TO TWEET OR NOT TO TWEET, THAT IS THE QUESTION – SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Tim Wright
twintangibles, Glasgow, UK
tim@twintangibles.co.uk

Stuart Watson
Intellectual Assets Centre, Glasgow, UK
stuart.watson@ia-centre.org.uk

Daniela Castrataro
daniela.castrataro@ia-centre.org.uk
Abstract: As individuals and as social agents, many have embraced Social Media (SM), the benefits of which are self-apparent and are taken for granted within the context of this paper. Evidence would suggest that the penetration and demographic spread of the adoption of SM continues to grow rapidly within our daily life, not only on a personal level, but also in the workplace. However, there is a lack of research relating to SM and its application within specific business areas. Firstly, this paper intends to focus on the utilisation of SM to foster Knowledge Management (KM) potential within organisations. Anecdotally, an important concern of decision makers is the reputational risk and threat to traditional models of Intellectual Property management posed by the use of SM in the workplace. In addition, there is a perception that the business use of social networking websites is “time wasting” and not cost-effective, considering the perceived resource requirements to manage and successfully exploit the phenomenon of SM. However, within organisations, there are a range of stakeholders that could potentially play an important role in influencing decision makers’ views in terms of limiting the risk and gaining the business opportunities which SM offers. The authors believe that SM can offer tremendous benefits and opportunities for knowledge-aware management, including new knowledge creation, fresh approaches to Intellectual Property generation and innovation, and the development of valuable and deep insights into client and customer perception. Each of the aforementioned opportunities may result in commercial benefits and advantages. But, in the absence of clear and compelling models for the application and exploitation of SM, the uptake of these tools could remain patchy, and the potential for KM practitioners to influence decision makers, regarding focusing on the positive side of the risk/opportunity equation, will be challenging. Secondly, the result of this paper is to improve the understanding of businesses perception and adoption of SM and the role of KM in that. The authors devised a survey that sought to capture the scope and nature of the use of SM in a business context, the application areas of work to which it is being applied, the key champions for the use of SM and the key constraints and guidance on its use. In particular, the authors aimed to gain insight into an organisation’s perspectives regarding the opportunities and threats offered by SM for the generation of Intellectual Assets and especially of new knowledge. The intent was to gain an “as is” view and identify commonalities that have resulted
in a positive perception of SM. The paper presents the findings of this survey, identifying the key applications of SM, where it is implemented and utilised, the prevailing attitudes and the key influencer for decision makers. In addition, the results specifically intend to demonstrate the active or passive role of the KM community in the wider business application of SM, highlighting areas where the authors believe opportunity exists for KM practitioners to influence decisions through a more extensive use of SM.

**Key words**: Social Media; Social Networking; Knowledge Management; Strategic Decision Making; Crowdsourcing; Co-creation; Innovation; Web 2.0.

1. Introduction

The penetration and demographic spread of the adoption of Social Media (SM) continues to grow rapidly. For example, within the past year, access to Twitter by UK users alone has increased by 974% (Goad, 2009); and with more than 400 million active users, Facebook would be the 4th largest “country” in the world whilst Generation Y will outnumber Boomers by 2010 as the largest generational group with 96% participating in social networks. Nevertheless some ask, is social media a fad? Or is it the biggest shift since the Industrial Revolution?” (Socialnomics, 2009). Undoubtedly this has been a comparatively rapid change. It took 38 years for the radio to reach 50 million users, whereas Facebook added 100 million users in 9 months (Socialnomics, 2009). Social Media has already attracted a great deal of interest in the business community, not all of it positive. There are organisations that are readily embracing aspects of this phenomenon whilst others are yet to be convinced of its business value even believing many of its more commonly cited applications as little more than a waste of time. Nevertheless the recent AIIM Survey of Social Media Activists (AIIM, 2010; Mancini, 2010) suggests that 30% of its respondents use Twitter, which for the cynics represents one of the most frivolous of SM tools, for business networking at least once per day. The authors believe SM has a valuable role to play in business and therefore sought to understand patterns of adoption of SM in business, and in particular to establish which groups, if they could be identified, were leading the charge to introduce it. The proposition to use SM in Knowledge Management (KM) initiatives seems, to us at least, to be a very compelling one and we were curious to see if the KM community shared that view and if they were in fact at the forefront, or perceived to be at the forefront, of the introduction of SM, within a business context. Our approach to the question was to configure a questionnaire that could be completed online and encouraged participants from all sectors and geographic regions to participate.
This paper intends to focus on the perception and utilisation of SM in business organisations and to understand the role in relation to KM. There are a range of stakeholders that could play an important role in influencing decision makers’ views of SM in business. The authors believe that SM can offer tremendous benefits and opportunities for knowledge-aware management, including new knowledge creation, fresh approaches to Intellectual Property generation and innovation, and the development of valuable and deep insights into client and customer perception. Each of the aforementioned opportunities may result in commercial benefit and advantage. However, the authors accept that in the absence of clear and compelling models for the application and exploitation of SM, the uptake of these tools could remain patchy, and that the potential for KM practitioners to influence decision makers to focus on the positive side of the risk/opportunity equation of SM will be challenging.

