

Corporate Use of Microblogging

A modern approach to improve employee motivation

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July 19th, 2010



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Introduction

Employee motivation is crucial for the success of change management projects while communication plays an important role regarding the motivation of employees.

But traditional communication methods do not meet the companies demands anymore. As companies get more complex and more global, tools are needed that smooth out or even remove hierarchical and geographical borders. Tools that enable employees to participate in the corporate culture local as well as remotely, to discuss business-related topics and to build up new relationships, create social networks and distribute information.

The beginning of the era of Web 2.0 provided this opportunities in the peoples personal lives. Gradually also companies started to adopt Web 2.0 tools for business purposes.

One of these tools is microblogging: at first companies used microblogging as an advertising tool, then they recognized that it can also be used for internal purposes. Today it is predominantly used by early adaptors to reduce the email overflow as well as to exchange business-related information but also to discuss internal ideas and innovations.

How far does microblogging effect internal communication?

Does microblogging also effect employee motivation?

Is an internal microblogging instance suited for the targeted communication in scope of change management projects?

To get answers to these questions I sent a questionnaire to three companies, that already use the Open Source microblogging tool StatusNet on their intranet. (two companies answered to my questions)

Please note: The focus of this paper is on the impact of Web 2.0 and microblogging on internal communication as well as the opportunities of such a tool.

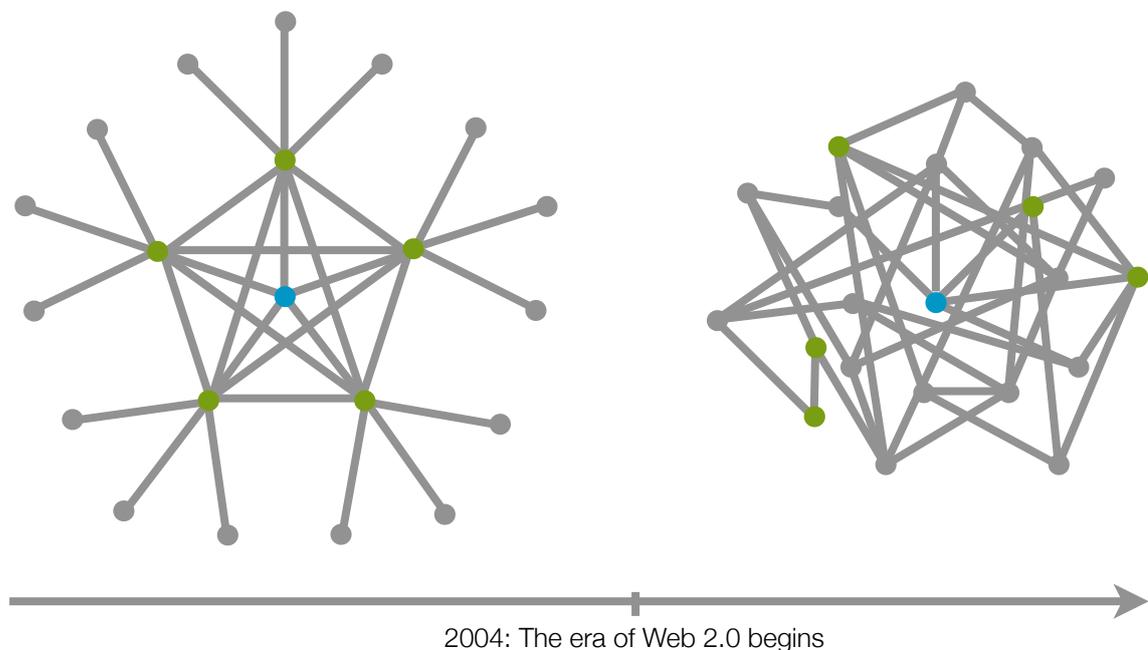
As I'm convinced that it is elementary for the employees motivation one the one hand to be able to participate in the corporate culture and relevant business-related topics and on the other hand to be kept in the loop, „communication tools“ and „motivation tools“ are used as synonyms.

The impact of Web 2.0

"Web 2.0 is an expression which was used for the first time in 2004 and referred to the second generation of Internet. The main characteristics of new era in Internet is connected with its constant development and delivering services tailored to the needs of each user." (<http://www.share.uni-koeln.de/?q=en/glossary/29>, n. d.)

