We Need to Talk…

An investigation into the usage, features and approaches applied by professional social media and communication platforms.

Adam Lee

AINT354 Design for Entertainment Systems

adam.lee@students.plymouth.ac.uk

Ebrisoft.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Through the identification, analysis and comparison of characteristics and functionality of three key industry players (Slack, Facebook Workplace and LinkedIn). This paper identifies the core features of an Enterprise Social Network (ESN): communication, information distribution and tool integration. Highlighting the importance of network size when considering platform design and its effect on business efficiency.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Communication Platform, Enterprise Social Network (ESN), Connectivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that social media and digital communication platforms have become a cornerstone of modern day-to-day existence with an ever-growing number of platforms available. Social network technologies have since found a home within the professional environment, developing into an exploitable Strategic Information Systems (Merali, Papadopoulos and Nadkarni, 2012). Life has now developed a need for such networks, not only with regards to interpersonal interactions and communications; they have now begun to underpin and entwine themselves within our careers and work environments. With this integration, there comes a need to identify the differences between personal peer-to-peer communications and those centred around a work environment. Social networking tools can, and are, being used to further one's career and ultimately allow communications between customers, clients and businesses colleagues to flow with increasing ease.

This paper will focus on identifying the attractive features of corporate social platforms (from the user's perspective) and their effect upon business operations and efficiency, and as such, the strategies applied to shape and manipulate their users into behaving respectfully and professionally.

2. FIELD

Communication has always been a driving force behind good business, and as technology has evolved, so have methods of how we communicate. There are several products on the marketplace applicable to small and large trades, each of which handles connectivity differently (Hillsberg, 2019). These Enterprise Social Network platforms (ESN) attempted to tear down information-sharing barriers and avoid information silos forming.

Common features among all platforms, usually take shape in an ability to direct message another party, allowing for an immediate exchange of information. Alongside this, there is usually the functionality to post publicly to boards or feeds. Generally, these are for announcements, large scale information distribution and broad queries that have a greater audience within a network. Enterprise knowledge management has developed more of a focus on: "leveraging human, social, relational and intellectual capital dynamically and across boundaries," (Turban, Bolloju and Liang, 2011) as opposed to traditional knowledge storage such as inhouse wiki pages that requires look-ups - in-essence users become a resource in-upon themselves.

3. KEY PLAYERS

There are a multitude of approaches to ESNs and numerous products that implement the ideology in different ways. Below is an analysis of the three providers that dominate the market place.

3.1 Slack

Slack's [1] groundwork lies with the ability to direct inter-personnel conversations. Created to provide a SaaS [2] communication solution; the product initially spawned from an internal tool created by Tiny Tech, during a game development project, to bridge their gap between their Canadian and US offices. Despite the game's failure, they realised the potential of their communication application, and in 201 Slack was brought to the market (Thomas, 2015).
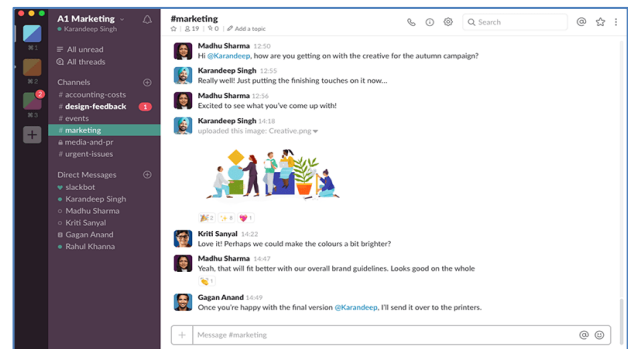

Figure 1. A Screenshot of a typical slack channel.

(Slack.com, 2019)

Slack stands apart from the other business tools due to its simplicity by design. In **Figure 1.1,** It is evident how the User Interface (UI) design focuses the user on their current conversation through screen real-estate, with other UI aspects taking up a considerably smaller proportion of the display. Group messages "Channels" are used to group communicate between individuals - seen on in the left column within the application window. Some other design features include the capability for users to view archives of all previous conversations with search functionality. Users can also respond to messages within sub-threads that appear in smaller windows and only notifying those involved within the thread of conversation developments. This prevents channels becoming cluttered and maintains a degree of controllability. Other features include tools to automate tasks through programable chat-bots [5] which the user can be prompt

---

[1] Slack.com. (2019). Home | https:// https://slack.com [Accessed 8 Oct. 2019].

