



***Teaching Young Dogs Old Tricks:
Ideas for Leveraging Social Media to Improve
Organizational Newcomer Socialization and
Hierarchical Information Flow***

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ABSTRACT

Hierarchies have long been the dominant approach among large organizations; most corporations and government agencies still rely on hierarchical structures to control different levels of management, power, and authority. Hierarchical organizations remain popular and successful today for good reason - they are typically easier to coordinate and manage than organic (flat) organizations; however, employees working within bureaucratic structures may find it more difficult to cope with rapid change. Conventional wisdom often asserts that the modern work place needs to change and adapt for the new, younger employees entering the work force. But in large organizations, is it really possible for the work place to adapt to the younger incoming work force? Or does it make more sense for hierarchical organizations to leverage current computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies to help the new work force readily adapt to the existing work place? This paper will: (1) examine CMC usage in an organizational context, (2) challenge some of the key assumptions made about the effects of CMC on hierarchical structures; and (3) offer evidence to support the argument that large organizations can embrace social media because it is possible to leverage the benefits of new CMC tools to attract and retain new talent without undermining successful established hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, extensive research has been conducted on computer-mediated communication (CMC), predominantly in which CMC technologies have been compared to more traditional media, such as face-to-face or telephone conversation, letters, and memorandums. Much of this research has placed significant emphasis on measuring CMC against face-to-face communication in both interpersonal and organizational contexts; however, until recently, little differentiation has been made between task-focused and social-focused communication within this area of study. Given the advent of advanced CMC technologies in the workplace and the emergent popularity of social media, such a distinction is especially relevant for current research.

Many companies are still avoiding or banning certain CMC technologies altogether, fearing that these new tools are employee time wasters, that social media is just a fad, or that implementing new communication technologies in their work environment will necessitate the “democratization” of their organizational structures and processes. Conventional wisdom often asserts that the work place needs to change and adapt for the new, younger employees entering the work force. But in large organizations, is it really possible for the work place to adapt to the younger incoming work force? Or does it make more sense for hierarchical organizations to leverage current CMC technologies and social media to help the new work force readily adapt to the existing work place?

This paper will: (1) examine CMC usage in an organizational context, (2) challenge some of the key assumptions made about the effects of CMC on hierarchical structures; and (3) offer evidence to support the argument that large organizations can embrace social media because it is

possible to leverage the benefits of new CMC tools to attract and retain new talent without undermining successful established hierarchies.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: DEFINING KEY TERMS

Organizations are commonly regarded as “social structures created by individuals to support the collaborative pursuit of specified goals” (Scott, 1998). Organizations enable members to coordinate their activities through formal supervision, rules and procedures, training, and socialization. Organizational structure generally falls into two categories: mechanistic and organic. The table below (Figure 1) provides a brief comparison of the key differences between mechanistic and organic organizations.

Figure 1. Comparison of Mechanistic and Organic Organizations¹.

MECHANISTIC ORGANIZATIONS	ORGANIC ORGANIZATIONS
<i>Usually hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature, characterized by:</i>	<i>Also called open organizations, are organizational structures characterized by:</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Centralization of authority, 2. Formalization of procedures and practices; and 3. Specialization of functions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Flatness: all communications and interactions are horizontal, 2. Low specialization: knowledge resides wherever it is most useful; and 3. Decentralization: mainly formal and informal participation used for decision making

Mechanistic organizations are typically easier to coordinate and manage than organic organizations; however, employees working within mechanistic structures may find it more difficult to cope with rapid change. While this pattern of organization tends to be highly stable once developed (Vroom, 1969) and the authority of centralized decision-making “serves to economize on the transmission and handling of information” (Arrow, 1974), formal hierarchies

¹ Definitions for *mechanistic* and *organic organizations* found at: <http://www.businessdictionary.com>

can interfere with tasks that present very complicated or ambiguous problems (Blau & Scott, 1962) (as cited in Scott, 1998). Organic structures, on the other hand, are comparatively more complex and harder to manage than mechanistic structures, but are highly adaptable, flexible, and well-suited for rapidly changing and unpredictable environments (Russell & Russell, 1992).

Some organizations employ aspects of both mechanistic and organic structures, especially within smaller organizations or individual units within larger organizations; however, for the purposes of this paper, I will be strictly focused on examining CMC usage within mechanistic organizations.

Organizational Norms and Socialization

Organizations, as social structures, are characterized by normative and behavioral constructions that link members in a common pattern of activities, interactions, and sentiments (Scott, 1998). While the terms *norms*, *socialization*, *newcomers*, and *seasoned employees* are commonly used in organizational literature and are generally well understood, definitions are provided in the following sections to frame my discussion of these concepts throughout the remainder of the paper.