The beginning of the 21st century was the start of a radical change of the internet. The appearance of the so called Web 2.0 tools was the first step on the way to the recreation of a read-write culture.

One of the most passionate representatives of this idea is Lawrence Lessig. According to Lessig the "legal sharing and the reuse of intellectual property is a social benefit." (Keen 2007, p. 144) He claims that individuals have to be able to create and to re-create their culture. (see: Lessig 2008, p. 28) The internet and especially Web 2.0 enable us to do exactly this - transaction cost-free. Never before it was so easy to make content, ideas and visions available to a broad public. At the same time it became quite easy to access public content, to find people with the same interests and visions. Discussions started to take place in a new context.



How Web 2.0 changed our opportunities to communicate

How companies use Web 2.0

„Enterprise 2.0 applications are loosely defined as Web 2.0 / Internet-based applications and technologies used for business purposes. Examples include messaging of all types, social networking, cloud-based productivity, collaboration, and conferencing.“ (http://www.paloaltonetworks.com/literature/whitepapers/Application_Usage_Risk_Report_Fall09.pdf, 2009, p. 5)

Some examples for well-known Enterprise 2.0-applications are - according to this definition:

-  Google Docs
-  Twitter
-  Facebook and
-  Zoho

These applications are used to improve productivity and the sharing of organizational knowledge. Information that would be stored on the employees' desktops are - thanks to the tools of Web 2.0 - accessible to all members of the company, as "the internet is the fastest, most effective way to access to a wealth of information." (http://www.paloaltonetworks.com/literature/whitepapers/Application_Usage_Risk_Report_Fall09.pdf, 2009, p. 8)

"But Web 2.0-applications are not only used to improve the employees' work flows but also to connect themselves with customers and suppliers, to establish a "networked company". (http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/

How_companies_are_benefiting_from_Web_20_McKinsey_Global_Survey_Results_2432, 2009)

Enterprise 2.0-applications stand out as they "are based on a design whereby users and contributors are often one and the same". (http://www.paloaltonetworks.com/literature/whitepapers/Application_Usage_Risk_Report_Fall09.pdf, 2009, p. 5.) Furthermore the introduction of these applications is often a bottom-up process. The initiative is often taken by the end-users.

According to a survey conducted by McKinsey in 2009, 69 percent of respondents recognized measurable business benefits, e. g.

-  more innovative products and services
 -  more effective marketing
 -  better access to knowledge
 -  lower costs of doing business and
 -  higher revenues (http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/
- How_companies_are_benefiting_from_Web_20_McKinsey_Global_Survey_Results_2432, 2009)

The impact of microblogging on communication

"Microblogging is a form of blogging. A microblog differs from a traditional blog in that its content is typically much smaller, in both actual size and aggregate file size. A microblog entry could consist of nothing but a short sentence fragment, or an image or embedded video." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microblogging>, n. d.)

Microblogging is like sending a short message (SMS) to the world. Like a short message, a post consists of max. 140 characters, 160 respectively, but it has not only one recipient -everybody who wants, can receive it by „following“ the sender/author. Communication is simplified, the path of the Six Degrees of Separation can be abbreviated.

One of the most known microblogging-platforms is Twitter with about 106 million users and an average of 55 million tweets a day. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/14/twitter-user-statistics-r_n_537992.html, 2010)

In fall 2009 already 89 percent of the companies which were analyzed for the report by Palo Alto Networks used Twitter. Compared to 35 percent usage in spring 2009. "The sessions consumed per organization by Twitter users increased 252 percent." (http://www.paloaltonetworks.com/literature/whitepapers/Application_Usage_Risk_Report_Fall09.pdf, 2009, p. 6)

Microblogging cannot only be used to stay in touch with the consumer, to hear their laud and critics but also to improve internal communications.

The risk connected with the usage of Web 2.0-applications - including Twitter - is the possible publication of corporate data to the whole world as these applications run on external servers and are open to the general public.

An alternative to Twitter is the open source-platform StatusNet, formally known as Laconica. It can be installed on the companies servers inside the firewall, which means that internal data cannot be accessed from an untrusted (and unknown) third party.

Laconica/ StatusNet was founded in 2007 to enable "communities, brands and organizations to incorporate micro messaging into their own domain." (<http://status.net/company>, n. d.)