This paper identifies key findings of the survey results which seem to indicate missed opportunities for the KM community and highlights some of the more striking and curious metrics. We will consider where SM tools could have significant application in the KM domain, at the same time considering briefly some suggested reasons for the apparent lack of KM exploitation of these opportunities as they appear to the authors.

2. Methodology

To ascertain the business adoption of SM, a questionnaire was created and advertised online\(^1\), through Social Networks and by emailing individuals. The findings for this paper are based on the initial six-week post-launch period between February and March 2010. The survey sought to obtain data on how businesses generally use and manage SM and in particular how it is used to maximise the value of their Intellectual Assets and how they deal with Intellectual Property issues involved in the use of SM. The questionnaire contained twenty-one questions; a mixed methodological approach was devised with both open and multiple choice questions. Businesses were evaluated on different levels, reflecting the three sections of the questionnaire: Awareness and Use of Social Media; Intellectual Property Considerations; Intellectual Assets Considerations. Within these holistic topics, a number of questions related to the management of knowledge within the organisations. The resulting number of respondents for first six-week sample was 134, since there was no canvassing of possible respondents, it is difficult to explicitly state the response rate. However, the response number was favourable in comparison to similar sized surveys surrounding this subject matter (Journalism.co.uk, 2010).

\(^1\) [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/socialmediaquestionnaire](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/socialmediaquestionnaire)
3. General Findings

In the recent AIIM, Survey of Social Media Activists (AIIM, 2010; Mancini, 2010) taken in February 2010, 76% of respondents agreed either strongly or very strongly with statement “I think that business social networking tools help me to do my job better” and 62% felt that “it’s becoming increasingly important for my job that I am active on social networks”.

In conducting our survey, we identified a number of points which support and refute general perceptions of the use of social media within the business context. The majority of companies (86.3%) are using SM in the workplace for work-related purposes. Of the companies who responded to our survey, the prevalent usage of SM is social networking, with an overwhelming 81.9% of respondents using websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Bebo. Over half of respondents noted that social networking websites were used for networking with individuals external to the organisation, however the focus was upon using social networks for Hiring (63.1%) and Marketing (61.2%). Also, the usage of blogs (48%), Microblogging such as Twitter (49%) and Wikis (46.1%) was high. A number of respondents declared use of Livecasting/Instant Messaging tools and Video Sharing. The responses to the survey also outlined a large use of employment website (26.5%) for recruitment purposes. The use of SM for hiring may stem from organisations sourcing new talent or identifying the skills in the external workforce. Conversely it could also be argued that individuals were using SM at work to source future potential employment. Without further research, this question will be left unanswered. The use of SM monitoring tools (i.e. Social Radar) and Crowd sourcing tools, whilst relatively low should not perhaps be ignored even with such a relatively small pool of respondents.

41% of companies have used these tools for more than 2 years and a total of 68% have been using them for between 1 and 2 years. 74% of responses stated that all staff are allowed access to SM within the work place for work related purposes. Only 10.8% answered “Only Managers” as a select group permitted to use SM in the workplace. This apparent lack of constraint seems to go against anecdotal evidence. An overwhelming 71.1% have not introduced policies and/or guidelines for conducting business practice online, another statistic which is surprising as it juxta posed to a survey carried out by CloudNet (Journalism.co.uk, 2010) which identified that only 20% of respondents did not have a social media policy implemented. It should be noted that CloudNet’s survey size was similar to ours. Our survey identified that the majority of individuals did not have concerns with disclosing their company’s intellectual property (76.3%) through the use of SM. However, according to the UK IPO (2009), when an employee discloses information regarding a company innovation on a SM website such as Facebook, Twitter and or Flickr, this could invalidate a potential patent application, therefore the resultant risk of disclosure so could be severe to certain businesses.
61.2% of respondents stated that the majority of the use of SM is for marketing purposes, for example, many use Twitter for raising brand awareness. A large percentage of respondents believe that SM helps to exploit their Intellectual Assets (IA), but what appears to be implied by IA is little beyond Brand Awareness/Recognition. Many respondents also declared the use SM to interact and analyse their customers. There seems to be little differentiation between public and private sector, again challenging expectations and anecdotal evidence. Those differences that can be found are largely in the tools in use by each sector: the private sector seems to use Microblogging more than formal blogging and, generally speaking, the private sector appears to use a greater variety of tools.