Organizational Norms: Typically defined as the written or unwritten (implicit and explicit) rules that govern the way people interact in the organization. Norms may be transmitted through story-telling, written in manuals and procedures, and role-model behavior but generally, norms are not explicitly stated and employees must learn them from observation and (usually painful) trial and error. The implicit nature of norms makes them hard to transfer and difficult to learn. However, when individuals do not behave according to established norms, these transgressions are easily spotted, which can limit a newcomer's ability to assimilate into the

existing organizational culture and successfully interact with the seasoned employees within the organization.

Socialization: Often defined as the processes employees follow to interact with other people in the organization. By socializing, employees meet other employees and develop connections within the organization. These connections help employees access knowledge they do not have by reaching out to people who do. Additionally, these connections play a significant role in terms of visibility of work contributions and the development of individual career paths. Socializing helps employees to increase their scope of organizational knowledge and improve the probability of being involved in decision-making processes. Employees who are better connected, possessing a blend of strong and weak ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Pickering & King, 1995) are more likely to be influential within an organization and therefore, are more likely candidates for promotion and recognition (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

Newcomers vs. Seasoned Employees

Newcomers: Typically defined as employees who have been working for less than 6 months in the organization. Newcomers are usually young, junior personnel who have little work experience, but they can also be employees who join in mid-management or top-management positions and do not yet know the “nuts and bolts” of the organization.

Seasoned Employees: Generally defined as employees who have worked at least several years in the organization. They are usually senior personnel who have extensive work experience, have worked their way to mid-management or top-management positions and possess comprehensive explicit and tacit knowledge regarding the inner workings of the organization.

In her 2008 book, *From Boomers to Bloggers: Success Stories Across Generations*, Misti Burmeister compares and contrasts the differences between new vs. seasoned professionals and offers guidance for easing potential conflicts and overcoming social barriers. Figure 2 (below) provides a brief summary of some of the common key differences in mindsets and values of new vs. seasoned professionals, and the common ground that organizations can emphasize to foster interpersonal communication and successful socialization between these types of employees.

Figure 2. Five Shifts to Common Understanding²

SEASONED PROFESSIONALS	COMMON GROUND	NEW PROFESSIONALS
1. Paying your dues	Building credibility/create a path	Wanting it all now
2. Making them just do the work	Creating a learning relationship	What can the company do for me?
3. Make them appreciate what has come before them	Creating and focusing on a common vision	Bucking the system
4. Be at work when you are needed	Company/individual mission and vision alignment / accountability for results	Freedom and flexibility in my schedule
5. Adhere to the rules	Creating a common strategy to reach the vision / acceptable risk	I can do it faster and better and I have fresh ideas

Organizational Communication

Communication is primarily a mechanical process, in which a sender transmits a message through a channel to a receiver. Organizations typically have mechanistic structures, in which employees function in defined roles following formalized procedures. Mechanical parts and processes tend to be interchangeable; therefore, communication methods that work in one organization will work in another similar organization, right? Not likely.

Perhaps that line of reasoning was acceptable in decades past, when employees were limited to traditional types of oral and written business communication, such as face-to-face or telephone conversation, letters, telegrams or faxes, and intra-office memos. Today, however, the

² Chart adapted from Misti Burmeister's book, *'From Boomers to Bloggers: Success Stories Across Generations.'*

widespread adoption of Internet usage and computer-mediated communication (i.e. e-mail, wikis, forums, blogs, chat, etc.) within organizations has dramatically changed, and continues to change, how employees interact in the workplace. There is no longer a “one size fits all” business communications solution, even for traditional hierarchical organizations.

Horizontal vs. Hierarchical Communication

While we may assume that organizational information flows vertically (from top to bottom), in reality, information flows back and forth in all directions – vertically, horizontally, and sometimes diagonally. Horizontal communication, also referred to interchangeably as lateral communication, is defined as the flow of messages across functional areas at a given level of an organization, allowing people at the same level to communicate directly without going through several levels of organization (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 1997).

Organizations typically communicate and store collective knowledge through informal lateral communication, which in general, compensates for any errors or omissions in hierarchical information flow. However, some organizations, fearing that informal horizontal communication undermines their hierarchical structures, have sought to resist this type of communication through the development of formal lateral connections, mainly in the form of liaison roles, task forces, special project teams, and complex matrix structures³ (Scott, 1998). Yet, the establishment of formal lateral connections inevitably incurs delays and inefficiencies, discounting the utility of informal lateral communication.

³ A *matrix structure* is a multiple command structure in which vertical and lateral channels of information and authority operate simultaneously - participants are responsible to both their functional supervisor and project leader; thus, for many participants, matrix structures are high-demand, high stress work environments (Scott, 1998).

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

While hierarchical and informal networks have traditionally always existed adjacently, the introduction of CMC technologies in the workplace has provided the mechanism needed for employees to legitimately shift to informal networks as an acceptable channel for business communication (Hinds and Kiesler, 1995). According to a study of employees across seven departments of a large telecommunications firm, Hinds and Kiesler (1995) found that “increasing technization of work implies an emphasis on horizontal structure and collaborative, lateral flows of communication” and that communication by employees using electronic means was 42% horizontal, 30% vertical, and 28% diagonal (p. 388).

