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MON: The LinkedIn Effect: A new way of learning? (Louise Worsley)

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9 February 2015

Focus on project management LinkedIn communities.

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Cloud created by:

Louise Worsley
22 December 2014

While many people are aware of LinkedIn as a business network, fewer perhaps, are aware of the 1.9 million LinkedIn community groups (Quora,2014). This paper examines how these are being used in the field of project management to promote learning and share knowledge.

Open learning practices challenge the basis of what we traditionally mean by learning. Classic theories of learning focus on learning being acquired and occurring *inside* the person. In her engaging phrase, "I store my knowledge in my friends", Karen Stephenson (undated) captures the opportunities faced by learning in a digital age where the sum of the knowledge that an individual or community has is defined not by what they 'own' but by what they are 'connected' to. This leads us to a different definition of learning where "knowledge is distributed across a network of connections …and learning consists of the ability to construct and traverse those networks."(Downes,2012)

The growth of online communities has been one of the emerging phenomena of the digital age. In a study in the USA, 73% of online adults use a social networking site of some kind and while Facebook is the dominant platform, 42% of online users now using multiple sites regularly. (PewResearch Internet Project, 2013). Growth in professional networks such as LinkedIn continues, as does interest in specialist professional groups such as Doximity, a networking site exclusively for medical professionals with over 295,00 members (40% of physicians in the US).(Alden, 2014)

LinkedIn, and in particular the community groups on LinkedIn, are examples of a member-initiated community (Porter,2004). In these 'networks of practice', participation is open for all to see, and it is common that participants are strangers. Given these characteristics, it is interesting to ponder why such groups should result in knowledge sharing and learning at all. Why do individuals choose to seek out information through these types of mediums and are

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they successful in gaining insights and learning? If they are sharing, are we moving to the position described by Wasko & Faraj (2000) who propose that "knowledge can be maintained as a public good… where knowledge exchange is motivated by moral obligation and community interest"?

As an active member of the project management community and a 'knowledge benefitter' from online engagements I have been intrigued about the growth of project management (PM) communities on the authors preferred social network LinkedIn. This presentation provides an analysis of conversations occurring on some of the most popular PM groups on LinkedIn. In doing so, it explores further how we classify social network conversation and starts to address the question: To what extent are social networks changing the way we learn and share knowledge?

Extra content

Draft version of the paper: https://www.dropbox.com/s/huxxdkmr0wcijh4/Conference paper.v4.pdf?dl=0

Dr Simon Ball
16:34 on 3 February 2015

Extracted from draft paper (Discussion of results)

There is *prima facie* evidence of learning and sharing of knowledge in open communities such as LinkedIn. From comments received in response to surveys and from personal experience, it would seem that people do seek learning opportunities, and are using social media to extend the reach of their knowledge and experience.

 "As I work for a very large company, I… have a tendency to be very inward looking. By joining networks like this I've recognised that I can challenge my thinking, understand other's journeys for example, particularly on topics such as women in leadership, where other organisations are finding their way and we can share learning in this area."

[Female respondent: Large engineering UK company]

 Many more organisations are comfortable with the concept that: "*Not all information is found within our own organisation*", and as the respondent above suggests, there are genuine insights to be gained from practices in other organisations.

 This emerging connectivism is supported by Wasko & Faraz (2005) who suggest that:

"…*not only do virtual community members benefit from external network connections because they gain access to new information, expertise and ideas not available locally but they can "*act free from constraints of hierarchy and local rules.*"*

 It is this space that member-initiated, open communities such as LinkedIn currently occupy.

 In the survey described in this paper, more than two-thirds of the respondents are aged between 45-64 – an age often associated with maximum responsibilities and a plateau in learning. Even so, nearly 90% use LinkedIn at least once a week and just over half use two or more social networks regularly.

As might be expected from a group with this age profile, the main use of LinkedIn is in creating and maintaining professional relationship. Less expected is that just under half used LinkedIn, and gained benefit from "*seeking information on practices*", this being the second most important use.

With individuals brought up in the digital age becoming the dominant generation in the workplace, and the continuing rise of social networks, it is a fairly safe prediction that – like the telephone of the twentieth century - social media will simply become part of the way we not only maintain relationships but also the way we extend our knowledge and expertise.

But is all learning, is all knowledge sharing an active process? The received wisdom for traditional learning is that active learning is more effective, and more quickly absorbed. (Though there are counter examples: see   ) Can learning and extension of experience occur passively?