4. KM observations

The findings of the survey are interesting to the authors as it appears to suggest that KM practitioners are not, or are not perceived to be, in the vanguard of championing the adoption of SM tools within a business context. In addition, the potentially powerful applications that SM tools offer to the KM domain do not appear to be embedded or necessarily understood. Given the sample size, we have focused mainly on the broader indicators avoiding granular analysis. As the survey remains open, we hope that over time, the sample size will increase, and that will allow us to investigate specific sectoral and geographic comparisons. However, even the broad indicators present cause for thought and reflection by the KM community.

It is striking that when asked about the key groups championing the use of SM for work related purposes within their workplace, the clear leaders in pushing for its use are the Marketing and Communications (Marcomms) group by some marked degree. In both Public and Private sector groups, around 25% felt that Marcomms were the key players in introducing and championing the use of SM. If Sales is added to this group, then the results are even more compelling as 17.5% felt Sales were, or are, the key champions. KM came in at 11.3% and, within the public sector, even behind the IT group. This was particularly surprising given the anecdotal evidence that suggests IT stakeholders are commonly seen as a blocker to the adoption of SM. However, it is striking that defined KM practitioners are not perceived to be at the forefront of pushing for the adoption of SM in the workplace.

This appears even more surprising when one considers that more than 50% of respondents saw SM as valuable for managing the intellectual assets of their company. We can quite reasonably regard Intellectual Assets (IA) as being knowledge assets and typically an area for the involvement of KM professionals. Yet this stands at odds with the efforts of KM staff to be seen as champions of SM. If we dig a little deeper, however, we learn that few respondents considered IA as
being more than brand awareness and recognition, and with this rather limited perspective of what constitutes IA, it is hardly surprising that the Marketers, the traditional custodians of brand management, are at the heart of SM activities.

Less than 50% declare they use Wikis in the workplace and less than 25% marked the use of social bookmarking. This seems surprising given the high usage of SM generally and the anecdotal high visibility of wiki based tools such as Wikipedia. If we set this alongside the finding of the AIIM survey (AIIM, 2010; Mancini, 2010), where 71% agreed with the statement that they would be “willing to participate in a wiki or other tool to gather together and share best practices”, one wonders why the take up of this opportunity seems relatively low. Of course what people say they “will do” and what they actually “do” are quite different things.

One interesting finding – again when compared to anecdotal evidence – was the apparent low levels of use of SM applications for internal KM initiatives. This seems surprising given that the majority of respondents classed themselves as working for organisations of more than 250 staff where the opportunity for deployment of SM tools for internal KM application must be stronger than in smaller organisations. However, by a ratio of nearly 2:1, respondents stated knowledge sharing is conducted with external parties rather than internally. However the use of SM for external knowledge exchange may be no bad thing. In the recently published European Innovation Scoreboard (Pro Inno Europe, 2009), it was found that more than half of firms classed as innovating firms involved users (i.e. external parties) in their innovation efforts. These were described in the survey as “super innovators”. This could be the by-product of one or both of the following: 1. Employees believe that knowledge gained through analysing the external environment will be of more benefit to the organisation; or 2. KM using SM focuses upon the identification of explicit knowledge, whereas tacit knowledge (if you accept these definitions) created/shared internally is shared through interaction and/or collaboration within the interaction of IT, specifically SM. Our survey found that 16% of companies declare they use SM for crowd-sourcing purposes which could well include the involvement of users in innovation activities and so is broadly in keeping with the European Innovation Scoreboard (2009) findings. However, we should restate that it is those coming from a Marcomms background that are leading the uptake of SM, it could be a cause for concern for KM practitioners if it were the Marcomms teams who were pushing businesses into the “super innovator” category.