The companies using StatusNet are diverse: From companies and NGOs with about 20 employees to global corporations with more than 50.000 employees. Companies from the technology sector are using StatusNet as well as Sacramento's basketball team The Kings. (see: <http://status.net/whos-using-statusnet>, n. d.)

Microblogging is often painted as "background noise", the virtual water cooler talk. It seems to lack structure. However, this is far from reality. Every microblogging entry has a so-called Unique ID (UID). When someone posts a reply or "retweets" a message, this UID is referenced. This allows

the user to retrieve a whole thread of information, even if he/she is not following all of the participants.

A second powerful feature of microblogging is the hashtag. By preceding a keyword with the hash - # - every user can declare a semantic group of related messages. It is simple to query the system for all messages with a certain hashtag, thus allowing for aggregation of related information.

A very typical use of the hashtag is to have an agreed hashtag for an event. So if you are having a quarterly company meeting to discuss the results, you could use a hashtag like #FY10Q1 (Fiscal Year 2010, Quarter 1) and ask everyone commenting on this event to use the hashtag.

Or if you go to a trade fair like CeBIT, you could use #CeBIT10 to group and aggregate all ideas, plans, notes etc. with regard to CeBIT.

Hashtags are also a powerful method to collect ideas under a known umbrella. If you give all your corporate initiatives a hashtag (and publish that list on the intranet), you allow anyone to post messages in a way that automatically aggregates all information.

This very natural way of tagging and aggregating is one of the key success factors of microblogging. It reflects the way people think - we all create acronyms for projects - by using them as a hashtag we can leverage this to collect and find ideas, opinions and statements that otherwise would be lost.

The companies' reasons to introduce StatusNet

"StatusNet has filled a communications gap for Creative Commons that we didn't know we had. With a team distributed by time zone, travel, expertise, and use of various communications methods (email overload, IM, IRC, phone), StatusNet is accessible and usable by the whole staff and has become an invaluable tool for keeping us all in sync. (Mike Linksvayer, Vice President, Creative Commons)" (<http://status.net/whos-using-statusnet/creative-commons>, n. d.)

Most of the companies introduced StatusNet to improve their internal communication. Hugh McGuire, CEO of Bite-Size Edits, lauds the company's internal StatusNet instance as a tool that is "more informal than email" and "more social than a project management software" (<http://status.net/whos-using-statusnet/bite-size-edits>, n. d.)

Rami Levy, Distinguished Member of the Technical Staff and team leader at Motorola Open Source Technologies, even claims Motmot (name of the companies internal microblogging platform) to be a revolution of Motorolas internal social communications. (http://status.net/sites/default/files/StatusNet-Motorola-CaseStudy-FINAL_0.pdf, 2010, p. 1)

How StatusNet is and can be used

It is indisputable from the given data that the use of an internal StatusNet instance is improving communication. To find out if the use also improves motivation and has a positive impact on change management projects, I sent out a questionnaire to three companies that already use StatusNet internally.

I wanted to know e. g.:

- 🗣️ if there were also other reasons to introduce StatusNet,
- 🗣️ what the microblogging platform is used for,
- 🗣️ how the use affects employee motivation,
- 🗣️ and how the impact is measured.

The complete questionnaire and all answers can be found on pp. 15-18.

The effects of an internal StatusNet instance

“It seems this tool has pushed our communication capabilities firmly into the 21st century by providing an open, real-time platform that was not previously available.”

For both companies the main reason to introduce StatusNet was the opportunity to improve internal communication and especially to reduce the amount of email. For B, a company with several thousand employees, also the social factor was important. The company sees the microblogging platform as a possibility to create new relationships and to find “out what is going on around the company“.

A, a company with a little more than 20 employees, uses Status Net especially to make their employees more flexible. So they share work-related information with their colleagues even when they are working from home or are on vacation.

In company B the microblogging platform is also used to encourage conversations, questions and suggestions. It helps to get quick answers to problems and to find colleagues with similar interests. Innovation is socialized by enabling the employees to vote on internal ideas. By creating “fan pages“ for products the company raises the employees’ awareness for product launches and other events. During the event the participants keep their colleagues, who cannot participate physically, in the loop by posting live.

