

Stuff IBMers Say: Microblogs as an Expression of Organizational Culture

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Abstract

In globally distributed enterprises, face-to-face communication of the norms and values underlying organizational culture may not be feasible. As a result, enterprises have turned to social media as a potential resource for acculturation, the process in which employees make sense of organizational culture. In this paper, we explore the emergence of a Twitter hashtag (#stuffibmerssay) characterize user participation and content of the tagged tweets, and describe the motivation of active contributors. Our analysis reveals that participants tended to share often humorous observations of everyday work practices indicative of a highly technical global workforce and interviews with participants suggested that the resulting tweets help reinforce a shared sense of group identity with other members of the organization. We conclude by discussing the implications of emergent social media as expressions of organizational culture, particularly when it occurs outside of the intranet.

Introduction

Employee satisfaction does not solely rely on successfully completing job-related tasks. A good fit with the organizational culture can influence an employee's workplace experience in a positive manner. If an employee is unaware of the subtleties of the group culture, however, s/he may not be able to reach his or her full potential at the organization, or may even decide to look for another position that is a better fit. Global enterprises have turned to social media as a potential resource for communicating organizational culture to distributed employees in order to support acculturation, the process by which employees make sense of these values and norms (Louis 1990).

Prior research has suggested that employees use social media sharing on an intranet social networking service as a way to express dissent or discuss controversial aspects of organizational culture (Thom-Santelli and Millen 2009).

An employee's online interaction with co-workers, however, is not limited to intranet social media. Technologically adept knowledge workers, in particular, have become adopters of social media sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, which cross the boundaries of the firewall.

As a result, issues of identity management become salient, especially as these users employ these informal channels to discuss their professional activities (DiMicco and Millen 2007). In addition, there are issues surrounding what workplace information is appropriate to share with heterogeneous networks of friends and co-workers (Skeels and Grudin 2009). Less is known, however, regarding how employees would share information about organizational culture using social media outside of the intranet. In particular, the advent of microblogging features may encourage such expression by employees to their professional and personal networks.

Our research questions are as follows:

- What are the characteristics of the users who contributed to the #stuffibmerssay discussion?
- What type of content did participants annotate with the #stuffibmerssay hashtag?

In this paper, we present the results of a multi-method study that analyzes the emergence of the Twitter hashtag #stuffibmerssay. We then describe how the shared content was illustrative of certain aspects of organizational culture that are particular to a large global enterprise. Finally, we discuss the implications of using non-intranet social media as a resource for organizational acculturation.

Related Work

Employees have adopted microblogging and its broadcast nature to reach audiences within and outside the intranet. Status messages on Facebook have been employed for social information seeking within employee's personal and workplace networks (Morris, Teevan, and Panovich 2010). Zhao and Rosson (2009) observe that organizational use of Twitter helps establish common ground at the workplace.

Similar to social networking services with a mix of personal and professional networks, employees make specific decisions about what to post on microblogs internally and externally. In a comparison of users of an intranet microblogging tool and their personal Twitter accounts, the content shared internally focused on information seeking while the external tweets promoted information sharing (Ehrlich and Shami 2010).

The temporal nature of internet memes, with their early peak and long-tailed distribution over time, may also influence participation and contribution for an organizational culture-related hashtag (Bauckhage 2011). This characteristic may help to encourage employees to readily share informal observations on corporate life, particularly if the observations may be interpreted as critique. Ephemerality has also been observed to encourage discussion thread owners to motivate participation by other potential contributors through various mechanisms (Bernstein et al. 2011). Taken together, we propose that microblogging outside of the intranet can serve as a medium for the expression of organizational culture because of its informality, the potential reach of the audience and its ephemeral nature.

Methods

The phrase “Stuff IBMers say” first appeared on Thursday November 17th 2011 at 10:02 AM EST in the following tweet by @firsttweet¹ “Stuff IBMers say – Let’s crawl before we walk. #funny.” The first appearance of the hashtag came shortly afterwards at 10:04 AM EST in a reply tweet from @user2777, “good one @firsttweet Ha! #stuffibmerssay should be the hashtag – let’s get it trending! what do you say #ibm?”

From those initial posts, we examined a Twapper Keeper archive of 3085 publicly accessible tweets tagged with #stuffibmerssay over the time period of November 17th to December 19th 2011. The two authors performed a content analysis of each tweet, excluding the retweets, using open-coding to create categories (Miles and Huberman 1999). Disagreements were settled via discussion and inter-reliability was then calculated on a sample of 60 mutually coded tweets ($\kappa=0.84$, $p<0.001$).