CMC technologies, in particular, can benefit organizations by improving the speed and quality of information transmission and decision-making, and supporting the more rapid and accurate identification of problems and opportunities (Scott, 1998). Hierarchical organizations are often looking for new ways to increase their information-processing capacity; therefore, one would assume that CEOs, CIOs, and IT managers would be the first in line to implement the latest CMC technologies in their organizations. While this may be true for the more traditional task-focused CMC tools, organizations have been slow to recognize the value added by social media and even slower to adopt the newer social-focused CMC tools for the enterprise.

Why are CEOs/CIOs afraid of social media?

I propose the reason why some CEOs/CIOs and other senior leaders within organizations are still apprehensive about implementing new social-focused CMC technologies is because of their adherence to one or more of the following key assumptions still commonly held about traditional organizational communication:

1. *Face-to-face communication is the “gold standard” in business because other forms of communication are impersonal and lack “social presence.”*
2. *Horizontal communication flattens hierarchies, creating a “level playing field” & a more egalitarian, democratic environment.*
3. *If senior managers are too accessible to junior personnel, it weakens the chain of command.*
4. *Encouraging relational communication reduces workplace productivity.*

In the following section, I will examine these key assumptions and discuss the impact of CMC on each, within an organizational context.

ANALYSIS OF KEY ASSUMPTIONS

Assumption #1: Face-to-face communication is the “gold standard” in business.

It is often claimed that face-to-face communication is the “gold standard” in business because other forms of communication are impersonal and lack “social presence.” However, extensive studies of email in the workplace have consistently shown the interpersonal aspects of CMC (Schmitz & Fulk, 1991; Turner et al, 2006). As with face-to-face communication, CMC users socialize and maintain online relationships which are regarded as genuine personal relationships by the participants (Lee & Varey, 1999). Research has often shown that CMC tools can foster increased participation and opinion expression (Ho & McLeod, 2008) and facilitate the faster and more efficient completion of unambiguous tasks (Dennis & Valacich, 1999). Compared to traditional methods, electronic communication carries more information faster, at a lower cost, and to more people at a time (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

A study by Flanagin and Waldeck (2004) also found that the use of CMC tools, rather than face-to-face contact, may “save time and be potentially face-saving for organizational newcomers

(e.g., by sparing them the embarrassment of posing inappropriate questions or ones with obvious answers)...and, when given a choice, (newcomers) will rely on mediated technology over face-to-face communication for information seeking and interaction during organizational socialization.”

A recent Harris Poll⁴ found that because of social networking sites like Facebook, 57% of American adults say they feel more connected to people now than they did previously; yet, 54% say they’ve had less face-to-face contact with friends as a result. How is it possible that people are feeling more connected to others with less face-to-face contact?

A possible explanation may be found in the *hyperpersonal* model (Walther, 1996), which asserts that CMC affords certain interpersonal processes (e.g., selective self-presentation, idealized perception, self-fulfilling prophecies, etc.) that may intensify impression formation (Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007) among users. Data from empirical research supports the hypothesis that, given the “leanness” of CMC (less rich in social cues), this condition fosters extreme rather than reduced interpersonal impressions (Hinds & Kiesler, 1995; Lee & Varey, 1999; Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007; Postmes, Spears, & Martin, 1998; Walther, 1996). Applying the hyperpersonal model to an organizational context, employees may experience increased interpersonal satisfaction when interacting with others via CMC tools because they are able to carefully craft their personal profiles and written communication, allowing individuals to always present their “best” selves and provide select information to others that may never come up naturally during face-to-face communication.

Another possible factor contributing to people feeling more connected to others with less face-to-face contact is the “*less is more*” effect (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007) which suggests that

⁴ The results of *The Harris Poll* of 2,258 adults surveyed online between September 1 and 3, 2010 by Harris Interactive.

ambiguity (in this case, lacking information about another person) leads to liking; whereas, familiarity (acquiring more information about another person) can breed contempt (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). Research on online dating has shown that as ambiguity decreases over the course of becoming acquainted, the positive expectations inferred from the ambiguous information diminish as increased evidence of dissimilarity is revealed (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). Again, applying the “less is more” effect to an organizational context, employees may find that they like interacting with their coworkers and clients more online versus face-to-face because CMC affords the lure of ambiguity, allowing people to maintain their own positive expectations and idealized perceptions/inferences based on the self-presentation of others.

Thus, contrary to the longstanding notion that because face-to-face communication is the richest media it is always the best choice, I argue that CMC technologies have changed this important assumption about organizational communication. Given the advent of CMC in the workplace and the emergent popularity of social media, CMC technologies are on their way to becoming the “new gold standard” for business communication. At present, CMC technologies may often be the most appropriate choice for communicating in certain organizational settings, allowing co-workers and customers to socialize and form hyperpersonal relationships, while still maintaining enough ambiguity to avoid breeding contempt.