One of the most important effects B recognized is that the companies potential to solve problems is utilized better. As the platform does not know geographical and divisional borders, users get immediate replies and suggestions to their problems.

Both companies recognized that the employees' communication improved. The internal StatusNet instance became an important tool to keep the employees informed. But it also enables them to participate. „It is (still) a valuable medium for spreading the word as well as searching for answers after the fact,“ B states.

Also the employee motivation is affected positively. A sees that the platform helps its employees to feel being part of the company's culture

Company B does not want to generalize yet. But the employees' reaction to the adoption of the microblogging instance was extremely positive.

Yet both companies have not used StatusNet for targeted communication in scope of (change management) projects.

According to A it's a opportunity but as voice and email are still the norm, in this case the adoption would take its time.

B thinks that yet it is not possible to use the platform in this context, due to technical inadequateness. StatusNet would require features like private groups etc. to prevent an information overflow of the system.

StatusNet as online tool to continue offline communication

It looks like microblogging is kind of a self-evident way to communicate. As the usage of the tool does not demand any explanation, people are likely to adopt it.

But StatusNet cannot replace face-to-face communication. An internal microblogging platform has a lot of positive effects on the company's internal online communication. As it is described in the chapter above, the fields of application are various:

-  to share business-relevant information,
-  to solve problems,
-  to discuss ideas,
-  to find experts on special topics,
-  to help employees creating new relationships etc.

Microblogging combines the advantages of a number of other online tools like social networks, wikis and blogs.

As an internal StatusNet instance does not know any geographical, divisional or hierarchical borders, it should amend team meetings, brainstorming, and discussions. People who normally hesitate to participate in discussions due to handicaps (e. g. speech disorders) or a lack of self-confidence are encouraged to become a part too, as microblogging creates lower entry barriers.

How to link off- and online communication

Right now, according to interviewees, StatusNet is not suited yet for targeted communication in the scope of change management projects. Basically the tool would help to coordinate the team and to reduce the email information as well as to improve the exchange of information. But it needs certain technical adaptations, like private groups, to make StatusNet a valuable tool in change management processes.

Nevertheless: an internal microblogging instance significantly improves communication and thus motivation.

One opportunity to link offline meeting with online communication is to post important facts of a meeting on the internal StatusNet instance. The ideas and facts can be picked up by the users any place and any time. So the discussion can be continued online.

The advantage of this method is that time zones do not matter as the information is available from the moment on the post is written. Even weeks after it was posted, the information is still available on the platform. Furthermore the team is able to select which information are supposed to be accessible by their colleagues.

The disadvantage is that one person is occupied with writing post during the whole meeting. And the offline team has to check the internal StatusNet instance once in a while for posts concerning the topic.

An alternative would be to broadcast the meeting as a live stream on the internet. People could follow the meeting on their desktop and make comments via the internal microblogging instance. So online ideas can be discussed offline immediately.

In this case the advantage is that the team gets new impulses at once. And the users online, "participating" in the discussion have a certain opportunity to control the discussion.

The disadvantage is that the offline team is not able to control which information hits the public as the meeting is broadcasted live. In addition further measures have to be taken to make the video available also days after the meeting. Companies with places in different time zones are extremely limited regarding the time frames for such meetings or they have to risk that employees from a certain time zone are not able to participate.

Regarding the implementation of StatusNet it is recommended to proceed successively. After a soft launch with a couple of early adopters, the tool can be announced internally on the intranet or in the company's newsletter. In the case of Motorola the number of users increased abruptly after the Motmot icon was added to the main company internal portal. (see: http://status.net/sites/default/files/StatusNet-Motorola-CaseStudy-FINAL_0.pdf, n. d.)

Conclusion

Running an internal microblogging instance has measurable positive results on motivation and communication of employees. Open Source solutions like StatusNet allow implementation of microblogging at low initial and maintenance cost.

The data indicates that companies with more than 20 employees will experience the advantages of an internal microblogging service. Companies with more than one location or companies with remote employees are also typical candidates for microblogging solutions. As it has been shown, it helps to motivate employees by allowing them to participate in discussions on a non-discriminating basis. It also motivates them to become more included into the corporate culture by allowing participation at any time and at any place.

