

A.2 Use Cases of Enterprise Social Software in Consulting: A Practice Perspective

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Research

1 Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of public social media platforms led a growing amount of companies to implement Enterprise Social Software (ESS) (Schwade & Schubert, 2018). ESS can be understood as online applications used in business contexts to foster communication, collaboration and exchange of information, which is particularly relevant for knowledge workers, such as consultants (Cetto et al., 2018; Nissen, 2018; von Krogh, 2012).

Despite the growing trend and its various benefits (Stray et al., 2019), ESS bears a number of challenges that put its success at risk (Forstner & Nedbal, 2017). One major difficulty is that employees are often missing a clear direction and guidance on how to utilize ESS. This is crucial since ESS is malleable, i.e. it does not prescribe particular application patterns to its users and thus requires individual sense-making and reflection on possible beneficial uses (Richter & Riemer, 2013).

To date, there is still little groundwork on how successful ESS adoption can look like (Greeven & Williams, 2016). To support ESS appropriation, academics and practitioners have suggested introducing use cases to showcase the potential such information systems bear (Glitsch & Schubert, 2017; Herzog & Richter, 2016) we present a revised version of the IRESS Framework, a novel approach that supports the implementation of Enterprise Social Software (ESS). ESS use cases, in turn, constitute ‘technology-mediated practices’ and templates for regular (future) behaviors (Whittington, 2014).

This paper aims to investigate the use of ESS within a knowledge-intensive industry, specifically in a consulting context, from a practice perspective in order to identify relevant ESS use cases. To achieve this aim, we present preliminary findings of a project investigating the usage of ESS in a consulting company, based on interviews with consultants in different project settings. As a result, we identify six practices and corresponding use cases. By showing how consultants have tailored the possibilities ESS offers to their particular needs, we are able to illustrate how users can align their individual requirements with the resourceful technology. In doing so, our study contributes to the literatures on ESS use cases (Schubert & Glitsch, 2015) the so-called “Enterprise Social Software”.

The “social features” of this software type have stimulated a renewed interest in Enterprise Collaboration Systems (ECS, practice research in information systems (Whittington, 2014), and digital transformation of the consulting industry (Cerruti et al., 2019; Nissen, 2018).

Next, after a brief introduction to the characteristics of consulting projects, we elaborate on our research design. In section 4, we present emergent findings that we structure in the form of six use cases supporting earlier introduced consulting project practices. Ultimately, we discuss our results and their limitations. We conclude the paper with an outlook on possible further research.

2 Related work

As stated earlier, the malleability of ESS offers a range of possibilities to use it. But at the same time it also impedes its appropriation, e.g. by insufficient awareness of the technology’s benefits or a lack of management commitment due to ascribing little relevance to its use (Forstner & Nedbal, 2017). Thus, to anticipate the shortcomings of the understanding of the technology’s potential, use cases² as means of explaining and showcasing potential uses of such flexible software are needed to streamline ESS appropriation (Herzog & Richter, 2016).

Given the relevance of ESS for knowledge workers, we want to illuminate use cases of ESS specifically within consulting projects and show how consultants utilize the malleable software to match their job requirements. In order to better contextualize the results, it is important to first consider characteristics of consulting projects. Firstly, the client as the service recipient is at the center of the consulting life cycle. Therefore, understanding the customers and their needs is a crucial variable that consultants have to consider in every project (Cope, 2012). Secondly, consulting projects are usually time-boxed events, meaning that consultants engage in finite collaboration scenarios which require working against deadlines (Kubr, 2002). Thirdly, since the product of consulting is a solution to a client’s problem, knowledge, be it process-oriented or technical, is the key asset of every consulting project (Creplet et al., 2001). Fourthly, a consulting job means working in team settings and collaborating closely with the client team and peers (Block, 1999). Therefore, successful coordination and communication is another prerequisite for a successful project outcome. Fifthly, consultants need to constantly “reinvent themselves” (Kubr, 2002, p. xvi), in order to offer valuable advice for their customers.

