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Enterprise Social Networks – not just about collaboration
Communicating Projects
Series Article
by Ann Pilkington

Communicating Projects[1]

Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) – they're not just about collaboration

By Ann Pilkington

We recently conducted some research at PR Academy, led by my co-director Dr Kevin Ruck, to look at the challenges and benefits of using Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs). The following article provides an overview of the report's findings.

According to Global Industry Analysts, the global market for Enterprise Social Networking is expanding at a rapid rate globally and is forecast to reach US$4.8 billion by 2020. The main objective for ESN deployment is enterprise-wide communication and collaboration. However, associated benefits – such as an improved ability to visualise consumer insights for enhanced decision making and for improving business strategies – are expected to build momentum for ESN solutions. On a more practical communication level, internal social media are forecast to supplant email as the dominant form of workplace communication within a decade. However, despite these predictions, current adoption still seems to be slow and patchy. For example, in research in the US, Cardon and Marshall found that traditional communication channels are used more frequently and are considered more effective for team communication. However, they also found that Gen X and Gen Y business professionals are quite likely to consider social networking tools as the primary means for team communication in the future.

CHALLENGES OF USING ESNS

Our research shows that the key challenges to the successful implementation of ESNs mainly relate to the culture of organisations and their readiness to embrace two-way communication. These challenges include encouraging employees to post comments on blogs (68%), getting managers to reply to comments (64%), and gaining buy-in from senior management (62%).

ESN MANAGEMENT SKILLS GAPS

ESN management skills gaps provide evidence of a further barrier to the successful implementation of ESNs. The top five skills gaps cited by respondents include measuring the impact of using ESNs (53%), engaging senior managers to use an ESN (45%), integrating an ESN with other internal communication channels (44%), technical knowledge (42%) and community management skills (36%).

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[1] This series of articles on effective stakeholder engagement is by Ann Pilkington, founding director of the PR Academy (UK) and author of the book *Communicating Projects* published by Gower in 2013. Ann is one of the UK's leading experts on communications; she shares her knowledge with project managers and teams in this series of articles in the *PM World Journal*. Her author profile can be found at the end of this article.

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BENEFITS OF USING ESNs

Given that most respondents believe that ESNs are having a positive impact on internal communication, it is perhaps unsurprising that the greatest benefits of using them highlighted by respondents centre around communication and collaboration. The benefits include making it easier for employees to share information with each other (92%), enhancing collaboration across the organisation (82%), enabling senior managers to use a more informal communication style (79%) and making it easier for employees to express their views (75%).

ESNs are often discussed in terms of their benefit, how they can be used to enhance decision making and improve business strategies, and the prediction that they will supplant email as the dominant form of workplace communication. However, the study shows, there are many significant challenges to their successful implementation. These challenges, including the current skills gaps, need to be addressed before the full potential of ESNs can be realised.

In terms of some immediate, more practical guidance that arises from this study, there are some general pointers for good ESN practice:

- Establish a clear purpose for the ESN at the outset
- Secure leadership buy-in and role modelling
- Provide training and ongoing support
- Ensure that strong community leadership is in place
- Use whatever data that there is available for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of adoption

This is not an exhaustive list of recommendations, and every ESN should be treated individually according to specific organisation or project objectives, taking account of the organisational culture. In many ways, these recommendations are high level and generic. Furthermore detailed and technical guidance about ESNs is available from other sources.

However, if there's one overriding message from this study it can be summed up in what one interviewee said about ESNs: 'It's social, but social with a purpose'.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The 'Implementing Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs): Challenges and Benefits' report is based on a questionnaire that was completed by 81 respondents in May 2016 and interviews that were conducted with experienced ESN managers in June 2016.

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire work in internal communication (56%), PR (10%) and social media/digital communication (10%), which reflects the demographics of the PR Academy alumni network. However, some respondents work in an IT department, in marketing or in human resources.

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The report incorporates a brief overview of recent studies and articles about ESNs. It analyses the findings from the questionnaire and reviews the themes that emerge from the questionnaire's open questions and the interviews conducted. It concludes with some pointers for future ESN implementation.

References

Download the full report here: https://pracademy.co.uk/esns-survey/

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Ann Pilkington is the author of *Communicating Projects* published by Gower. She is a founding director of the PR Academy which provides qualifications, training and consultancy in all aspects of communication including change project communication and project management.

Information about Ann's book, *Communicating Projects, An End-to-End Guide to Planning, Implementing and Evaluating Effective Communication,* published by Gower in 2013, can be found at https://www.routledge.com/Communicating-Projects-An-End-to-End-Guide-to-Planning-Implementing-and/Pilkington/p/book/9781409453192

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