[2] Software as a Service - a software distribution model in which a third-party provider hosts application and makes them available to customers over the Internet

with commands. The user can also send files of varying type within a message, integrated pre-existing business tools, and add custom web-hooks and API interactions (Slack, 2019) to create a custom work ecosystem.

Organisation members have the option to create channels and add and remove members. As of this, user management is handled somewhat more passively amongst the general populous. If a member of the group is behaving inappropriately, then they can be removed, and role powers can be assigned within a group. A channel admin can restrict the behaviour of members and discourage misdemeanours. When an enterprise establishes an organisation within Slack, they also gain the power as system-wide administrator[3] and can add and remove users from the organisation.

Over the last two years, Slack's paying user base has almost doubled (Richter, 2019). It now maintains a large repertoire of small and large customers, including the likes of the BBC; who praise the system increasing their effectiveness in their ability to tackle arising problems during the 2018 world-cup broadcasting (Slack, 2018). Moreover, they have also stated how it has assisted with communications with external customers and outsourced services, bringing them closer to the organisation (Slack, 2018).

3.2 Facebook Workplace

One of the most commonly used platforms for recreational, social media (Fb.com, 2019); Facebook, was created by a team of Harvard undergraduates with the intent of enabling students from several universities to communicate and network over large distances. Facebook includes the ability to establish a communication link between one's self and others, direct message, follow pages of interest and write posts which can be viewed by a chosen audience. This recipe is the reason for Facebook's success; users of the platform create the content that they desire and believe others will respond to – becoming information radiators.

Facebook Workplace takes this established recipe and hones it - applying it within a business situation as an ESN. It is promoted with the ability to 'Engage employees to drive culture' (Workplace by Facebook, 2019). The focus of Workplace within this context is not to serve as a go-to entertainment provider, but to act as a resource.

The engaging Facebook UI and construction is mirrored within Workplace and results in an interface that is familiar to the large majority of people. Thus, this means that an adopting business need not impact their efficiency with the initial implementation and training requirements. The only alterations to the UI are the condensing of the chat and notifications sections– a passive visual technique used to manage an employee's efficiency and avoid distraction [4].

Facebook Workplace is also only deployed within the local business network with employees being pre-linked. Within this network, members can create custom groups whereby they can localise the team information, with capabilities to live voice and video stream. Furthermore, additional attractive features within this ESN include the integration of current standard business tools within the app (Workplace by Facebook, 2019), apace with programmable chatbots [5] which can perform custom tasks when called by users.

Workplace's approach to the management of users and the enforcement of professionalism primarily lies with the use of active system administrators. These administrators are employees within the enterprise with the power to manage the entire network, groups, employees and content for full control over the community. [6] An admin can assign post priority in a co-worker's feed and thus influence their behaviour on the service, alongside this they can also manipulate the content which the entire network sees by flagging a post with varying degrees of importance for 24 hours.

The first adoption of the system occurred during the initial beta with the large banking company The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS). A report from RBS states that it was "available to 100,000 staff across the bank to encourage collaboration and allow employees to communicate faster and more efficiently" (Rbs.com, 2015). RBS found that staff were "able to work much more efficiently together, answer customer questions faster" (Rbs.com, 2015). Since then, a large proportion of companies have on-boarded Facebook Workplace with a great deal of success. [7]

3.3 LinkedIn

Although not strictly an ESN, LinkedIn[8] is within a professional ecosystem as a tool to increase career prospects, advertise positions, represent businesses and serve as a point of contact. Created in 2002 as a virtual address book with the intent of providing a network for working professionals. The platform's growth was relatively slow initially (The Linked In Man, 2017), however, now Over 75% of people who recently changed jobs used LinkedIn to inform their career decision (Connect with the candidates you want — faster, 2015), the site has now become a necessity for forwarding one's career.

Within LinkedIn, users create a page in a similar vein to a curriculum vitiate. On this page, users promote their skills sets, previously held positions and education history. The focus of this social network is to further one's career, and while it still maintains the core social media concept of connections, the focus drives towards professionalism. Securing a connection through one's profile (even by proxy of another connection) could result in step forward in a person's career. Also, jobs are posted on the site and recommended to those who appear to have the

---

[3] Slack.com (2019). Articles | Set Chanel Management Settings | https://slack.com/intl/en-gb/help/articles/115004988303-set-channel-management-preferences [Accessed 9 Oct. 2019].

[4] Facebook.com (2019). Workplace | About https://www.facebook.com/1319742961447503/videos/428996521200381/?t=26

[5] Note: A bot is an autonomous program on a network (especially the Internet) which can interact with systems or users.