We interviewed the ten most active contributors (4F, 6M) to the #stuffibmerssay thread. We conducted 45-minute semi-structured interviews with the two originators of the #stuffibmerssay hashtag to uncover their motivations for starting the thread on a social media service outside the intranet and how they characterized their participation through the discussion. In addition, we completed 30-minute semi-structured interviews with the eight most ac-

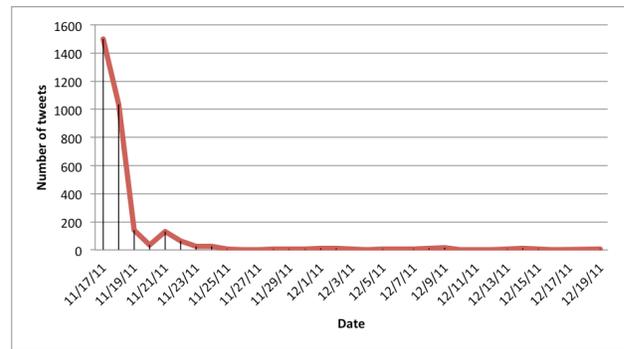


Figure 1. #stuffibmerssay tweets during data collection

tive participants on the thread, using tweets contributed by each participant as elicitation aids.

Eight members of the interview sample were employees of a large global IT enterprise with 400K employees, headquartered in the Northeastern United States, while the two of the remaining participants were business partners. Job roles ranged from consulting, sales enablement, marketing, learning, software and human factors. Six of the interview participants were from the United States, while two were from Canada, one from the UK and one from India.

Results

RQ1: Characteristics of contributors

Figure 1 shows the distribution of posts over that time period. The posting frequency trailed off shortly after the first three days, with the weekend of November 19th and rose briefly during the start of the workweek on November 21st.

1259 (41%) of the tweets in this thread were RTs. There were 725 distinct Twitter accounts (authors) participating in the thread with a median of 2 posts/account, with 361 (50%) of the tweeters posting only once. The originators of the #stuffibmerssay hashtag were the most active tweeters with @firsttweet at 497 tweets and @user2777 at 268 tweets. In addition, @user2777 received the largest number of mentions (110) with @firsttweet following at (89) and they had the largest number of conversations with other people, @firsttweet (40) and @user2777 (29). This suggests that the hashtag originators tried to draw attention to the thread by commenting and sending @replies, similar to Bernstein et. al.’s (2011) observations of ephemeral threads in 4chan. Our interviews with @firsttweet and @user2777 confirmed the motivation for this activity.

To obtain additional demographic information regarding the participants, we sampled the 502 public accounts that posted during the most active seven days of the #stuffibmerssay thread. From these accounts, we were able to locate corporate directory email information for 379 (76%) to perform a directory lookup, with the remainder of the profiles being from non-IBM employees.

¹ Twitter names have been anonymized.

The geographic distribution of participants was largely concentrated in the United States (57%) with the UK (19%), Canada (5%), India (3%), Australia (2%) and Ireland (2%) following behind. The sample reflected the varied work location arrangements in the organization. The majority of the contributors work in a remote setting (31% mobile and 24% home) with the rest located in a standard office (41%) and 4% unidentified.

Consistent with the profile of this enterprise as a services and software provider, contributors to the #stuffibmerssay thread were primarily knowledge workers in the information technology sphere. The most common organizational affiliations were Software (30%), Sales (28%), Consulting (14%), Corporate Headquarters (10%), Services (6%), Hardware (6%) and Other (6%).

Two of the top four roles (sales at 13%, consultant at 11%) were ones that regularly interact with external partners or clients. In addition, the job role of IT Architect (12%) and IT Specialist (12%) are potentially service-related, in that they support sales teams or implement solutions for clients. Finally, the remainder job roles were people managers (7%), external relation professionals (5%), workforce enablement (4%), project managers (3%) and engineers (3%). Nine percent did not have job information available.

RQ2: Characteristics of the content

Table 1 describes the content typology of the tweets annotated with the #stuffibmerssay hashtag. We determined the categories in an iterative open-coding process, based on emergent themes observed as well as prior research when

applicable. The coded tweets were in English, with the exception of 10 items, which were then translated using Google Translate and then categorized.

As befitting the work-centric nature of the #stuffibmerssay hashtag, the majority of the tweets focused on professional topics. The most common category was process-related tweets (29%), describing quirks of procedure observed in a large enterprise organization. Also observed were banter or joking comments about the organization (17%) and observations about conference calls (11%). Tweets about information technology breakdowns, which we termed as “fails”, emerged as well (12%). Less prevalent were tweets about requests (4%) and those suggesting a switch between communication media (3%). Finally, meta tweets commenting on the hashtag itself and the elicited content were also prevalent (20%).