In a survey (Fortuna et al,2007) it was found as many as 90% of people in online communities are 'lurkers', people who search and read content but never – or very rarely - communicate i.e. offer comments to others in the group. This is backed up by comments from one of the respondents:

"I hardly ever interact with these groups and often routinely delete the daily email from my Inbox without reading it … Sometimes when a subject line resonates with me then I do click on the link to follow the discussion, but I have not once submitted a post to any of the groups."   *[Male respondent: Consultancy firm SA]*

It is interesting to note that while nearly half the individuals engage with LinkedIn, less than a third participate in forum discussions. Further, analysis of the main information sharing activity suggests relatively passive observation of forum activity rather than active engagement.

With over 700 project management related communities on LinkedIn alone, projects managers have a lot of groups to choose from. Some of the biggest of these groups have over 600,000 members are growing at a rate of some 15,000 members a month. Yet, what typifies successful communities of practice is engagement not simply size of membership – and the survey results described in this paper clearly identifies how differently the different groups score on creating and maintaining engagement.

The results, even in this small sample, strongly suggest that certain types of interactions encourage engagement and the exchange of ideas, while others act as dampers. This supports the views of Wasko and Faraj (2005) in their work on why people share on social networks. They found that there is strong desire to have access to a 'community of practice', which by their nature provide 'rich interaction'. As they reported, respondents said about their communities of practice, "If it just becomes a platform for Q&A and no discussion, I would lose interest quickly."

Discussion threads which are genuinely seeking advice such as, "Hello, can someone explain sigma to me in layman's terms? Any help would be appreciated!" generate the greatest number of valued exchanges. A close second are those that seem to have the general intent to involve the audience and provoke debate such as: "What makes a great project manager?"

A third discussion thread, one which is mainly informational in nature (we labelled them, 'Sharing information') and which are often initiated by links to an article, for example, "The Science Behind the To-Do List", do generate traffic, but this is typically five time less than

those seeking advice.

The statistics collected on this are directly supported by comments such as:

"I personally feel that the information and interaction shared through the social media sites are of a significant importance to young academics and professionals that are entering into the construction industry. It is in these places that information can be shared openly and accessed easily and on the move; almost an essential requirement in the lives of the younger generation; that certainly is the case for me…

[Male respondent: Large construction company UK]

It is interesting to note that there does seem to be a significant 'framing' effect at work. If discussion threads include self or corporate promotion; if there are professional relationships and networking threads combined with sharing information, seeking advice and provoking debate discussion threads, then this juxtapositioning seems to reduce the general level of interaction significantly.

Of the three project communities examined in detail, one in particular demonstrates high levels of engagement, and this is associated with the information seeking and provoking debate discussion threads. Indeed, in this community forum, no' promotion' discussions were found, and each discussion thread received on average some 40 comments. This compares with just eight comments per discussion, and less than one comment per discussion, in the other two community forums.

All three groups describe themselves as professional interest groups and their group rules, which are published on the site, state that their aim is to promote group discussions.

The big difference with the group with 40+ comments per discussion is that it is moderated – posted discussions are 'approved' before making it onto the community area. It is hard to believe that this moderation process does not contribute to the higher levels of engagement and it may also impact the culture and general behaviour of the group in other ways. For example, in this group 'seeking advice' discussion threads always receive at least some comments, whereas in the other two groups it is noticeable that some of the requests for advice and support are totally ignored.

While it is not yet known what factors cause communities to behave differently, with thousands of project managers joining project management communities every month, an important question for those prospective members must be; "What do I want from my virtual community?", and "How can identify the right one to join?" One move that is already apparent is the formation of groups within the LinkedIn project community which specifically state their focus is job recruitment. This may act so as to take these types of discussion threads out of the other project community forums

It is likely that, as social network usage matures, networks and communities within those networks will be selected that more closely match specific member needs and expectations. Hargittai (2008) notes that even though social networks are designed to be widely accessible, many attract a homogenous population and this leads to segregation. Doximity (an online network for doctors) is an example of a homogeneous network. Formed in the USA in 2011 it now has 295,000 members – some 40% of the physicians in the USA. (Alden, 2014).

So, do social networks support learning and the sharing of information? If they do, is the learning similar to, and is it as good as, the learning that happens in traditional formats?

The answer is a qualified – definitely. There appear to be three distinct types of learning going on. The first, a form of 'active' learning is delivered by the discussion thread that generates the highest levels of engagement, 'seeking advice'. The sharing and debating of the responses to these questions builds knowledge and understanding in individuals and communities.

