Impact of new media on internal communications media essay

Cornelissen (2008) defines internal communications as " communication with employees internally within the organization" (pg195) He also went further to state that the emergence of new inventions in technologies like internet blogs and emails has evolved into messages not just been restricted to the confine of the office, but have faded the boundaries between internal and external communications. This translates to the fact that employees can now distribute information about an organization or even a co-employee electronically to outside stakeholders............ and they can share their views and publish their grievances as well as organise and demand action from the organization. With access to email, blogs and social networking sites for sharing corporate information, many employees become corporate communications professionals themselves.

Before the advent of World Wide Web, media communication as means of mass communication was to a large extent one-sided. Newspapers were written by a few people and read by thousands; television programmes (including news and documentaries) were made by a few people and watched by thousands; books were typically written by one person and read by thousands. Internal communications was no different. Employee newsletters were typically developed by a handful of employees and disseminated to the entire workforce.

The advent of Web 2. 0, which brought with it a clutch of new technologies such as social networking websites, blogs, etc., changed this nature of few-to-many communication. These new technologies allowed everyone to participate in the discussion. Suddenly, communication was not ' communication' at all; it became ' discussion' i. e from one way to two way

method of communication. This is a fundamental shift in perspective. In the workplace, the roles and explicit power of the players however have not changed. The employers are still the employers with the power to hire and fire employees; the employees are still employees who are bound by their employment contracts to their employers and are most times to be seen and not heard. Hence it is interesting to examine if there has been a change in the nature of internal communication within the workplace as a result of the advent of the new media.

This paper attempts to examine the ways in which each new major technology has changed the nature of internal communications, and concludes with a view towards the future.

2. 0 New Media inside the Workplace

Holtz (2006) points out that any technology that becomes a commonly used tool on the Internet will find its ways onto Intranets. There is always a lag between the widespread adoptions of the new technology and the adoption of the technology by corporations. Holtz is also of the opinion that this is because " business leaders tend to dismiss new technologies with contempt, viewing them as nothing more than diversions for youngsters and computer nerds". (pg22). These business leaders will eventually see a different side to this as the roles between the old and new media is obviously changing, or should I say have changed? Companies used to rely on the intranet and emails to communicate with their employees, so also face to face, but with the emergence and infiltration of new media into people's lives, communication has taken a totally different form, and it is bound to improve in years to come.

According to Henneman 2010, Gartner Inc, a research and advisory firm have predicted that social networking will replace email as the primary form of communication for 20% of business users by 2014.

2. 1 Instant Messaging

A prime example of this is the use of instant messaging. Initially no corporate use of instant messaging was found to be acceptable. However, as the technology began to be used more and more widely, it began to be adopted by corporations. Today instant messaging is used by a large number of companies to provide customer support, and to facilitate internal communications. Within the corporate network, especially within large corporations, instant messaging represents a non-intrusive method by which two employees can communicate. If two employees speak over the phone, the conversation may not be private because it is conducted in an office cubicle where conversations are easily overhead. Instant messaging on the other hand allows two employees to communicate without making any noise whatsoever, and therefore the conversation can remain private. Instant messaging also allows these two employees to communicate without moving from their cubicle.

Isaacs et al (2002) find that social use of instant messaging (IM) has a rather different nature compared to the use of instant messaging in the workplace. They find that whilst social use of IM is short, quick and the users multitask when chatting using IM. Media switching is also very common. However, the use of IM in the workplace is slightly longer, and therefore comparable to other impromptu conversations such as face to face conversations, phone calls, etc. Media switching was also not common. Two main styles of use

could be identified, namely working together and coordinating. Working together involved the use of IM For a number of collaborative activities, such as multipurpose discussions. The conversations are rather intense, with threading of the messages. Pairs of employees who work together tend to use IM more frequently, and for working together. The use of IM for coordinating on the other hand is often with the objective of scheduling interactions in other mediums. The conversations here are slow paced, with fewer and longer turns and little threading and multitasking. Cameron and Webster (2004) find that the success of the use of IM depends on whether a critical mass of users has been established. They also find that employees use IM as a replacement for other communication media and also as an additional method for reaching others. Both Cameron and Webster (ibid) and Herbsleb et al (2002) find that IM is used in internal communication where informal communication generally takes place.

2. 2 Social Networking – Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.

Skeels and Grudin (2009) report that the use of social networks websites are increasing in the workplace. They opine that the nature of use of social media in the workplace, the impact of this use on productivity, and the nature of any evolution in enterprise-friendly use are all open questions. Their study finds that the use of social networks often creates tensions which span social groups and the organisation's firewall, That is to say, the impact of the use of social networking websites can have an influence not only on the internal communications but also on the image and business of the organisation externally. Furthermore, they find that the use of social networking websites have only weak ties to productivity.