Assumption #2: Horizontal communication flattens hierarchies.

Horizontal communication is often viewed negatively by senior leaders and department heads within large organizations because of the belief that it flattens hierarchies, creating a “level playing field” among employees, and a more egalitarian, democratic environment (Scott, 1998). Given the flexibility of informal lateral connections, an obvious benefit to members within an

organization is that this type of horizontal communication can more easily accomplish “problem solving, information sharing across different work groups, and task coordination between departments or project teams” (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 1997). Horizontal communication in the workplace can also enhance morale and afford a means for resolving conflicts (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 1997).

Kanter (1983) and Van de Ven (1986) argued that uncertain problems requiring innovative solutions are best solved through informal information exchange because “no formal procedure or set of rules can guide organizational members in solving the ambiguities of innovation because, *by definition*, innovation represents a new activity where rules and procedures have not been devised” (as cited in Russell & Russell, 1992). Therefore, it can be argued that the reason hierarchies continue to successfully function is because of the strong horizontal communication fostered by private informal networks. CMC technologies make lateral communication within organizations much easier and more efficient than in decades past, replacing the proverbial water cooler or break room conversations needed for traditional horizontal information flow.

Some research does indicate that CMC can promote a more egalitarian, democratic environment (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) specifically when anonymity is a factor; however, CMC is rarely anonymous in an organizational setting, which negates this effect for most workplace communication. In particular, studies using university students as subjects have found equalizing effects regarding CMC use (Ho & McLeod, 2008); however, research performed in everyday work situations has not generated evidence of CMC fostering equal participation or minimizing status differences (Mantovani, 1994; Nelson, 2000; Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007; Postmes, Spears, & Martin, 1998).

Moreover, CMC technologies can facilitate the communication needed to cultivate and maintain social roles, especially in geographically disperse organizations. Researchers have found that CMC technologies are effective in overcoming physical and temporal barriers but not necessarily social barriers (Cho & Lee, 2008; Mantovani, 1994). Electronic communication primarily enhances “existing interaction patterns rather than creating new ones” (Bikson et al, 1989, as cited by Mantovani, 1994). Peña, Walther, and Hancock (2007) found that: “An equalized, flatter playing field was not established among members of geographically distributed groups; instead, they developed more extreme and complementary dominance perceptions than members of collocated groups.” Overall, in most organizational contexts, the implementation of new communication technology tends to improve rather than reduce status differences (Mantovani, 1994).

Furthermore, flat structures are generally only possible to maintain in smaller organizations or for individual units within larger organizations. When these smaller organizations or units reach a critical size, they cannot retain a completely flat structure without impacting productivity. A theory of social organization called the *iron law of oligarchy*, developed by German-Italian sociologist Robert Michels (1876-1936)⁵, states that “all forms of organization, regardless of how democratic or autocratic they may be at the start, will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies, thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organizations. The relative structural fluidity in a small-scale democracy succumbs to ‘social viscosity’ in a large-scale organization.”

⁵ Information on Robert Michels and the Iron Law of Oligarchy was retrieved from: Encyclopedia Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/294472/iron-law-of-oligarchy>

Thus, I argue that the concern senior leaders may have about the use of CMC promoting a more egalitarian workplace environment is unfounded because: (1) democracy is an incompatible social condition within medium to large organizations, regardless of the method of communication used; and (2) sufficient empirical evidence from extensive research shows that CMC use actually strengthens the existing social roles found within hierarchies rather than flattening them.

Assumption #3: If senior managers are too accessible, it weakens the chain of command.

A common belief among senior managers is that it is dangerous to be too accessible to junior personnel because it will weaken the formal chain of command. However, young professionals entering today's workplace value relationships more than their counterparts from previous generations. According to a survey by SelectMinds⁶ (a provider of corporate social networking solutions), 77% of workers ages 20-29 reported that they "believe that the social aspects of work are very important" to their "overall sense of workplace satisfaction," compared with 67% of their older colleagues.

In fact, 86% of young professionals (workers ages 20-29) said they are "more likely to listen to information and recommendations if they are presented to me by someone I know and trust." The survey found that workers ages 20-29 also ranked "cementing relationships with colleagues and supervisors" as their top challenge (41%), followed by "adapting to a new company culture" (33%) and "learning new job responsibilities" (27%). The survey also found:

⁶ The SelectMinds survey was conducted in late 2006 by IntelliSurvey, according to the SelectMinds news release. The company polled 2,002 full- or part-time professionals age 20 and older working at least 20 hours per week, with about 26 percent of those between the ages of 20 and 29.