The second is 'passive' learning. Perhaps unfashionable, and certainly with a long history, there are 'learners' or 'lurkers' who watch and wait, and absorb content without responding. That some learning is going on is certain, as case studies show changes in knowledge and attitudes following their interactions with, but non-exchange with the social networks.

And there may be a third, which is identified as 'gamification', learning through 'games'. The second most popular discussion thread – provoking debate is interesting. The most popular discussion by far, with over 4,000 comments and over 450 likes, was initiated in August 2014 and was going strong still in February 2015. (Table 10)

The discussion thread was started by, "Describe project management in three words!" Do the contributions made constitute learning as it would be traditionally recognised? Do the responses fit into the critical thinking categories described by researchers such as Newman et al (2004)? That there is conceptualisation, abstraction and refinement of ideas is evident in many replies. It is also evident that the individuals are heavily engaged with the topic and others interested in the thread, and these are all characteristics of learning in a social environment – and perhaps more importantly in a community of practice.   It is fun and seems trivial – but the question remains "Are people learning from it?" – and the answer seems to be "Yes".

Louise Worsley
17:26 on 3 February 2015

+ **Add extra content**

Embedded Content

Analysis of data Part 2

Analysis of data Part 2

added by Louise Worsley

Analysis of data Part 2

Analysis of data Part 2

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Conference presentation with script

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Accessible Alternative

added by Louise Worsley

References on Diiigo tag cloud that I used throughout this research

References on Diiigo tag cloud that I used throughout this research

added by Louise Worsley

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Contribute

Lisa Kidger
2:47pm 16 January 2015 Permalink

I hope to attend your session Louise. While I have a LinkedIn account, I barely use it, so I would be interested to learn how LinkedIn can be beneficial.

Rachel O'Connor
9:35am 26 January 2015 Permalink

This sounds a really interesting presentation so hope I can make it. I know nothing about linkedin. I have always avoided it but probably am missing out on a useful resource. Seeing how it contributes to learning in your particular context will be interesting to find out about.

Samantha Marks
9:58am 27 January 2015 Permalink

HI Louise. I am really enjoying reading through your research and picking up some of the reflections that have emerged. Linkedin, twitter, facebook...it seems that different people like different things and use them in different ways. I think the point is though, is that each may afford professional development. you could do the same study on any of these social media tools, or different communities of practice. What I particularly like about your study is that you have linked teh theory with actual practice and started to look at the conversations that are already taking place. I am sure there will be some interesting insights and lessons for us all.

catherine wilson
5:22pm 28 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Louise,

Its a great abstract, really interesting-I didnt know linked in had so many properties! I dont have any doubts that good quality learning can occur in these public, non policed (as such) spaces. This fuels the pro- wikipaedia debate! I look forward to hearing more.

Alison Walker
12:13pm 29 January 2015 Permalink

Hi Louise

Engaging read, thank you! You have led me to reflect on how LinkedIn is evolving as it grows and matures and how it can occupy a fairly unique position in social networking in that it was initially conceived as a place where people could network on a professional

basis. Do you think the way LinkedIn is structured ie around shared education, employment and companies and shared interest groups that it is particularly well suited to learning and growing knowledge?

I'm looking forward to understanding more about the categorisation of comments and how they support informal learning and the sharing of tacit knowledge.

[Catherine Dartnall](#)
11:56am 6 February 2015 (*Edited 11:57am 6 February 2015*) [Permalink](#)

Hi Louise

A really thorough exploration here of the use of online communities in learning. I always love to hear the phrase that you quote "I store my knowledge in my friends". We have access to so much information that it would be almost impossible to internalise this as personal knowledge - on the flip side however, why should we have to if we operate as a 'Networked Practitioner'?

Your comments also brought to mind the work of Julian Stodd in 'The Social Leadership Handbook' (2014). Stodd describes the benefit to organisations from working with networked individuals as the organisation also benefits from the knowledge within the communities of practice that the individual operates in. With 'jobs for life' being less common, it would seem to make sense to make the most of our connections to enable us to approach our professional lives with agility.