2. 3 Blogging and Micro-blogging

Ehrlich and Shami (2010) examine the use of micro-blogging in the workplace and find that confidentiality issues separate micro-blogging inside the workplace and outside the workplace. Micro-blogging was however relatively widely used, for the following main purposes:

Conversation and help from colleagues – internal micro-blogging allowed the employees to have conversations with their colleagues in an environment that was perceived to be familial. As the discussions were kept within the corporate boundaries, they believed that constructive criticism could be voiced, and to seek for help. The sense of belonging to the organisation also gave some employees an obligation to help others and actively search for colleagues who needed help.

Real time information sharing and awareness – One of the main benefits of internal micro-blogging was that it allowed employees to gain information in real time. It allowed for the free sharing of information as well as ideas.

Reputation management – The authors of posts in the micro-blogging also attempted to use this activity as a method of reputation management. They published information that was of use to a wide variety of people not only with the desire to help their audience but also with a desire to enhance their reputation as having access to the latest information.

Feeling connected – micro-blogging helped create a sense of interconnectedness and familiarity, especially amongst mobile workers. This was partly because micro-blogging did not focus solely on work-related topics but also included personal topics.

2. 4 Wikis

Hilska (n. d.) examines the effects of the implementation of a wiki-based intranet. He finds that wikis have multifarious uses in such a work environment such as writing the minutes of meetings, publication of news and announcements, task management, project management, documentation, for use as home pages for individuals, departments and work groups, etc. Wikis therefore can be said to be used for both internal communication as well as collaborative work. He also finds that there is a lot to be gained from the use of wikis, such as enabling people to participate in internal communication, participate in collaborative projects, share information, seek for information from colleagues, and manage work. Wikis also facilitate easy authorship by all the employees in an organisation. The main disadvantage of using wikis that was identified is that it was difficult to find relevant and up to date information.

3. 0 Discussion

Fidler (1997) points out that the rise of the new media is but one wave of change amongst many others that have occurred in the past. He points to the changes in communication that can be traced back from the time of recorded history, such as the invention of the telegram message, the invention of the telephone, the printing press, etc. In all of these changes that have been introduced into communication, it can be said that the principle of survival and delayed adoption has held true. The different forms of media, as well as media enterprises will adapt and evolve in response to the changing environment, otherwise they will become extinct. The forms of communication will evolve, such that the older forms of communication will

no longer be used. The telegram for example, became quite irrelevant when telephones were invented and widely adopted. As VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology matures and becomes more usable, the migration of users to the Internet may well render the telephone obsolete. The Apple iPhone for example facilitates videoconferencing between users directly using the Internet. This technology is therefore already sufficiently mature and established. What remains is for the adoption of the technology and cross–network adoption of common protocols.

The main question that arises from the discussion above is, as the nature of communication has changed from a few-to-many style of communication to a discussion in which a large segment of the traditional ' audience' participate in the communication, how has the nature of communication in the workplace changed?

Lengel and Daft (1989) make the important point that the selection of medium of communication has an impact on the meaning of the message. This collaborates with other findings discussed above that IM is generally preferred for informal communication.

Holtz (2006) also explains that the employee is not just an employee 24/7; he is also a customer, shareholder, etc. Hence internal corporate communication cannot always be distinguished from external corporate communication. Indeed the use of the new media for whistleblowing and activism is very high (Walter, 2009).

The author agrees with van Dijk (2006, pg. 240) who states that new media has the effect of organising the entities engaged in the communication or

discussion. As the media facilitates both public and private discussions, the choice of medium of communication reflects the desire of the initiator of the communication to have the contents of the conversation be public, or kept private. Furthermore, new media always provides an electronic record of the communication. This facilitates the verification of the message and authorship of the message. This helps to provide structure to the collection of individuals who collectively use the media. Within corporate environments, it can be seen that organisations that have a relatively flat structure generally employ new media to a greater extent than those that have a rigid and bureaucratic structure. The flat structure allows for open communication, and the consequent formation of societal structures with the use of new media. It encourages participation and interaction by opening a door of opportunity for employees to speak their minds.

Rooksby et al (2009) provide an excellent overview of the use of new media in the workplace. They explain that internally new media technologies are often used to locate the person who would know the answer to a question, rather than to find the answer to the question itself. One of the reasons for this could be that as the economy becomes more and more knowledge based, the answers that are sought could be implicit knowledge and not codified. This use of new media for expertise finding represents an opportunity for the people in the organisations to share their expertise. This in turn facilitates organisational learning, knowing and judging people's competencies, the creation of ad hoc teams to solve time-critical problems, and generally developing social capital.