- 46% of young workers rate the availability of support and networking programs for employees with common interests as very important in their decision to join or remain with an employer.
- 72% of young workers see professional networks as beneficial to their career development.
- 78% of all workers and 81% of young workers feel somewhat or very disconnected from the information flow, politics and career opportunities across their organization.
- More than one in four (28%) of workers ages 20-29 reported leaving a job because of feeling disconnected from the organization and 20% have switched jobs because of poor relationships with coworkers, compared with 14% of their older colleagues.

Traditionally, senior managers tend to use rich media proportionately more than persons lower in the organizational hierarchy purportedly because managers' jobs involve greater ambiguity (Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). Drawing from my earlier discussion on CMC versus face-to-face communication, this imbalance might explain why the younger, more junior workers reported feeling "disconnected from the information flow, politics and career opportunities across their organization" – because, unlike senior managers, today's organizational newcomers prefer CMC technology over face-to-face communication and accordingly, they rely upon CMC tools for seeking information and interaction with their colleagues and supervisors for organizational socialization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).

If senior leaders avoid or ban the use of certain CMC technologies and social media in the workplace, they will fail to connect with junior personnel and risk losing these employees to organizations that do use the latest CMC tools to foster interpersonal communication and form mentoring relationships.

Contrary to the conventional belief that senior managers must distance themselves from their subordinates, accessible leaders gain referent power (French & Raven, 1960), which actually helps to strengthen their positional power. Referent power refers to the ability of a leader to influence a follower because of the follower's loyalty, friendship, or admiration of the leader, usually resulting from interpersonal trust between the leader and the follower (French & Raven, 1960). As evident in the SelectMinds survey, referent power has become increasingly important in leadership today. Therefore, I argue that senior leaders should focus on becoming *more* accessible to junior personnel, which will in turn, reinforce the social roles within the formal chain of command and strengthen employees' commitment to the organization by cementing their own identities within its command structure.

Assumption #4: Encouraging relational communication reduces workplace productivity.

Many CEOs and CIOs still view certain CMC applications as NSFW (Not Suitable for Work!). In fact, according to a CIO.com survey which polled 311 IT decision makers about their views on current technology, 54% reported that consumer technologies are inappropriate for enterprise use and nearly 10% listed social networks as the top consumer technology threat facing their organizations (Lynch, 2008).

However, analysts who follow the social media space say banning social networks is most likely a losing battle for two reasons: (1) people always find workarounds, such as visiting social media sites using their smart phones; and (2) employees can use social networks productively as a means to communicate with customers (Lynch, 2008). For example, after the CIO of Continental Airlines "shut down IM, he got an angry call from an employee in the fuel management group who was using it (successfully) to negotiate jet fuel pricing for the airline" (Lynch, 2008).

"Isn't this always the knee-jerk reaction of IT and management? It didn't work in the 1980s [because] there were very good reasons to give workers PCs. It didn't work in the 1990s [because] there were very good reasons to give employees access to the Internet. And it's not going stop the deployment of social networks now."

~ Jonathan Yarmis, an analyst with AMR Research⁷

Organizational units that interact with each other socially are more likely to share knowledge with each other. Research on informal relational communication and social interaction in the workplace shows a significant positive effect of CMC on knowledge sharing (Tsai, 2002). Further, knowledge sharing "involves a complex social process that demands collaborative efforts and social interaction is indispensable in this process as it can create trust and foster cooperation." (Tsai, 2002).

"CIOs and business leaders must let go of a command-and-control mentality and allow for collaboration to spring up via the Web. You can't control users looking to utilize Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, wikis and social networks. In fact, even trying to control these users is a foolish strategy. Instead, CIOs and other business leaders must embrace these technologies in the enterprise, and enable their employees to share and work collectively with each other to foster new innovations."

~ Charlene Li, co-author of 'Groundswell'⁸

Thus, I argue that banning certain CMC technologies for fear of reducing employee productivity is in itself counter-productive. When using enterprise resources and applications, employees retain their organizational identity and positional status, and therefore, retain their positive expectations about the actions of others and accountability for abuse, even in an online setting. For that reason, organizations should avoid wasting time and effort on trying to prevent employees from using emergent CMC technologies for workplace collaboration and instead focus

⁷ As quoted in the CIO.com article "*Banning Social Networks a Losing Battle.*" by C. G. Lynch.

⁸ As quoted in the CIO.com article "*Why CIOs Must Embrace Social Software*" by C. G. Lynch. *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, written by Charlene Li & Josh Bernoff, is a book on social software in the enterprise.

on understanding *why* their users find certain tools attractive and then leverage the technology to improve both internal and external organizational communication. Successful collaboration requires flexibility and social interaction; therefore, the new media tools that employees are already skilled in from using at home can offer both of these benefits at work as well.

Summary

The table below (Figure 3) provides a summary of my discussion on the key assumptions about traditional business communication and the counter arguments which show how CMC usage, applied within an organizational context, challenges the relevancy of these assumptions within today’s business environment.