I'm looking forward to your conference presentation to discover more. Slides are looking great too :)

Catherine

[Dr Simon Ball](#)
2:13pm 10 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Your comments and questions from your live presentation:

- Very good point on forced joining!
- linkedin has only just started in Germany. growing fast
- Agree with hidden adverts
- I have lots of SA connections and I'm in the UK I wonder if its just cultural?
- surveys are very hard to complete without any biases
- I thought LinkedIn was mainly about recruitment and sales
- The commercial aspect of SMS is often not readily apparent.
- it is now possible to publish articles directly on LinkedIn
- What characterises the benefit of LinkedIn groups vs Facebook or Google +?
- Great research approach Louise! In particular your triangulation is extremely interesting. Have you considered using social network theory/analysis to understand why some persons are more central than others in those groups?
- Jenny Preece talks about how you can move those who are passive into active
- Does moderating material weaken the openness and immediacy of the online

discussion.

- The role of key champions is important
- Is it difficult to create the right type of culture within a linkedin group? ie not self promotion, spam without being overly controlling?
- Do you find that some groups are 'self policing'? ie group members comment when it appears people are promoting themselves/thier company?

Louise Worsley
2:18pm 12 February 2015 Permalink

Very good point on forced joining!

LW comment: I think that some of the research done on University forums where students have to be in the forum, and may even be marked by participation, may not generalize to open forums.

linkedin has only just started in Germany. growing fast

LW comment: Interesting that there are different demographics. I didn't see that many Germans in the PM communities but lots of Australians, Dutch and also quite a few from Middle and Far East.

Agree with hidden adverts

LW comment: The analysis used which identified corporate and personal promotion meant I had to follow links provided – it's amazing what convoluted ways are used to bring people back to corporate sites. And I think users see straight through these most of the time.

I have lots of SA connections and I'm in the UK I wonder if its just cultural?

LW comment: It might be – see comment above "LinkedIn only just started in Germany. SA like Australia is a big place with just a few major cities so we do perhaps rely more on computer mediated comms. Maybe we also feel the need to reach out more. I certainly get that impression of Australians online.

surveys are very hard to complete without any biases

LW comment: I have still had trouble finding specific references on this. There are lots about the fact that online surveys may exclude those who don't go online. Any ideas?

I thought LinkedIn was mainly about recruitment and sales

LW comment When people think Facebook they think 'friends', LinkedIn- business networking – I wonder what we will think about Google+ - blogging?. LinkedIn may change its face but that is very difficult to do –they are currently trialing a kind of paper/blog areas which is definitely aimed at info sharing.

The commercial aspect of SMS is often not readily apparent.

LW comment: Not sure what this refers to?

it is now possible to publish articles directly on LinkedIn

LW comment: They are trialing this at the moment. I wonder if it will be free or a paid for option.

What characterises the benefit of LinkedIn groups vs Facebook or Google +?

At the moment networking, and the people on it are definitely business. Google+ lags behind this and Facebook still has the wrong image. The ability to 'find' professional groups is probably better on LinkedIn - 600,000 project managers growing at 23,000 every two months is a lot.

Great research approach Louise! In particular your triangulation is extremely interesting. Have you considered using social network theory/analysis to understand why some persons are more central than others in those groups?

LW comment: : I think a Tipping Point type analysis might work here – Mavens, Networkers, Salespeople- http://www.productiveflourishing.com/maven-connector-or-salesperson-whats-your-archetype/

Take it out of SN theory into more business language – what do you think? Too simplistic?

Jenny Preece talks about how you can move those who are passive into active

LW comment: Interesting to explore whether people can change roles – but like MBTI and Belbin type analysis I suspect that people tend to adopt a role but lots of people can still move around and adapt their styles.

Does moderating material weaken the openness and immediacy of the online discussion.

LW comment: I think this would be an interesting area to explore. Again this has been looked at in learning and academic forums but I'm not sure this translates to open forums.

The role of key champions is important

LW comment: On the PM forums there are a handful of 'provokers' – they seem to take delight in posing those questions which get the group going. Why do they do this? Is I community altruism? It maybe raises self-esteem and personal presence…?

Is it difficult to create the right type of culture within a linkedin group? ie not self promotion, spam without being overly controlling?

LW comment: It does seem to be working on the S2 group. I didn't get a chance to check in detail, but from a quick look at the data I would say that more varied people (there wasn't a lot of Hi David how are type stuff which indicates that people are responding to friends) are engaging in this group and as I mentioned in the talk, this group was much better at responding to direct asks for help and advice.

Do you find that some groups are 'self policing'? ie group members comment when it appears people are promoting themselves/thier company?

LW comment: It didn't directly come out on the groups I looked at, but I have seen

comments elsewhere. I think sometimes when its done by the group it can come out a bit aggressive – exercising power without perceived authority etc. Views?