They further explain that information itself is not a scare resource any longer, but time and attention are. Social networking technologies help people deal with information overload by finding the right person, source of help. These technologies help people become connected, and to share and consume information. This in turn leads them to form social connections, satisfying the human need to connect to people in their vicinity.

Rooksby et al (2009) state that social capital is difficult to quantify; it is also difficult to identify its exact influence on the productivity of an organisation. However, the formation of social relationships that is facilitated by the social networking technologies helps to build trust, reciprocity, and understanding between the workers in an organisation. This is clearly very important for the success of the organisation.

Cornelissen (2008, pg. 194) explains that organisations require employees to cooperate in order to achieve the company's goals. Today's organisations are often large corporations with a large number of employees. These employees are frequently required to perform highly specialised tasks, resulting in efficiency payoffs. These tasks however need to be coordinated, such that together they create value for the organisation. The organisation has to balance its own needs as well as the needs of its employees in order to ensure that they remain motivated and happy. Internal communication therefore serves a number of purposes, such as to fulfil the needs of the employees.

Raeth et al (2010) narrate that the cycle of adoption of new media can be described as having three distinct phases, namely the idea phase, the

project phase and the use and impact phase. The idea phase is when the idea for the development and deployment of new technology is put forward inside the organisation. This idea phase moves forward when there is support from management, proper justification for the project, funding, etc. When development is initiated, then the adoption of the new technology is said to move to the project phase. Here the actual system is developed and deployed. When it is adopted by the rank and file employees, then the adoption is considered to have moved to the use and impact phase. In this phase, the new systems are used, and the benefits are facilitated by training, communication and advocation. There is also analysis as to whether the systems are successful in achieving the desired goals.

Rooksby et al (2009) also highlight that one of the major problems associated with the use of social media is time wasting. The time spent by employees in social networking websites is not always productive, and this could lead to significant wasted time. Furthermore, there are also concerns about the privacy and confidentiality of information that is published on new media technologies, such as blogs and social networking websites. In workplace uses, there is a similar concern about the maintenance of confidentiality of information.

Cornelissen (2008, pg. 194) explains that new media technologies have served to blur the boundaries between internal and external communications. This means that the communications that would otherwise have remained within the organisation are sometimes disseminated outside the organisation.

4. 0 Conclusion

The author contends that new media has indeed changed society, and consequently the nature of internal communications, as described by Popp (2009). As the world has become more and more globalised, this is reflected in the changes in society where people have friends and family all over the world. New media facilitates interaction between these people in far flung geographical areas.

Herman and McChesney (2001) rightly state that communication is becoming more important in today's globalised economy. Society is also changing, as it is becoming more open, democratic and activist in nature. New media has certainly been a facilitating factor to this change, but it is important to note that society itself could be said to have been ready for change. Without this, new media alone would not have been able to effect any change. The author opines that in line with these changes in the wider society, a similar change in internal communications (in the delayed adoption fashion) is also already occurring. New organisations tend to have a flat structure, which is more democratic. The use of social media for internal communications allows for the effective communication of employees in far flung geographical locations. A prime example of this is the organisation which supports one of the most well known open source databases in the world, MySQL. The employees in this organisation are scattered all over the world, and have to rely on new media for communication. The rise of democracy can be thought to coincide with the rise in organisations with a flat structure. For these reasons, it can be said that the changes inside the workplace mirror the changes in wider society to a large extent, with a delay.

The new media does indeed bring a number of benefits to the corporate entity, just as they do to the wider society, such as creating relationships, enabling collaboration and communication, etc.

Klopper (2010) also states that internal communications tools create the opportunity for employees to not only ask questions but to answer them, increasing their visibility as an influencer in their niches. He refers to a study done by IBM which looked at over 5000 posts by their employees who use an internal IBM micro-blog called blue twit which though similar to twitter but can only be used internally, it was revealed that employees benefitted as they saw their interaction on bluetwit as " family conversation" because users could constructively criticise company products. As a result, people were able to use this tool to engage in a two way communication.

Hence in conclusion, it has been noted that the ' new media' of the past is the ' old media' of today. Change is inevitable, and it has been seen that internal communications within the workplace often tends to be a reflection of the general nature of communications in the wider society, and has helped companies recognise the fact that they need to keep changing in order to meet up or surpass their competitors and in so doing not lose manpower and company reputation due to absence of employee engagement. Hayes (2010) notes that some organizations probably fail to recognise the need for change until they have little choice but to react to an unforeseen situation.

Naslund (2010) believes that social media and communities are as distinctive as the businesses in which they exist…….. Undoubtedly building

internal communities and introducing social media initiatives can be an effective method in building the brand, exchange opinions, discuss freely and encourage employee engagement and interaction, it is also a new and refined method of identifying with the lively society that have been created within the company, so also an influential means of re-instating the facts that employees make up the framework of the company.