² According to Dourish, continuous “incremental adaptation of interactive technologies is inherent to practice, and, practice is inherently shared” (2003, p. 466). Therefore, to understand how to enhance successful adoption of ESS, a look at the actual practice, i.e. use cases, is needed.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to the fact that consultants usually work at the client site, thus being most of the time distant from their own company base (Cheng, 2012).

3 Research design

We designed this study as a single case study (Benbasat et al., 1987; Yin, 2009). The case organization, the management consultancy Multiversum GmbH, was founded in 2007 in Hamburg, Germany. Currently, Multiversum has approximately 55 employees in three cities, Hamburg, Berlin and Munich. It operates across various industries, including energy, automotive, mobility and media, with a particular focus on IT-related topics and agile project management methods (Multiversum, 2020). Consultants are often considered knowledge workers with an affinity towards innovation and a job requirement to navigate in highly uncertain terrains (Creplet et al., 2001; Martensen, 2014). Therefore, this target group appears to be an ideal fit for examining the use of technology that is per se a tool that needs a bottom-up approach and that does not offer a clear-cut manual of operation.

Our lead researcher took the role of a closely involved scholar by having access to the company and working in a consulting position, though not being actively involved in the projects under scrutiny. This and the close collaboration between the insider researcher and the two outside researchers provided us with an opportunity to synchronously pursue both approaches that have been aggregated and combined to secure the strengths of both perspectives (Evered & Louis, 1981).

We collected our data mainly by means of interviews with consultants of different levels with a particular affinity towards ESS tools. The informants have been suggested by the CEO and a manager as the most knowledgeable colleagues to address. This way, we took the purposeful sampling approach to find the most informative cases (Patton, 2014) and further employed the chain sampling strategy to find additional information-rich interview partners (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This resulted in a sample of 9 interviews with consultants and managers. Being malleable end-user software, the benefits of ESS only come into existence when the tools get incorporated into the daily work practices of its users (Richter & Riemer, 2013).

To allow for the triangulation of evidence, we consulted further data sources such as available company documents including website articles and field notes from observations. After the interview transcription by means of the software Sonix.ai and a manual review of the automatically transcribed interviews, we analyzed all material with the help of the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

During the coding process, we followed a deductive approach for the thematic analysis put forward by Braun & Clarke (2006) by focusing on the previously mentioned consulting characteristics, thus turning the consulting practices into our main unit of analysis (see also section 2).

4 Emergent Findings

Our findings suggest that consultants are able to employ the ESS in a way that is most appropriate for their job-specific requirements. Through the interviews and observations, we were able to study how the earlier introduced project practices were supported via ESS. Figure 1 shows this relation.



Figure 1: Consulting project practices and related ESS use cases

The following section presents several use cases in relation to the corresponding consulting project practices they are serving.

4.1 Project practice 1: Putting the customer first

According to the seven C's framework, one of the major stages of a consultancy process is understanding the client's problems and needs (Cope, 2012). Consultants in our case use the ESS to achieve synergies of understanding the client's reluctance to embrace new processes (in this example, tools) and introducing new changes caused by a consulting project: "For example, (ESS X) is a great tool, but it is not social enough. We implement (ESS Y) in (ESS X) (...) to find a better or stronger solution. (...) Let us be honest, (...) we have people who stay in the company for 25 years. They like to take things slow (...), they do not want to have a lot of new tools coming in. (...) But, the moment when their manager posts an update on (ESS Y), it will show on (ESS X), then they will be like „Oh, what is this?“. So, we are combining these different tools to find a better solution, (...) And that makes everybody's life much easier." (Consultant 4, further C4) This example shows how different ESS applications have been synchronized to serve usability purposes.

By exploiting the flexibility of the software, the consultant was able to create an improved user experience for a tech-averse customer by simply combining two applications and thus reaching the customer on his familiar terrain.