Figure 3. Summary of Key Assumption Analysis

Key Assumptions	Counter Arguments
<p>Assumption #1: <i>Face-to-face communication is the “gold standard” in business.</i></p> <p>(CMC tools make communication impersonal. Face-to-face is always best because it’s the richest media. Rich media = better communication = better productivity.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CMC tools make communication “hyperpersonal” (Walther, 1996). • The “less is more” effect (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). • CMC fosters increased participation & opinion expression (Ho & McLeod, 2008). • CMC facilitates the faster and more efficient completion of unambiguous tasks (Dennis & Valacich, 1999).
<p>Assumption #2: <i>Horizontal communication flattens hierarchies.</i></p> <p>(CMC use flattens hierarchies, creating a “level playing field” & egalitarian, democratic environment.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of anonymity in organizational CMC negates this effect. CMC use actually strengthens the existing social roles found within hierarchies rather than flattening them (Cho & Lee, 2008; Mantovani, 1994; Nelson, 2000; Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007; Postmes, Spears, & Martin, 1998). • CMC can facilitate the communication needed to cultivate and maintain social roles, especially in geographically disperse organizations (Cho & Lee, 2008; Mantovani, 1994; Peña, Walther, & Hancock, 2007).
<p>Assumption #3: <i>If senior managers are too accessible, it weakens the chain of command.</i></p> <p>(CMC tools make senior leadership too accessible to junior personnel, weakening the chain of command.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible leaders gain referent power, strengthening their positional power (French & Raven, 1960). • CMC tools also make mentoring easier; thereby strengthening individuals’ commitment to their

	organization and their own identity within it (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004).
<p>Assumption #4: Encouraging relational communication reduces workplace productivity.</p> <p>(Many CEOs and CIOs still view certain CMC applications as inappropriate for enterprise use.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful collaboration requires flexibility and social interaction; CMC usage has a significant positive effect on knowledge sharing (Tsai, 2002). • Employees retain their organizational identity and positional status, and therefore, retain their positive expectations about the actions of others and accountability for abuse, even in an online setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizational newcomers, junior personnel, and introverted employees typically face a myriad of challenges in trying to find the information needed to successfully perform their jobs and are often frustrated by how disconnected they feel from the information flow, politics, and opportunities taking place within their organization. In particular, newcomers and introverts may struggle to learn organizational norms and may be afraid to participate in discussions, express opinions, request assistance from colleagues, or seek mentoring relationships. If managers and seasoned employees fail to connect with newcomers, junior workers, and introverted members, they risk losing these employees to other organizations that do use CMC tools to foster interpersonal communication and build informal networks.

Key Benefits to Focus On

Organizations need to leverage their existing CMC systems to facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships that will contribute to successful organizational socialization amongst employees. As discussed earlier, strong informal networks are a key ingredient for successful knowledge synthesis, collaborative problem solving and decision-making within hierarchies, strengthening hierarchical information flow. Organizations need not fear enterprise social media activity because it serves to reinforce the informal networks needed to keep hierarchies strong

and productive. In the following sections, I will discuss several important emerging benefits of social media that many organizations may not realize or be taking full advantage of yet.

Create Online Communities

It really is as straightforward as it sounds: People who actually know each other are more likely to work well together. Creating community seems like a simple idea with proven success, yet few organizations make it a priority (Burmeister, 2008). Online communities provide excellent platforms for newcomers to get a high level view of the conversations or content that is being shared through CMC tools. Through the use of communities, employees (particularly, newcomers) can gain a better understanding of which conversations are appropriate to join and what content is relevant to review. Additionally, online communities help newcomers learn the implicit norms of socialization within the organization to better interact with people, learn the context of discussions, and discern the proper channels to communicate with others.

Online communities do not have to involve elaborate applications with a lot of features; actually the reverse is preferable – simple tools without the “noise” of complicated options are typically more successful (think Google’s search page vs. AOL’s). Research on Internet blogs, wikis, and forums has shown that many people have a strong desire to author – to write for a broad audience (McAfee, 2006). It is not that people are aspiring to craft elegant prose, rather the drive is contribute within a community “whether it’s knowledge, insight, experience, a comment, a fact, an edit, a link...authorship is a way to elicit these contributions” (McAfee, 2006). To ensure that new communities succeed and serve their intended purposes, it is wise to invest in community managers.

“Change takes energy. When adopting social media, the energy comes from two sources: end-users who are excited about solving long-simmering problems and

community managers who are evangelists. End-users have a day job and it is a huge mistake to think that end-users alone can change a company's culture and successfully promote adoption in the long term. The day job of a community manager is making social media succeed, educating users, finding patterns of success, correcting mistakes, and in general, finding ways to expand the use of the platform. Community managers are not site administrators but agents of change.”