[6] Facebook.com. (2019). Reporting | Workplace Help Center | https://www.facebook.com/help/work/1173159049384822/?helpref=hc_fnav [Accessed 9 Oct. 2019].

[7] Facebook.com. (2019). Reporting | Case Studies | https://www.facebook.com/workplace/case-studies [Accessed 9 Oct. 2019].

[8] LinkedIn.com (2019) | About Us | History https://news.linkedin.com/about-us#company-history [Accessed 9 Oct. 2019].

appropriate skills. LinkedIn's approach is provided value to the user, while also maintain common social media features such as user content posting and messaging - engaging the user. The platform also has a skill verification section where a member can endorse another's abilities, which can further aid one's credibility.

Due to the professional nature of LinkedIn, the manipulation of user behaviour on the platform is passive. Most user actions and content are publicly accessible; thus, any misconduct hinders the user's ability to take full advantage of the platform. If any inappropriate behaviour does occur, users can block communications (Linkedin.com, 2019b).

Despite the initial slow adoption, the website has now become a necessity for modern-day job applications. Companies will frequently vet and scout potential candidates via LinkedIn, with the site becoming a must-have resource within the job market for both employers and employees (Linkedin.com, 2019).

3.4 USP and Comparison

The key players previously described have some unique features which contribute to their market and commercial success: Facebook's hook lies with its intuitive layout as a social media platform; Slack's success comes from its inter-personal communication focus, and LinkedIn's success is due to the opportunities provided and the necessity to which it has become. However, some functionality held by each of the USPs can be scrutinised and differ in their benefits within varied contexts. Workplace lacks some functionality held by other platforms, such as the API functionality maintained by Slack. Nonetheless Slack has also fallen victim to criticism as being a detriment to a team's efficiency within large teams. (Philippou, 2019). With the main issue being the sheer volume of notifications an individual receives and the addictive non-professional validation through gifs and emojis (Philippou, 2019). In this respect, Workplace and LinkedIn are more effective at boosting efficiency with its use of a minimalised chat and notification UI, and the public posting functionality of both LinkedIn and Workplace excel at distributing low priority information across the greater network.

The approach to user management taken by LinkedIn is unique for the size of its network and the freedom which users have — despite the scope of the platform, a very hands-off passive approach is maintained. The reason this approach is so successful is due to the necessity for users to maintain professionalism on the platform in order to take full advantage of the opportunities on offer. Slack to some degree also applies this approach, with community members having control over groups, and a few administrative features. Nevertheless, as seen above, users may not adhere to professional-behaviour without a global administrative power to abide by.

In comparison, Workplace's system administration allows an organisation to have a large amount of control over personnel and manipulate the content that is viewed and shared across the organisation — making it a very viable solution for resource and efficiency management on a large scale.

4. APPROACH AND EVALUATION

The use of ESNs within businesses should always be focused on productivity and resourcefulness. Some features will ensure the success of a network. A clear and appropriate UI design is imperative; content must not serve as a distraction to users, while also radiating appropriate information. The user must not become overwhelmed with notifications and inappropriate content.

Alongside this, the ability to group members within communications will increase productivity when implemented and managed appropriately. The network should integrate with existing business technology, (such as cloud storage, office programs, calendars and management tools) allowing users to amalgamate their work with the network in a constructive manner.

Each of the key players applies a slightly different approach to implementing these features, with each choosing a differing focus point. ESNs that are chat driven, such as Slack, are more appropriate to smaller businesses and peer-to-peer communications. This is due to their focus on direct conversation, and discussions flow elegantly on a small scale, however, when scaled-up discussions may become diluted and organisation-wide information distribution becomes more difficult, with a weaker engagement. As of this, applications that are feed driven are suited to larger organisations and global information distribution, as feed items can be targeted, and user engagement can be managed and manipulate on a larger scale.

5. CONCLUSION

As seen with the key players, context is incredibly important when selecting or designing an ESN to support and provide a resource within a business. When deploying or developing an ESN, one must consider the size of the network being created along with the type of information that is being distributed. This will inform one's choices with regards to feature and tool implementation, user management approach and the focus point, ultimately affecting the success of the network. A smaller organisation or business should focus on inter-colleague communications and instant messaging. On this scale, users will have more control over the network and connectivity, resulting in an increase in productivity over distance and the prevention information silos.