4.1 Social Media missed opportunities in the KM domain

In the view of the authors, SM presents tremendous opportunities in the KM domain. Whilst we understand that KM has a range of definitions that fill a broad spectrum, ranging from those believing that it is little more than an extension of information management through to those that feel it represents
a radical and holistic management agenda aimed at nurturing and harnessing human cognition for business advantage, SM still has something to offer. We are not alone in this view. The IFLA conference of 2008 (Dysart, 2008) apparently had SM as one of its three key conference threads, and even a casual review of KM literature will find many references to the importance and impact of SM. This view is confirmed by Tapscott and Williams who posited the idea of the New Alexandrians in Wikinomics (Tapscot & Williams, 2007), an idea that one would expect to resonate with even the most conservative in the KM domain. The former Forrester researchers and authors Li and Bernoff (2008) agree by emphasising in their book Groundswell how SM underpins a landscape changed by the wikinomics revolution. In addition, companies may benefit from SM instruments for enhancing knowledge processing, which is (to some) the essential aim of KM, as Joe Firestone, CEO of Knowledge Management Consortium International, states:

“SM tools enable increased: social networking, connectivity, distributed content creation and aggregation, self-organisation, and collaboration. They may, also, if introduced into a social system, enhance aspects of knowledge processing including problem seeking, recognition and formulation; creating new knowledge; and knowledge integration. And that’s why KM may want to introduce SM tools or support others in introducing them. The democratisation of content production in the context of more intense social interaction, promised and, arguably, produced by SM tools, is something that KM should seek and support.” (Firestone, 2009)

If marketers are making the most of externally facing SM, KM is certainly missing the best opportunities when it comes to their exploitation within the firewall. One compelling case of an internally faced “social KM strategy” is IBM’s. IBM have developed an integrated social software package for business rather than a strategy, which has been tested by IBM employees (IBM, 2007). Lotus Connection, IBM’s trading name for the suite, includes a comprehensive suite of SM tools and applications for internal social networking: blogs, social bookmarking and communities. Their intent in developing this tool suite was to enhance knowledge processing within their organisation. The internal social network is extremely useful for finding and meeting with the “right” people throughout the company. Blogs could allow for increased knowledge transfer and collaborative idea generation across the enterprise. The shared bookmarking system in a company intranet site, with access to both internet and intranet resources, is in this case connected to the enterprise directory through the use of tags, thus allowing again to find the people with the right expertise within a specific domain. The success of the initiative has led IBM to publish 30,000 individual blogs (all browsable through a single location, Blog Central), 300,000 bookmarks for internal and external resources, 900 registered communities,
10,000 activities (IBM, 2007). A similar strategy has been implemented by Intel, with the goal of transforming “collaboration across Intel, addressing top business challenges such as helping employees to find relevant information and expertise more quickly, breaking down silos; attracting and retaining new employees; and capturing the tacit knowledge of mature employees” (Intel, 2009).

However, from our survey results, SM is not being extensively implemented to benefit KM, with only 12% of respondents declaring they use SM as an internal KM tool, and only one respondent identified that they used internal social media “to allow knowledge flow between the entities of the company”. A simple search of Google will identify a comparative lack of articles relating to KM strategies for SM by comparison to the many SM marketing strategies, leading us to restate that KM practitioners seem to be less actively engaged.

So, in the face of this apparent lack of evangelism for SM from the KM community, one has to ask why this might be. Could it be that the KM community lacks the imagination and flexibility to see the potential of SM applications outside of their stated purpose? Whilst there is significant evidence as to how SM can be used to generate brand awareness and customer centric feedback, these tools were not designed specifically with those purposes in mind. Facebook was born as a social network to allow people to stay in touch with friends and family. However, the use of it as a marketing tool is turning out to be popular, whereas the KM potential which it has in terms of knowledge sharing and creation is being apparently unexploited or at least unrecognised.

Wikis, social network aggregation and social bookmarking tools are capable and effective in the management of unstructured data and, with their collaborative nature, have capacity for consolidating disparate insight. It seems most surprising that of the survey’s respondents, they are used by only 46%, 10% and 24% respectively. Could it be that the concept of folksonomies and the unstructured tagging of items, practices closely associated with and essential to the effectiveness of these applications, may perhaps run counter to some strongly held views of those coming from a more structured information management background? In the area of ideagoras and crowd-sourcing opportunities, only 16% of companies declare they use SM for crowd sourcing, however 30% said they are using SM for Co-Creation and broadly speaking 30% of respondents intend to use an idea repository. This must be encouraging, but a closer examination of the application of these techniques appears to show that the ambition in this department may be somewhat limited or not well understood.