~Dan Woods, chief technology officer and editor of CITO Research⁹

One of the biggest advantages of CMC over face-to-face communication is the ability to easily scale conversations and collaborative projects from being just “one-to-one” to “one-to-many” or “many-to-many” within just a few clicks. The recordability, traceability, and accountability of information within organizations has improved dramatically due to the widespread adoption of CMC technologies in the workplace. Valuable information that used to be passed word of mouth amongst employees can now be captured and easily disseminated to new employees instead of being lost when individuals retire or leave the company.

To speed the adoption of new CMC tools and communities, it is essential that early use of these technologies starts at the top. Employees must see clear executive sponsorship of new CMC tools or they will view adoption as optional (Woods, 2010). People are most likely to start using certain wikis or forums, not because of clever design or specific content, but because of the other people already using them. As an example, Facebook currently has close to 500 million users, but it also has one of the lowest scores on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which ranks how people respond to certain companies. Facebook recently received a score of 64 out of 100, one of the lowest rankings of any of the companies ACSI measured, putting it at “the bottom of the heap along with notoriously hated businesses like the IRS electronic tax filing service, airlines, and cable companies” (Gawker.com, 2010). So why does everyone still use Facebook?

⁹ Quoted from Woods’ 2010 article, *Ten Corporate Social Media Mistakes*.

The answer: Because everyone still uses Facebook. Whatever method of communication is used by the most seasoned and well-respected leaders of an organization will be the method used by everyone else in the organization – get the key players on board with using a new CMC technology and the change will go viral.

Capitalize on Asynchronicity

Anyone who has struggled to keep his or her attention focused on a task knows the unpleasant feeling of boredom, which is commonly defined as the emotional state of feeling uninterested in a current activity. Not surprisingly, many people experience boredom during conference room meetings and formal classroom training sessions. Chances are, it is not the material that is to blame but the setting. Why? Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) may offer an explanation. Self-perception theory suggests that people experience emotional feelings based on their awareness of emotional actions, rather than emotional actions resulting from emotional feelings (i.e. happiness results from our awareness of smiling, not that we smile because we feel happy).

Given self-perception theory, one can hypothesize that for the experience of boredom to occur, an emotional action must exist that serves as the cue for feeling bored. Many researchers agree that inattention is a major cue for feeling bored (Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989; Danckert & Allman, 2005; Seib & Vodanovich, 1998); moreover, it may be the *perception* of inattention that is the most significant contributor to the experience of boredom (Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989).

Damrad-Frye and Laird (1989) explored the relationship between attention and boredom and, using self-perception theory as a framework, found that they could induce the feeling of boredom in an individual by subtly distracting his or her attention away from a focal task.

Damrad-Frye and Laird's (1989) study found that: (1) individuals not subjected to a distraction did not report feelings of boredom, (2) those subjected to a loud distraction correctly attributed their inattention to an external source; and (3) those subjected to a mild distraction reported the most boredom, likely because they misattributed the boredom to the task and not their own emotional state of inattention caused by the subtle distraction.

During conference room meetings, classroom training sessions, and other face-to-face encounters in organizational settings, people are hyper-aware that they are expected to stay keenly focused on paying attention, even when many subtle distracters may be present; thus, these settings are primed for inducing the experience of boredom in the participants of these activities. Organizations should focus on capitalizing on the key benefits afforded by the asynchronous aspects of CMC (i.e. flexibility for work hours and collaboration between geographically disperse units, etc) and not invest too much time and effort into trying to virtually simulate the real-life experiences that most employees loathe!

“Ironically, one popular use of technology in learning is recreating a classroom experience on the PC. I have very few fond memories of classroom learning. So the thought of trying to recreate an imperfect setting seems crazy. Rich experiences like online gaming should be the success criteria for formal training, while mobile applications should be explored for quick-fix Q&A. Leveraging social media is not about cut-and-paste sharing, but rather dynamic and social learning, people-to-people, enabled and enhanced by technology.”

~Rob Quish, CIO, JWT North America & CEO, JWT Inside¹⁰

Compared to decades past, we are now experiencing a reversal of the traditional technology cycle (in which technology used to be developed by the military and large corporations

¹⁰ As quoted in his response to Meister & Willyerd's *Five Myths and Realities About Using Social Media in Your Company* featured in *HR People & Strategy*, Special Preview – 2010.

and then it eventually made its way to the hands of the consumer market). Now, consumers are driving new technology and it is slowly trickling from consumers to the enterprise and military applications. Organizations that want to be ahead of the game should seek ways to incorporate “play” into applications. Anything that is fun in consumer technologies will eventually find its way to the enterprise, so be ahead of the curve and find a way to “gamify” CMC tools to make them fun for employees to use.

