

# **Using Social Software for Business Communication**

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## *Introduction*

Since its inception the Internet has changed the landscape of communication. Websites, e-mail, and electronic commerce have had profound impacts on business communication in particular. There is a general understanding that the Web is changing, and that the new “Web 2.0” is more about content and less about the technological back-end of the web (Peek, 2005). The focus of Web 2.0 includes technologies such as blogs and wikis. This change is occurring because of the wide-spread access to inexpensive, high bandwidth tools and millions of people who are motivated and interested in participating in these new areas of the web (Boyd, 2003).

Social software is an interactive aspect of Web 2.0. Social software programs allow users to easily produce content for the web. This new type of software has had an impact on industries from information technology (Metatek, 2005) to architecture (Littlefield, 2005). Because of the great potential of social software, this literature review was conducted to analyze how the business community is using the software and to consider its potential impact for libraries and information studies.

Technology changed the landscape of business from the success of online companies like Amazon and iTunes to fast and cheap e-mail communication. It would seem that there would be a large body of literature examining new web-based communication technologies. There are many short articles explaining new technologies such as instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and group calendars. However, there aren't many

articles that cover such topics in depth and there are very few scholarly articles critiquing, analyzing, or conducting studies on the use of such technologies.

Within the existing literature of substance, there emerge two major trends:

1. Social software is useful for business.
2. Social software can have negative implications for business.

This paper synthesizes the bodies of literature arguing for these two trends.

### ***Trend: Social Software is Positive***

Most of the literature leans positively towards social software in the workplace.

The sub-trends within this school of thought include:

1. Inexpensive collaboration (Fichter, 2005; Goodnoe, 2005; Hof, 2005)
2. Efficient, real-time communication (Conlin, 2005; Shoesmith 2004; Durland, 2004; Kavanagh, 2005)
3. Good Public Relations (Brown and Heinrich, 2005; Cone 2005; Trufelman, 2005)
4. Online archiving (Wagner, 2005)

### **Sub-trend: Social Software is Positive Because it Allows for Inexpensive Collaboration**

In the literature, Darlene Fichter (2005) made a case for collaboration in “Intranets, Wikis, Blikis, and Collaborative Working.” In that article she suggested that with the increase of social software the new way of working is collaboration. Fichter said that businesses are always on the lookout for new technologies that can aid in employee communication and teamwork, particularly as groups may be separated by time and distance. Ezra Goodnoe (2005) agreed with Fichter that social software is good for

collaboration in “Wikis Make Collaboration Easier.” This article focused specifically on wikis and predicted that there will be “a period of wild growth, fierce competition, and inappropriate usage.” Collaborative Strategies LLC supports this prediction with the calculation that social software tools and hardware will develop into a forty billion dollar market by 2009 (Hof, 2005), indicating that electronic collaboration will continue to be important. The literature also suggests that in addition to inexpensive collaboration, social communication software aids in efficient real-time communication.

### **Sub-trend: Social Software is Positive Because it Allows for Efficient Real-Time Communication**

The second most commonly discussed trend in the literature explains that wikis and blogs allow for asynchronous collaboration, but some social software applications allow for efficient real-time communication. In “E-mail is so Five Minutes Ago,” Michelle Conlin (2005) discusses how e-mail has begun to waste time instead of saving it. She examined statistics dealing with spam in corporations and explains how businesses are turning to wikis, blogs, and instant messaging for increased productivity. John Shoesmith (2004) further clarifies that instant messaging can help save time in “Take a Message, Now.” Shoesmith discusses instant messaging in a business environment. He argues that instant messaging may be the foundation of a shift towards a more collaborative way of working. Shoesmith also suggests that over time instant messaging may become more diverse and complex. In an example of a more complex use of instant messaging, Stu Durland (2004) explains how instant messaging can be used for small-group collaboration in conference-call types of conversation in “Instant Messaging Brings Risks and Rewards.” In an example of a more diverse use of instant messaging,

John Kavanagh (2005) explored how some of the benefits of instant messaging can be expanded with the use of Short Message Service, or SMS, over mobile phones in “SMS and IM Boost Collaborative Working.” Kavanagh argues that SMS has wide potential use because anyone carrying a phone can communicate in this way. SMS shares the benefits of immediate response with instant messaging but has the increased benefit of being totally mobile. The literature makes a strong case for social software supporting efficient, effective, real-time and asynchronous communication within a business, but it also makes a good case for social software aiding in good public relations with clients.

### **Sub-trend: Social Software is Positive Because it Allows for Good Public Relations**

Some of the literature focused on the third positive use of social software in business: that social software is beneficial for communication outside of the organization in creating positive public relations. In “What the New Personalized Media Means to You—And Your Business Future,” Brown and Heinrich (2005) discuss how social software tools allow businesses to put a human face on their organization leading to more effective public relations with their clients and customers. Brown and Heinrich point out that these tools allow for businesses to immediately respond when customers have concerns and allow for new ways of communicating with people interested in their business. In “Rise of the Blog,” Edward Cone (2005) considers how the increase in inexpensive self-publishing tools is impacting companies today. He suggests that corporate blogs are useful for customers as they allow communication between the business and its users. Cone argues that this gives the company a fresh perspective from the customer. Lloyd P. Trufelman (2005) pointed out that customers are changing how

they get their information in “Customer-Generated Media—Challenges and Opportunities For Public Relations.” As customers specifically request certain types of information, companies can provide desired and relevant information through blogs and wikis. Customers can make use of Really Simple Syndication to access this information at their convenience. While most of the literature focuses on the benefits of social software focus on communication, some of the literature emphasizes the benefits of online archiving using social software.