SM has, along with much of the online world, a tremendous democratising power with its strengths being based upon popular, common and simple participation. The agenda is predominately set by the participants and much of its power comes from the emergent qualities of this approach. Insight mined from this can often be regarded as more “truthful” and consequently as a method of gaining customer perceptions it offers a very compelling proposition to marketers. This is despite the fact that in many ways this methodology runs counter to much
traditional thinking in marketing which has focused on building and controlling messages from the centre. This is becoming increasingly difficult to do as the SM tools lead to an explosive mix of multiple publishers in multiple channels and media, making it all but impossible to control or manage “the message”. Despite the need for marketers to rethink some strongly held views in order to thrive in this environment, they do seem to be adapting more readily to the opportunities on offer. In the KM domain, this emergent and broad participation at the heart of SM has, to our mind, equal if not more potential. The ability to harness distributed cognition and contextually sensitive access to resources is all but unprecedented. By that we mean it is the practitioners themselves in the field that best decide on the application and value of resources, not the KM team, but this begins to take us towards a broader definition of KM and its scope than the more traditional interpretation of the discipline.

Perhaps marketing and communications communities have developed more compelling business cases that allow them to champion the use of SM effectively to senior management. After all, there are many apocryphal stories of both visible success in the use of SM from a marketing perspective, and disasters from a Marcomms perspective resulting from a lack of effective engagement with SM. These stories, true or not, can gather a momentum that can be useful in making the case for engagement. Perhaps marketers have simply become comfortable in the role as owners of the SM space. The Social Media Today website (Social Media Today, 2010) unapologetically describes itself as “The Web’s Best Thinkers on Social Media and Web 2.0” and “The Moderated Business Community for Marketers, PR and Media Professionals.”

Could it be that a narrow interpretation of what constitutes the function of KM makes it more problematic to make a strong argument to exploit SM for KM ends? If we take KM from a relatively narrow perspective of being focused on information management, the application of SM could appear more limited. However, if we took a broader perspective of KM as a more holistic discipline, it is reasonable to incorporate networking, customer insight, community involvement, crowd sourcing and even hiring or talent management as part of a KM brief. If we were to use this wider definition, the survey results would imply that KM is the primary application of SM, it is just that few see it that way. Could it be then that the KM community itself that has ceded the role as major evangelists for SM by constraining the view of what is within their domain?

An additional reason why Knowledge Managers are apparently not taking the lead could be that SM is transforming the KM paradigm. As Suarez states (IBM, 2007), “SM is more successful at achieving the same ends of KM, regarding explicit knowledge which is codified and stored as Intellectual Capital. There’s always been less attention regarding tacit knowledge, certainly less solutions to how it can be effectively captured (if it can be). SM aims to enable instant access to relevant codified knowledge and expertise, due to its searchability and the nature of tagging.”
The requirement to amass and manage knowledge seen as Intellectual Capital is now being challenged by a “social action” which arises spontaneously as an activity of daily work and, as our survey’s results seem to suggest, also of daily life outside work, driven by natural motivations, i.e. sharing what one knows, whenever they want to and in whatever form, without any artificial process and fitting abstractions. We all become knowledge managers somehow, the end users are in control of information, which is structured dynamically based on subject tags that arise from shared usage. This might frighten the KM community as they feel threatened in their leading position as managers of knowledge.

5. Conclusions

Whilst it is apparent that SM is taking a firmer hold in business, its use is wider, less constrained and has been active for longer than we had expected. It is also apparent that the KM community is not leading, or perceived to be leading, the adoption of SM. This seems to us to be a missed opportunity. SM could and should be returning business value to organisations in a KM context and whilst it is not seen to be doing so, there must be risks that the best advantage of SM may not be being won. Whilst the survey does not offer any definitive answers to explain why it is that KM seems so underrepresented in this area, it must warrant further investigation. Reasons for the findings may include the following: that the KM community is not convinced of SM’s value (or that the risks of its use outweigh its advantages); that they are unable to make a compelling business case to influence decision makers to adopt (unlike apparently the Marketers can); KM feels the application of SM is in areas that they perceive to be outside of their domain. The perception of users of SM and respondents to the survey is that the application of SM is outside of their understanding of what constitutes KM.

Whatever the reasons, it seems KM is not tweeting.

6. References

IBM (2007) Getting into social software...take the experience of IBM [online],
Journalism.co.uk (2010) Survey: small businesses don’t have time to use social media to generate new business [online], Journalism.co.uk, http://www.journalism.co.uk/66/articles/538025.php.
Mancini, John (2010) 30% use Twitter for BUSINESS networking at least once per day... [online], Digital Landfill, http://aiim.typepad.com/aiim_blog/2010/02/30-use-twitter-for-business-networking-at-least-once-per-day.html.