On the other hand, a large corporate application or network that focuses on organisation-wide information sharing would be better suited to a feed approach, with more direct administrative control. Ensuring the right posts are shown to the correct audience, be it global or a select group.

Further investigations into other factors that may contribute towards the success of an ESN can be seen in **Appendix A.** Risk anticipation and risk management strategies are important to consider during implementation, as unhandled risks may result in a detrimental effect on company productivity and employee adoption. The technology and infrastructure required to support Social Networks must also be considered, and research should be conducted into the strategies involved.

Conclusively, all networks will maintain the features described throughout this paper to some degree; however, the methods chosen and the weight to which these design choices carry should be influenced by contextual application requirements research. Professionalism should be maintained using administrative roles and the ability to direct the flow of information as a resource, while also keeping passive enforcement whereby user's actions are publicly viewable. This bolsters users into actively discouraging one another from misusing the platform, as it detracts from the application as a whole.

6.   REFERENCES

Connect with the candidates you want — faster. (2015). [online] Available at: https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/business/talent-solutions/global/en_us/c/pdfs/Ultimate-List-of-Hiring-Stats-v02.04.pdf.

Fb.com. (2019). Company Info | Facebook Newsroom. [online] Available at: https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/.

Hillsberg, A. (2019). Best Enterprise Social Networking Software Reviews & Comparisons | 2019 List of Expert's Choices. [online] Financesonline.com. Available at: https://collaboration-software.financesonline.com/c/enterprise-social-networking/uk [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Linkedin.com. (2019a). Blocking or Unblocking a Member | LinkedIn Help. [online] Available at: https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/47081/blocking-or-unblocking-a-member?lang=en [Accessed 17 Oct. 2019].

Linkedin.com. (2019b). February Workforce Report 2019. [online] Available at: https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/resources/linkedin-workforce-report-february-2019 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Merali, Y., Papadopoulos, T. and Nadkarni, T. (2012). Information Systems Strategy: Past, present, future? The Journal of Strategic Information Systems, [online] 21(2), pp.125–153. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0963868712000145 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Philippou, T. (2019). Is Slack impacting startups' productivity — and work culture? | Sifted. [online] Sifted. Available at: https://sifted.eu/articles/slack-startups-productivity-presenteeism-culture/ [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Rbs.com. (2015). RBS becomes first bank in the world to launch Facebook At Work. [online] Available at: https://www.rbs.com/rbs/news/2015/10/rbs-becomes-first-bank-in-the-world-to-launch-facebook-at-work.html [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Richter, F. (2019). Infographic: Slack's Growth Shows No Signs of Slacking. [online] Statista Infographics. Available at: https://www.statista.com/chart/6643/daily-active-users-of-slack/ [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Slack (2017). Slack API. [online] Slack. Available at: https://api.slack.com [Accessed 17 Oct. 2019].

Slack (2018). BBC | Customer stories. [online] Slack. Available at: https://slack.com/intl/en-gb/customer-stories/bbc [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

The Linked In Man. (2017). The History of LinkedIn - The Linked In Man. [online] Available at: https://thelinkedinman.com/history-linkedin/ [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Thomas, K. (2015). A Brief History of Slack. [online] Techvibes. Available at: https://techvibes.com/2015/09/25/a-brief-history-of-slack-2015-09-25 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Turban, E., Bolloju, N. and Liang, T.-P. (2011). Enterprise Social Networking: Opportunities, Adoption, and Risk Mitigation. Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce, [online] 21(3), pp.202–220. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10919392.2011.590109 [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Workplace by Facebook. (2019a). Why Workplace? [online] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/workplace/about/ [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

Workplace by Facebook. (2019b). Workplace Integrations. [online] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/workplace/features/integrations [Accessed 16 Oct. 2019].

7.   APPENDIX

A.

Table 1. ESN integration considerations.
(Turban, Bolloju and Liang, 2011)

Dimension	Possible issues and considerations
Main purpose or goal	Purpose such as improving team/individual productivity, improving customer satisfaction and soliciting user-generated content Internal vs. external;
Targeted participants	customers vs. general public; consumers or suppliers
Type of network	Public vs. private; or a combination; professional vs. generic
Technology selection	Criteria, such as access alternatives, security mechanisms supported, ease of use, and integration with existing infrastructure/applications
Anticipated risks	Legal, security and privacy, intellectual property and copyright, user resistance, misuse and abuse
Risk management mechanism	Governance and policy, education, phased introduction, access control, monitoring and filtering, legal insurance