4.2 Project practice 2: Timeboxing

From investigating consultants' usage of ESS, we also learned that users employ the technology to facilitate time management and to match the deliverables with the predetermined deadlines. ESS offers various functionalities to fulfil this purpose. As the following quote implies, functionalities like document sharing and a dedicated space for document storage provide opportunities for a faster collaboration: "I have always asked my team (...) to have it (ESS) on all the time, because I have a very busy schedule and sometimes have to shoot over quickly 'where can I find that, how can I do this, can you please do that'. This works perfectly over (ESS). And, I don't like making phone calls either, so I think it's much better to write briefly. (...) And as soon as it comes to exchanging documents via email, we have to save something on some servers. In my opinion, this is not a modern way to handle this." (C8, G) Here, the manager was able to speed up the information seeking process by sending chat messages to his team and exchanging documents via ESS and thus eliminating the need for writing emails back and forth as well as saving documents himself on a server. Instead, the manager can simply reach the requested information and documents on the dedicated ESS space.

4.3 Project practice 3: Leveraging joint knowledge spaces

Consulting companies' main assets are their employees and their expertise. The expression "independent problem solver" (Cheng, 2012, p. 44) adequately depicts that the whole "raison d'être of the firm" (von Krogh, 2012, p. 152) is its knowledge. Therefore, it is not surprising that ESS is being extensively employed to nurture the expertise base of a consulting company. Our example shows how it can be utilized to disseminate knowledge and advance cross-functional expertise building: "Traditionally, I would say from 2006 to 2018, a lot of things were done via Outlook or via email client. This means, information was lying in the local mailboxes. For the first time ever, I now have the possibility to share it (information) with other people on (ESS). This breaking up of knowledge silos, making project work across projects possible in the first place, I think, is a very important point that many people have not yet recognized. (C1, G)" This also shows when the ESS is used to contribute to building the main asset of the consulting practice: "I would say, the best use of this is sharing the knowledge or expertise and having this improvement of quality. Back to the Multiversum example: As a company, we are as good as our consultants. So, if I improve the level for all consultants with such an area (Wiki), then I will improve my quality as a company." (C4, G)

4.4 Project practice 4: Managing the team

Working in teams calls for a clear division of work and effective and transparent communication regarding project goals: “What we also like using in (ESS), meanwhile very extensively, is the ‘to do’s function’. (...) you can basically create your own backlog, assign it to one or more people, then break it down to subprojects, so that every subproject gets its own column. (...) This is more used for the day-to-day business and not for the major strategic lines of the projects.” (C3, G)

Moreover, consultants use ESS to create different communication streams in order to inform the stakeholders about the project purpose and progress without overburdening them with operational issues: “In a project, you typically have people who are very differently involved in a particular topic. There is a core team that consists of rather few people who push this forward intensively, day by day, and then, there is an extended project team or other stakeholders who are only involved from time to time (...). For some of them, (...) status needs to be updated and maybe something like a schedule, such information. (...) Within the core team, however, is it rather a question of detailed documentation, the ongoing communication about votes, about tasks that need to be done, and questions about design decisions or whatever is going on in the current work. This is a much more short-term use (...). It’s more like information that is exchanged and then disappears at some point, if it is not documented elsewhere.” (C5, G) ESS can thus function as an extended workbench to collaborate with different teams by facilitating different collaboration streams.

4.5 Project practice 5: Networking and socializing

As mentioned previously, consultants usually work at the client site and thus, most of the time, can build close relationships neither with the varying clients nor with their fellow colleagues who are working on different projects. Therefore, the job as a consultant requires a different approach to networking and socializing during working hours. ESS’ plasticity offers opportunities to close this gap in communication: “Of course, we also have larger groups where we can exchange ideas. Some groups are more professional, others are more private, where it is OK to share some jokes or gifs or something to make us smile. I find that very pleasant. Especially in project teams, i.e. every account or every subproject has its own channel, you spend a lot of time with each other on-site at the client and that makes it easier a) to coordinate on-site, if you can exchange ideas in the group and b) you experience a lot more on-site, because you spend a lot of time together, then you get into situations that weld you together and if you share that again, in the group, it promotes discussions and social cohesion.” (C2, G)

