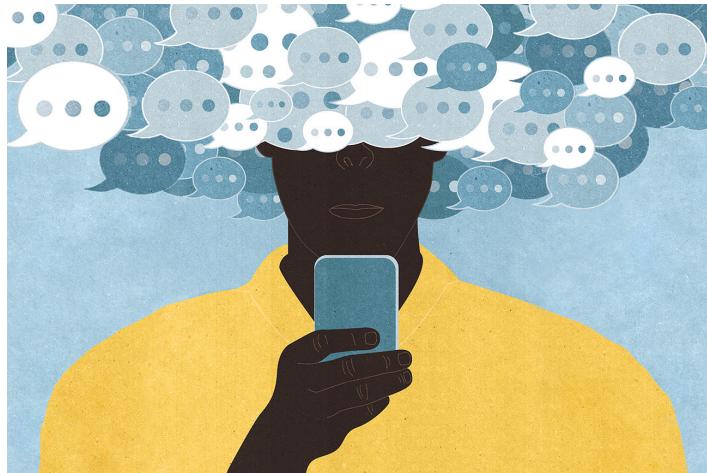# Are Enterprise Social Platforms All Talk?

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To get the most from corporate knowledge sharing tools, encourage users to engage with more content, not just build their personal brand.

Kotryna Zukauskaite/theispot.com

The widespread shift to remote work has made organizations increasingly reliant on digital collaboration platforms that enable employees to work together, manage projects, solve problems, and share knowledge. But these tools' effectiveness in practice is often limited by how participants use them.

The conventional wisdom, based on previous research, suggests that a lack of contributors is what limits the value of these platforms. However, we observed a strong tendency for users to post content rather than read content created by others. Our findings indicate that it's not the lack of contributions but lack of engagement with the knowledge contributed by others that restricts the potential of these tools.

The issue may stem from norms set by public social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn. The social-networking features of enterprise platforms appear similar to those on consumer-focused sites, but the objectives and desired behaviors are considerably different. While public social networks emphasize the interests of individual users, for enterprise networks, the goal is creation of a knowledge-sharing community.

Most participants on enterprise social platforms, we find, contribute promotional content that is designed to enhance their own image and reputation but adds little value to the organization and its goals. What's more, too much self-promotion may hinder efforts to cultivate a knowledge-sharing organization, as it alienates users who do want to engage with others.

Relying on traditional engagement metrics, such as counting the number of posts and page views, can easily overlook users' behavioral differences. It can create the false impression of a vibrant platform while obscuring the types of behaviors that dominate. If enterprise networking tools are to achieve their goals, managers need to look more closely at how employees interact with them.

Our research advances an alternative approach that managers can use to assess the behavior of participants and to build a truly vibrant knowledge community. We identify four distinct user types — accelerators, broadcasters, champions, and observers — and the motivation for each. We then offer guidance for how managers can work with

each user type to help harness their diverse motivations and better align the network with the organization's knowledge-sharing objectives.

How Employees Really Use Collaboration Platforms

Our study of 359 users of a digital collaboration platform in a multinational organization reveals four distinct usage patterns and motivations for posting and reading content. Recognizing these user types can help managers understand how the different usage patterns can create value and how they facilitate or hinder knowledge sharing.

Accelerators make up the smallest group, at about 5%, but they are perhaps the most valuable. They are the most active participants, and in notable contrast to the other groups, they read as much as they post. Seeing that the network plays a crucial role in knowledge sharing, accelerators believe that its purpose is to facilitate open ideas and information flows, coordinate project work, and support innovation. They do not favor using the platform for self-promotion or recreation. "Open flows of knowledge and ideas that occur through the platform prevent us from being too siloed in what we do," one employee told us, adding that this viewpoint can avoid duplicating others' efforts.

Broadcasters, who represent about 10% of users, primarily use the platform to enhance their reputation within the organization. They post significantly more than they read and use the site to brag, gain visibility, and change how others view them. Their selective self-presentation and self-branding illustrate how behaviors on workplace sites are influenced by public social media. "The community helps me build my reputation, build my brand," an employee said. "The platform helps me show that I am good in this particular area and share personal success stories."

Champions are the largest group, representing about 55% of the studied community. While they rarely post and read even less, they seek to raise awareness of their teams' work by sharing examples of their successes. "People that normally don't even know us as a team, or are not that familiar with us as a department, can read that and then get a better idea of our role and what we do," was a typical response.

Observers, representing the last group and more than 30% of participants, read significantly more content than they post. They use the platform to follow news, learn about others, and stay connected with the rest of the organization, but they only rarely contribute. Most in this group work outside of corporate headquarters and report that using the platform is important for making them feel part of the company and mitigating the challenges of geographic isolation.

What Makes a Vibrant Knowledge Community?

Managers need to understand the types of users and their behaviors and motivations because their actions can affect the overall effectiveness of the company's platform. Research has shown that dominant practices can drive away those who might use these platforms for different purposes. When self-promotional behaviors dominate, users who want to use the platform to share knowledge will either abandon it altogether or gravitate toward private subgroups to fulfill their goals. The fact that many enterprise collaboration platforms start out very active and then die down might stem directly from the dominance of broadcasters who disrupt other ways of using the platforms.

Understanding what motivates different types of users can help managers find the most appropriate ways to empower them. For instance, managers could encourage accelerators to take a leading role advocating for the platform's usefulness as a hub for information exchange and innovation. These users could help break dominant usage patterns and encourage greater collaboration. To get broadcasters to engage with content generated by others and diversify the content they share, managers could organize internal strategy or innovation competitions that raise the visibility of individuals while producing value for the organization.

Managers could leverage champions' desire to promote their teams by encouraging them to focus more on sharing the learning that emerges from successful projects. These users' strong focus on their teams sets an example for the organization to raise the profile of others, not just oneself. Finally, managers could help observers transfer their knowledge to the broader organization by pairing them with

people who are more comfortable posting on the platform. It's important to be sensitive to the big role that cultural influences can play in users' behavior. Our own study shows that employees in the company's Asian offices were three times less likely to contribute content than their North American counterparts.

How to Get the Most From Enterprise Platforms

To harness the advantage of enterprise collaboration platforms, organizations could more actively manage them to support knowledge sharing. That means looking beyond simple engagement metrics at what people are actually posting. Employees may post a lot, creating the illusion of a vibrant knowledge community without providing any real benefits for the organization.

Community managers can do more than simply moderate the content submitted to the platform. Our findings indicate that they could take on the more important role of ensuring that sharing knowledge — as opposed to self-promoting or reputation building — gets the attention it deserves. They can encourage more interaction by spotlighting high-value content and posing questions to seed discussion in those posts.

As organizations strive to build vibrant knowledge sharing in the workplace, it is essential to recognize the distinct user groups that exist and their unique behaviors. Considering the rudimentary engagement metrics available in digital collaboration platforms today, managers should avoid falling into the trap of viewing high levels of contributions as a positive indication of a knowledge-active community. A community can only thrive in a state of generalized reciprocity, where users engage as much with the knowledge created by others as they contribute novel information to the system themselves.

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