The key take-aways of this paper can thus be summed up as:

- 🗣️ Microblogging supports an inclusive corporate culture by enabling employees to participate in a non-disruptive way. Internal communication becomes a pleasant experience which results in more participation and identification with the company.
- 🗣️ Microblogging sets free more creativity by allowing more participation in the most natural way.
- 🗣️ By creating an open environment for discussions and dissemination of relevant information, employees feel more attracted to the goals of the company - if these goals reflect and support this openness.

Questionnaire

1. What was the reason for introducing StatusNet?

A: opportunistic addressing of long-term low-level complaint about noise on internal email list

- B:
- Silo destruction - replace inward-facing group-based communications, enable social discovery and create new relationships
 - Networking, finding out what is going on around the company („serendipitous exploration“).
 - Encouraging collaboration.
 - Real-time dialog among employees
 - Reduce amount of global email

2. How many of the company's employees are using StatusNet?

A: majority. does SN have a stats dashboard?

B: About 10,000

3. What is the purpose StatusNet is used for? (e. g. only for discussion, to inform employees...)

- A:
- work from home/sick/vacation etc notices (much of the noise complained about above)
 - sharing work-related links/news
 - banter

- B:
- Getting quick answers to problems.
 - Networking, finding others of similar interests.
 - Reduce reliance on, and proliferation of, email bulletins.
 - Letting others know what you are working on and what new tools are available.
 - Socializing innovation - voting on internal ideas, encouraging communications.
 - Corporate employee communications - created "fan pages" for products to help create awareness for product launches or other events; encourage conversations, questions, suggestions.
 - Internal and external event microblogging Expands participation for people who could never physically attend the event.

4. Do you recognize improvements regarding the communication of the company's employees?

A/ B: Yes

5. If so, how does the use of StatusNet affect the employees' communication?

A: many people have commented they feel more in the loop with office culture - a number of people work remotely and/ or travel heavily

B: It gives people an alternate way of communicating, both listening and participating, to a much wider (if invisible) dynamic audience. While we still have many more listeners than posters, it's still a valuable medium for spreading the word as well as searching for answers after the fact (via keywords and text searches).

6. Do you recognize improvements regarding the motivation of the company's employees?

A/ B: Yes

7. If so, how does the use of StatusNet affect the employee motivation?

A: see (5) - feeling in loop/included/part of culture makes it easier to keep motivated

B: It's still a bit early in the adoption cycle to generalize, but comments from people who have used the tool have been extremely positive. Most view it as a "wow" tool – as in "we're so glad this tool exists internally". It seems this tool has pushed our communication capabilities firmly into the 21st century by providing an open, real-time platform that was not previously available.

8. Is StatusNet also used for targeted communication in scope of projects, especially change management projects?

A/ B: No

9. If so, does the use serve its purpose?

A/ B: -

10. And how does the use affect the projects?

A/ B: -

11. If not, do you think it's an option to use StatusNet for targeted communication and discussions in scope of projects?

A: Yes

B: No

12. Why?

A: It's an option, just haven't used for project or change communication yet - email or voice still the norm, expect to slowly change

B: Not yet, because this would require private groups, a feature that is not yet available in StatusNet. There are too many groups/projects and people to use this in that way, because the system would be flooded with information that is not relevant to most of the recipients.

13. Did you recognize other effects?

A: No

B: Yes

14. If so, which?

A: -

- B:
-  StatusNet has been useful in some situations when people have been looking for domain or subject matter experts.
 -  StatusNet has been very useful in identifying fixes for common issues (questions posted, answers returned).
 -  Suggestions for specialized solutions to problems - one user was looking for a webbased resource scheduler and received an immediate reply with suggestions and links.
 -  Growing platform for communicating and discussing innovative ideas logged in our idea management system.
 -  Widening employee participation in external events such as trade shows, conventions, and product launches by providing real-time, two-way communication with representatives on the show floor.

15. How do you measure the impact of StatusNet?

A: Haven't attempted to. Very low cost impact, qualitative changes good enough to keep and increase use.

B: Currently we just keep track of the participation numbers – including total users, total posts, threads, follows, and replies. As these indicators increase, we consider the impact to be positive.

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List of illustrations

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Imprint

This paper was originally written as a term paper in scope of the lecture Change Management by Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Daniel Habelt, Munich University of Applied Science, Department of Business Administration, Am Stadtpark 20, 81243 München.

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