4.6 Project practice 6: Enhancing personal effectiveness

Another consulting practice introduced earlier is the strive for optimization. The following quote illuminates the use of ESS to optimize future workflows: “I would rather sit for six hours to find out how it works than do the work manually for six hours, because then I know how it works and the next time it is automated. For example, the planner board with the story points where I spent 40 hours in total to set up the programming (...) and so on. But now I can use this in the future for each of my projects again and again.” (C6, G)

5 Discussion

Literature has shown that the flexibility of ESS makes it difficult to predict how the technology can be utilized within certain contexts (Glitsch & Schubert, 2017) we present a revised version of the IRESS Framework, a novel approach that supports the implementation of Enterprise Social Software (ESS). Against this background, our paper sheds light on use cases in order to facilitate ESS appropriation and provide possible directions for its users. We introduced six core practices of consulting projects and were able to illustrate six respective ESS use cases, i.e. how the ESS is being used by consultants to support their daily project work. Understanding user needs and industry-specific practices further helps digital work designers create digital solutions that best possibly reflect its users’ concrete problems (Richter et al., 2018). For example, one common barrier of ESS appropriation is usability (Forstner & Nedbal, 2017). Our data shows that consultants also recognized this difficulty but used the malleability of ESS to harmonize two tools within a single interface to enhance the user experience for their clients.

The company under investigation can be seen as an exemplary case when it comes to ESS utilization (Yin, 2009). The results may thus not show the most cutting-edge use cases, but the ones that are most relevant for the business. These insights are nevertheless valuable due to the company’s operational focus on digitalization and an affinity for IT-related topics. However, it might well be that, when compared to more extreme cases of use, possibly in IT companies or start-ups, we may observe very different use cases and associated practices. This notion, in turn, is at the heart of the concept of malleability and provides fertile ground for future research.

Consultants have to work mostly within the software environments that their clients are using and, more importantly, cannot use tools just for the sake of innovation, but do that only if they support the client’s actual value creation activities. This is due to the fact that, although being innovative knowledge workers, the main job requirement of a management consultant is to solve a client’s problem (in line with Practice 1: Putting the client first).

Nevertheless, consulting companies – just like many of their clients – are also facing a pressure to change due to digitalization (Seifert & Nissen, 2018), thereby having to re-evaluate whether the processes in place still represent the best way to carry out their job (in line with Practice 6: Enhancing personal effectiveness). The use of ESS – both internally between consultants and externally between consultants and clients – is an obvious candidate for future change to affect the industry, and possibly disrupt the business model of traditional consultancies, when face-to-face exchanges are replaced by virtual interactions. This debate is linked to the discussion of the role of consultants as change agents, bringing innovation and change to their clients (Cerruti et al., 2019).

Last but not least, considering the importance of new technologies in the war for talents (Michaels et al., 2001), where businesses require more high-performing workforce to navigate the increasing complexity (McCullough, 2020), the use of ESS may signal to potential employees that work is being done in a modern fashion, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of the firm for potential employees.

6 Conclusion

We are contributing to the literature in three ways. First, we are addressing a gap identified by Cerruti and colleagues (2019, p. 918), namely that “it appears ... critical to investigate how the role of consultants and their skills are changing in the digital age, but all these topics are completely neglected in the academic literature.” Second, despite the growing body of research on ESS, the field of use cases research is still in the initial phases and needs further in-depth examination (Schubert & Glitsch, 2016). With this paper, we were able to extend the set of known use cases and introduce new ones specifically for the field of management consulting, a novel context. Third, following the call by Whittington (2014, p. 90), we are taking a practice perspective on ESS, going beyond the “historical absorption with technologies as artefacts” to study “information technologies ‘in use’”. As the practice perspective is inherently oriented towards practitioners, we hope that the results of the paper will also stimulate discussions among them.

Although our paper provides interesting insights into the utilization of ESS in consulting with regards to particular industry practices, limitations that may serve as starting points for future research need to be mentioned. Firstly, we only considered one single case company as the source of information, which provided us with the opportunity to look at the phenomenon in greater depth. Therefore, our analysis shall only serve as a starting point for examining further use cases of ESS across the consulting industry, while extending research into other knowledge-intensive settings.

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