[Samantha Marks](#)
9:40am 13 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Louise, there is so much information and related and intersting work here. I hope you agree that your project has been fascinating. Re the survey bias, I think that it's just accepte dthat as long as you highlight the limitations that's OK. In my last module I think I remember reading something along the lines of, although there many be limitations, if there is enough data suggesting the same thing, then you can say there is a trend. I also agree about using business theory rather than social networking theory - or maybe showing how the two transpose each other. If we are taking about encourgaing otgers, then the theories, and language that they are used to will be more useful than theories around technology. Power, dynamics, roles...they are kind of universal aren't they? I do think that some people can change roles, so, for example, there are some face to face meetings where I sit back and 'lurk' because I know there are more dominant people in the room, and yet for many other aspect of work I try and take the lead. I am not sure that you always need to make teh passive active, it's part of their own journey.

It has definitely made me think again about how linked in can be better utilised.

[matthew street](#)
10:37am 17 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Louise,

I am just revisiting your presentation it is brilliant (I wasnt able to attend the section of the conference on Monday, becuase of work commintents :( ), being an individual that is quite reflective and likes to revisit ideas and content to undertand them better the cloudworks space and the work shared openly is fantastic, your work is thorough and detailed it gives a great insight into the use of LinkedIN, previously I had struggled to see a place for LinkedIN for me professionally.

Three things on reflection occur to me there seems to be a link between the work on Twitter I have been doing and yours in the sense that I am trying to create what you have been observing a vibrant space where people engage and contribute, did you notice whether posts from certain people recieved more traffic and contribution or was it the nature of the content that drove this?

One thing I have been aware of and which led to the resource being developed was that tools like twitter can seem quite abstract have you come across anything around the skills to use the tool?

When exploring Twitter I have found it quite open and easy to link to other tools and draw information from, My perception of LinkedIN is it is quite a closed tool, what haev you found using it?

Thanks

Matt Street

Louise Worsley
6:19am 18 February 2015 Permalink

@Sam. I am intrigued by the different roles. I suspect that people may also adopt different roles online from the persona they show in the 'real' world. I know quuite a lot of the academic players in my field and it is interesting to see the ones who appear in the onilne world and those who definitely do not! I think there has been work in this area but as I've mentioned before the little bit of searching I have done mainly ends up in education/academic focused research. I'm just starting H800 now - its interesting to be looking at that material with this in my head!

Louise Worsley
6:36am 18 February 2015 Permalink

Matthew Thanks so much for your comments. I had 'favourited' your presentation to watch but couldn't make the Weds evening. In fact I think I might use your project as a comparison as your artefact is different (media rather than paper) and also I think it's good to experience the presentation as an after observer to compare the experience with seeing the presentation live.

On your queries - its difficult to partition the nature of the discussion post from the person. One person in particular makes a habit of posting 'Provoke debate' questions - these posts get a lot of comments. Is that him or the nature of the post? What I did notice is that he does not get a lot of social asides in the conversations - the kind of "Hi Paul – how goes it type comments'. On the other hand people are more likely to 'follow' him because of his posts – so maybe these two factors (comment type and network) are intimately related.

On skills to use tools – nothing I've come across. My own personal experience – I was new to Twitter for this module. What has helped me is discovering tools that allow me to begin to understand the utility of Twitter. Simon suggest I use tweetdeck which suddenly meant I could see things better. The twitter analysis tools made me realize the importance of twitter for tracking things – I could suddenly understand why business/marketing just put things out there to test reactions. Then Sam's storyline and Dave Ms link to the research.

LinkedIn seems a VERY closed tool and I don't quite understand why yet. I did write to them asking for help with the analysis as there are virtually no LinkedIn analysis tools and certainly none I could find to look at community activity. Their response was that they needed to keep their member data confidential (I wasn't actually using member data, but there you go!). Having just watched the Aaron Swartz documentary I wonder whether some of these big groups are getting more and more scared of big brother coming down on them.

Dave Martin
9:19am 18 February 2015 Permalink

Nice examples of criteria for the selection of the other two presentations for the EMA Part 2 Louise.

'In fact I think I might use your project as a comparison as your artefact is different (media rather than paper) and also I think it's good to experience the presentation as an after observer to compare the experience with seeing the presentation live.'

[matthew street](#)
10:18am 25 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for the response Louise, I am also looking at comparing your project with mine. The different media element hadnt occured to me. I was comparing on the basis you were observing and researching an existing established network.

Thanks again, any questions in relatiom to the project please do get in touch

Best

Matt

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