### **Sub-trend: Social Software is Positive Because it Allows for Online Archiving**

The fourth trend that emerged in the literature is that social software can be useful for online archiving of business information. Christian Wagner (2005) explained that organizational knowledge is often kept in the memories of employees and isn't formally recorded. He goes on to say that this hasn't changed much over time. In “Breaking the Knowledge Acquisition Bottleneck Through Conversational Knowledge Management” Wagner explores why information doesn't flow freely within organizations and considers how some of the newer collaborative social software systems might allow for this type of information sharing. Wagner specifically suggests wikis as ideal software for this type of repository. While most of the literature focused on positive trends associated with social software such as archiving, public relations, or internal communication, some of the literature argued that social software has a negative impact for business.

## ***Trend: Social Software is Negative***

Though the literature generally contains a positive message regarding social software in the workplace, there is acknowledgement of its potential drawbacks. The sub-trends within this school of thought include:

1. Potential misuse (Tebbutt, 2005; Fichter, 2005)
2. Too little control (Niles, 2005)
3. Lack of standards (Fisher, 2000)

## **Sub-trend: Social Software is Negative Because it Can Potentially Be Misused**

The literature indicates that the strength of social software can also be its weakness: it's so open with very little control. David Tebbutt (2005) questions how wikis and blogs should be used in business in "Blogs and Wikis Could Blog the Gaffe on You." He suggests a need for establishing guidelines for the type of information employees can make available through these sources. Tebbutt points out how it can be risky for employees to be in a position to accidentally give away confidential information. Though Darlene Fichter generally supports the integration of social software into the workplace, she does point out that the possibility for abuse causes many businesses to avoid the technology (Fichter, 2005). There were articles in the literature that discussed the possible inadvertent misuse of social software by employees, but the literature also included a few arguments that social software didn't allow enough control by those in charge.

## **Sub-trend: Social Software is Negative Because Those in Charge Have Too Little Control**

A second negative trend that emerged in the literature is that organizational leaders have too little control in the use of social software in business. According to the literature, Robert Niles (2005) points out problems with the lack of control in social software in “Wikis Will Help Readers Direct the Community’s Most Powerful Voice.” Niles recounts a situation in which the *Los Angeles Times* opened up editorials to become interactive as wikis. However, the experiment was closed when contributors got out of hand. The lack of control is built in to the nature of social software. Some of the literature also focused on an issue that is less fundamental to the nature of social software: that there is a lack of standards.

## **Sub-trend: Social Software is Negative Because There is a Lack Of Standards**

According to the literature, an older concern that hasn’t yet been entirely corrected is that there is a lack of standards in social software. Dennis Fisher raised the issue in 2000 in “Instant Messaging Camps Still Divided,” exploring the lack of unity in standards within different instant messaging programs. This frustration still exists, as there are many different platforms for instant messaging, blogs, and wikis. If someone learns how to use one blog platform, they won’t necessarily know how to use another. Some of this has been rectified since this article was published, as there are some cross-platform instant messaging programs at this point in time, but there is still a ways to go. While the literature includes arguments against using social software in business because there is potential misuse, there is too little control, and there is a lack of standards, most

of the literature focused on the positive implications of social software: inexpensive, efficient communication within the business, good public relations, and online archiving. With the literature focusing on the benefits of social software, it is worth considering how social software can benefit libraries, specifically.

### ***Implications for Libraries***

Clearly social software is making an impact on business, from increasing collaboration, improving the public face of the company, and allowing easy archiving to raising questions of misuse, control, and lack of standards. What does this mean for libraries and information science?

The library literature includes an article by Shannon L. Roper (2005) which gives some insight into what social communication software could mean for libraries in “‘IM Here’ Reflection on Virtual Office Hours.” In this article, Roper explains a two year process of holding office hours with instant messaging for college students to see if they would contact her through this method. She found that students did instant message her on a regular basis and generally focused on task-related conversations. This can be seen in the growing use of virtual reference in colleges and public libraries today.

In the literature, Darlene Fichter (2005) further explores how social software can impact libraries by pointing out targeted uses of social software in “The Many Forms of E-Collaboration: Blogs, Wikis, Portals, Groupware, Discussion Boards, and Instant Messaging.” She uses this article to explain how these social software products can be used in libraries. She points out that blogs, wikis, portals, groupware, discussion boards, and instant messaging software is generally inexpensive and these programs are simple tools and flexible in implementation. Janet Balas (2006) also discussed how social

software might impact libraries in “The Social Ties That Bind.” Reflecting on an article by Thomas Frey, Balas suggested that libraries embrace new technologies, archive community memories, and provide opportunities for creativity. Social software provides a way to do all these things. The business literature contains more information dealing with the use of social software in business practices than the library literature does, however many of the benefits and drawbacks discussed in the business literature is applicable to libraries. Library managers and technical employees could determine some of the uses and challenges associated with utilizing social software by examining the body of literature that exists in the business world and drawing conclusions regarding the usefulness of implementing social software in the library environment.

## ***Conclusion***

Web 2.0 social communication software has a growing body of literature surrounding it. Content is becoming the focus of the Internet, rather than the technological backend (Peek, 2005). The impact of social software is impacting many industries, and is beginning to emerge in librarianship as well (Metatek, 2005; Littlefield, 2005; Fichter, 2005; Balas, 2006). This literature review has covered the two major trends in the literature dealing with social software: that social software can be useful for business, and that it can have negative implications for business.

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