We further broke down the process category (n=561) into three subcategories to better characterize the subject matter of those tweets. The *practice* subcategory (45%) refers to specific IBM-related work practices, such as ones that focus on accounting, legal and sales procedures. Tweets also describing approval chain and team consensus-building were coded in this category. The *terms* subcategory (25%) described IBM-related terminology, such as acronyms and specific organizational phrasing particular to the company. The *time* subcategory (17%) depicted process tweets that relate to scheduling, coordination and multi-tasking, along with ones describing tenure at IBM. The *tools* tweets (13%) referred to specific system-related procedures within the enterprise, unrelated to failure or breakdown.

Type	NUM (%)	Description	Example
Process	561 (29%)	Commentary on work-related procedures	<i>I've got this cadence to prep for that cadence for the rollup. #stuffibmerssay</i>
Meta	398 (20%)	Discussion of the hashtag and shared content	<i>I really wanted to add to #stuffIBMerssay but it's all been said. My working life in tweets</i>
Banter	327 (17%)	Joking about corporate culture	<i>"my gut says the suggestion has legs" #stuffibmerssay (any other body parts?)</i>
Fail	237 (12%)	Technology or task failure	<i>oof! BLUE SCREEN OF TEH DETHS! #stuffibmerssay</i>
Conference call	209 (11%)	Observations on conference call behaviors and norms	<i>"Who just joined? Who just joined?" #stuffibmerssay</i>
Remote work	78 (4%)	Characterizing details of non-standard office location and global nature of teams	<i>I'm working from home today, can't you hear the kids and the dog? #stuffibmerssay</i>
Request	73 (4%)	Asking for favor, help or information	<i>Where are the charts for this meeting? #stuffibmerssay</i>
Media switch	69 (3%)	Moving from a communication medium to another	<i>We need to talk offline on that. #stuffibmerssay</i>

Table 1. Content categories of tweets (excluding RTs) tagged with #stuffibmerssay by frequency and exemplars. (n=1952)

The demographic data describing the hashtag contributors are generally consistent with the type of content that we observed in our content analysis. For instance, the tweets describing conference calls and remote work indicate the diversity of office locations found in our sample (e.g. home, remote, standard). In addition, the process tweets subcategorized as practice-related focused on issues related to sales teams, such as client meeting etiquette, reflecting the sales and consultant job roles of those participating in the thread.

Our interviews revealed three emergent themes. First, the external facing job roles of the active participants contributed to **strong awareness of a public external audience**. Interview participants also mentioned the notion of transparency in dealing with external partners and the public, and that the active use of external tools would help accomplish this goal. In addition, participants revealed the humorous nature of the #stuffibmerssay thread as a strong motivator to participant and took the opportunity to show an imagined general audience that IBMers could have a sense of humor.

Second, the qualitative analysis suggested that contributors to the #stuffibmerssay thread were also able to poke fun at the bureaucratic nature of a large global enterprise. We termed this **“the Dilbert effect”** where tweets served as satirical observations of how the processes within a large organization could be bewildering. Specific examples noted the particular culture of meetings and presentations at IBM, conference call etiquette and failure of specific IT systems that contributed to an occasionally frustrating work experience.

Finally, the interviews with the eight employees of the enterprise revealed that they perceived the tweets tagged with #stuffibmerssay helped them feel **a sense of belonging** with fellow members of the organization. For the employees, connecting to a shared identity as an IBMer was especially gratifying because they worked remotely from home offices and/or they belonged to distributed teams. One of the ways in which this common shared identity emerged within the #stuffibmerssay thread was in the usage of terms that are particular to an organization, which emerged as the “code” subcategory for the process tweets (e.g. "I need to finish the RFA by EOD per the DOU with SWG and add it to my PBC, ASAP!" #stuffIBMerssay).

Discussion & Implications

We propose several potential design implications of an organizational culture meme, such as #stuffibmerssay. First, the content may be useful in the acculturation process for new employee, as cues about dominant work practices are identified and norms of conversation and insider language can be exposed to new employees during training. Second,

these memes may also potentially serve as an additional employee feedback mechanism. For instance, they can also be used as an early warning mechanism to identify tools and practices that may not work well, or could signal trends in employee morale or job satisfaction. Designated hashtags could be used by Human Resource organizations as an elicitation tool, in a similar manner to a cultural probe (Gaver, Dunne, and Pacenti 1999).

There are several limitations to the research presented here. Our study focused on a specific hashtag meme associated with a single organization (and on tweets written primarily in English), and therefore was influenced by the culture of the organization. Future work should be done with similar cultural memes in other organizations to determine the generalizability of our results.

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