

JURY'S SPECIAL MENTION AWARD



Geetika Rustagi

Geetika Rustagi won the PoleStar Award for her article, 'Internal networks at work go social', which appeared in Mint, dated October 2012.

Geetika Rustagi, has been working with Mint since June 2009 as a Web Editor. She graduated from Delhi University with Honors in Journalism and went on to earn a PG Diploma in Journalism specializing in new media from Asian College of Journalism, Chennai.

She is responsible for video production and social media at Mint. Prior to this role, she was on the web desk updating the website and handling social media for livemint.com (the online identity). In these four years, she has been associated with some special projects like Manthan Awards and mBillionth Awards given for outstanding work in the field of ICT by Digital Empowerment Foundation. She has also been reporting on social media, technology, mobile apps and digital trends. Her current work profile revolves around video production and devising social media strategy for Mint.

Her personal interests include social media, advertising, digital trends and branding. She has also worked with the India Today Group and The Hindu's lifestyle supplement MetroPlus and has dabbled into content writing as well.

Internal networks at work go social

Companies worldwide are using social media networks to improve communication with their employees

Geetika Rustagi

October 24, 2012



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Infosys Ltd engineers have got a way out of coder's block—they log on to an internal portal that mimics popular social networks. So when an engineer with the Java team was in atangle over a coding problem recently, he sought help from the Java community on InfyBubble, launched last July. He had his answer in a few hours.

Tech Mahindra Ltd used its internal network, Oie!, to find a parking solution for its engineers in Bangalore. British budget airline easyJet Plc used its social media to borrow photographs from a staff holiday for an ad campaign. And Bacardi Ltd invited videos created by its employees for a Bacardi Together campaign montage.

Worldwide, companies are using social media networks similar to Facebook Inc. and LinkedIn Corp. to improve how they communicate with their employees and how their employees communicate with each other, hoping to understand them better and encourage greater interaction and ideation. Indian companies have been fast adaptors.

Bangalore-based Infosys calls its InfyBubble a hub for brainstorming. The network has 94,018 members across its centres globally. "Someone asks for employees' ideas on a thread (emails or messages centred around a topic of discussion) and the whole project team starts giving their ideas on the thread itself," says Nandita Gurjar, senior vice-president, group head of human resources, Infosys. "If someone thinks the idea is good, then they 'like' the comment. Based on the most 'liked' solutions,

we arrive on a pool of solutions."

A lot of the activity on corporate social media can also be fun. When Kotak Mahindra Group turned 25, it launched a national talent hunt through its network, Im25.in, called 'Kotak's Got Talent' as part of its 'I M 25' campaign. With more than 5,300 members on the network, about 18,000 board messages (on profile pages) and 1,300 private messages were shared during the three months of the campaign.

It helps that many Indian companies have a pool of young people quick at adapting to platforms similar to Facebook or Twitter. "The formal changes to informal. Hard messages can be communicated in a casual manner without jeopardizing the morale of the younger employees," says Rajesh Lalwani, chief executive and founder of Blogworks, a social media agency.

"In our organization, most employees belong to the 25-30 year age bracket and are extremely tech-savvy. The technology evolves around them," says Dayanand Allapur, head, human resources at retailer Tesco Hindustan Service Centre, India. The company's social network, HUB, connects its 6,500 employees in India to peers across the world.

Need for networks

Knowledge is no longer formal or explicit. Ideas are often shared informally through blogs or status updates on social media (in an earlier era this was done by the coffee machines or in the office cafeteria). So, for many companies, knowledge management and collaboration became the primary drivers for using internal networks.

"Aiming to collaborate and harness our organization's greatest asset—the collective knowledge of our people, we leverage networks to improve learning," says Deepa V. Mukherjee, head (training and development), NIIT Technologies Ltd. "Social media works as a staple of work life and people today seek out employers who understand and acknowledge the critical role these new technologies play in our world."

The company uses Yammer Inc.'s customized enterprise social network as its internal social media platform for employees.

At Sapien, every document, comment or question shared on its network Vox is captured automatically, along with information about the author. "We needed an easy way to tap into our collective knowledge," says Nicole Bussard, product owner and social business strategist, Sapien. The network has more than 10,000 members.

Unlike the traditional intranet portals that are primarily used by

managements to convey information to their employees, social networks are people-centric and “have a huge amount of potential to harness the existing skill sets of the employees”, says Dahmesh Dilkhush, director, collaboration business (IT-enabled services and banking, financial services and insurance), at Cisco India and SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation).

“The platforms are not mere activity feeds but are also communication channels wrapping a work product,” adds Sanjay Manchanda, Microsoft business division, Microsoft India. “These help you deliver a product as a fair amount of content is created just around the product development.”

Officially social

Though social networks are by nature informal, a lot of work goes into the enterprise versions. The broad category of content in a company’s internal network includes employee profiles, discussion forums, blogs, documents, closed-user working groups and interest groups.

Such networks also enable “online mentoring of employees and help in building strong support systems,” says Aditya Narayan Mishra, director for marketing at Randstad India Ltd, a human resource management firm.

Social networks play an important role in corporate policymaking as well.

Shivnath Thukral, president, corporate branding and strategies initiative at Essar Group, says the company is tweaking its IT (information technology) policy after feedback from employees on its My Essar network. “Most Essarites cannot access external sites like Facebook due to our IT policy, but are accessing them through their smartphones anyway. We are working with the IT department to figure out a way to allow access,” he says.

Some companies use customized enterprise networks such as Salesforce.com Inc.’s Chatter.com and Yammer to manage inventories and sales operations.

Belkin Corp., a California-based manufacturer of routers, uses Chatter.com for enabling collaboration within its sales teams to provide deals and bid details. For broader collaboration, it uses Yammer. Advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi uses Chatter.com as a project management platform for employees across offices to share ideas, projects and business plans.

Policy and security

However open these corporate networks are, they are still guided by a company’s social media policy. Network security is also of

extreme importance, as employees are free to connect and share information on these platforms and companies can’t afford to allow any leaks. Sensitivity settings related to content can set off alarms for any information leaks or potential mishaps. Moreover, the networks allow users to create both open and closed groups where people must be invited in order to see and share content.

Negative chatter—especially comments from disgruntled employees or general gossip that may not be quite company-friendly—is an obvious area of concern. “It is an open forum and sensitivities of information may not be understood clearly. It can be misused for things not appropriate such as gossiping, which can be destructive,” says Mishra of Randstad.

Companies declined to share specific examples and dismissed such chatter more as one-off instances. But to deal with it, Tesco Hub has a reminder and an alert system for employees who make harsh comments. Network moderators have the power to warn and ban such users.

Others say such networks should offer space for debate, even if the comments are harsh.

“So far there haven’t been any negative comments and chatter. However, if it does occur in the future, we would view it as constructive feedback and connect to take corrective action,” says Prince Augustin, executive vice-president, group human capital and leadership development, at Mahindra and Mahindra Ltd.

Taking stock of what happens on these networks is important given that they reflect the activity level of employees. Enterprise network providers like Salesforce and Yammer offer client companies dashboard services that list all the activities that happen on internal networks in the form of reports, activity logs and amount of traffic.

Integrated future

According to research by Gartner, by 2014, emails will be replaced by internal social networking sites for 20% of business users. Industry experts say social media won’t kill emails, but internal corporate communication could move into a phase of integration. In other words, networks will integrate and social media platform will simply become the starting point for any work.

In the future it will cease to matter whether information moves via emails or document management systems, says Manchanda of Microsoft India. “The most successful platforms will in turn be the ones that are best able to control the volume of information and tune it so that it’s relevant for the participants.”