Incorporate Game Dynamics into CMC

With over 50 million users and growing, the recent rise of Farmville (a farm-simulation game developed by Zynga) on Facebook demonstrates the power of game dynamics applied to social networking. Farmville users spend hours toiling away in their virtual fields with no apparent tangible rewards – in many cases they actually pay to play. So what is the secret of Farmville that keeps millions of people hard at work on the farm every day? The answer may lie in the high value people place on online achievements. Users like to show off their handiwork, impress their virtual neighbors, and bask in the glory of high status among other players for having the latest and greatest tractor or the cutest farm cat available.

Game dynamics motivating real-life behavior is nothing new – before there were Internet games, there were airline frequent flyer miles, hotel reward programs, discount club cards, casino comps, etc, all designed to get people to spend their time or money on things and in places they would not otherwise if they were not earning “points” or status recognition. Organizations should not discount the power of points-based motivation, especially when compounded by the peer pressure effects of social networking. Also, organizations should be sure to incorporate ways for

employees to be publicly recognized for their online achievements (i.e. incorporation of reputation systems and comment systems to acknowledge online participation, etc).

Organizational leaders should not dismiss the game dynamics found within social media software as frivolous features that would only appeal to young workers – the fast growing segment of Facebook users are people between ages 35-49 and the average age of the 100 million people in the US and UK playing social games such as Farmville and Mafia Wars is 48 (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Using social media is quickly becoming a way of life for multiple generations of users (Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

Pitfalls to Avoid

If companies fail to establish specific goals for a new technology and do not communicate the goals to users or explain specific reasons for introducing a new technology, users will struggle to adapt to the change (Woods, 2010). Like any change, implementing social media requires careful planning to ensure the new technology aligns with a company's strategic objectives, that all employees understand why the change is necessary, and that leadership is provided regarding how the new social media is expected to be used in the workplace (Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

The failed implementation of Google Buzz in February 2010 provides an excellent case study on unintended negative consequences that can occur when upgrading or introducing new CMC technologies. As Google's answer to Facebook and Twitter, the implementation of the Google Buzz feature drew angry responses from Gmail users who felt they were being forced into a social networking service that they did not sign up for. The main complaint was that once the Google Buzz feature was activated for a user's account, which happened at login and there was no option provided to decline activation, a list of followers and "people who you follow" was automatically

populated based on the user's frequent contacts. These lists were publicly viewable by other Gmail users, and if a user had previously set up a Google profile, this personal information was publicly indexed by search engines.

The Google Buzz feature immediately raised many privacy concerns for users who feared that the names of their e-mail contacts, and who they contact most frequently, would be publicly exposed. The class action lawsuits swiftly filed against Google after the Buzz deployment highlighted not only the legal implications of violating email privacy, but also the explicit value people place on e-mail privacy and how unethical it feels for a company to violate that sense of privacy. Google's utter lack of regard for the personal information of all of its users was quite alarming and would certainly lead any reasonable person to ask the question: What was Google thinking?

Todd Jackson, product manager for Gmail and Google Buzz, explained that "the auto-follow feature had been intended to make it easy for people to get started on Buzz" (BBC News, 2010). That may very well be true, but at some point, someone on the Google Buzz team should have considered the ethical implications of making private user information public and said: "Wait a minute – what if not all Gmail users want this feature?" Much of the backlash caused by Buzz was due to the fact that Google automatically enrolled all Gmail users into Buzz without notice, permission, or an opportunity to decline enrollment. Therefore, most of the privacy issues, outrage, and the resulting \$8.5M settlement could have been avoided, or at least significantly reduced, if Google had simply designed Buzz to be an 'opt-in' rather than 'opt-out' feature.

A key lesson to learn from the Google Buzz debacle is that it is critical for organizations, through the establishment of formal testing policies and procedures, to invest sufficient time for

testing and gathering user feedback before fully launching new features. For example, organizations should be sure to announce launches in advance and then implement applications changes using methods that make it easy to roll-back to previous software versions, at a global or user level, if the changes are not well received or are found to be defective.

It is a widely held notion by IT managers within organizations that, theoretically, there should be no expectation of privacy for users of enterprise applications and resources. For the most part, this is an absolutely true generality; however, the reality is that some users have highly justifiable reasons for not making all of their contacts and work-related information publicly available to other users. As evident from the Google Buzz case, new CMC systems and features are much more likely to be accepted by users if they are given ample notice about the change and are allowed to decide what information is to be revealed in a public forum.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined the impact of computer-mediated communication on traditional organizational communication and challenged some of the key assumptions made about the effects of CMC on mechanistic organizations. My goal was to offer evidence to support the argument that organizations can embrace social media because it is possible to leverage the advantages of CMC to improve employee socialization and information flow without undermining successful established hierarchical structures.

My analysis and recommendations for implementing social media in hierarchical organizations were offered to highlight reasons why these new social-focused tools can add value to an organization and need not be dismissed as employee time wasters or just passing fads.

Hierarchies augmented by CMC technologies and social media will continue to operate successfully in the future by fostering the interpersonal relationships needed to attract and retain new employees, for many of whom using social media has become a way of life.

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