

Micro-presence: changing the 'status' quo

Summary: * Jennifer Leggio is on vacation Guest editorial by Donald J. Patterson There is no way that managers and their subordinates see eye to eye on social networking in the workplace.

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* Jennifer Leggio is on vacation

Guest editorial by Donald J. Patterson



(<http://www.zdnet.com/i/story/61/46/001221/donpatterson.jpg>) There is no way that managers and their subordinates see eye to eye on social networking in the workplace. Why should they? To employers and employees alike, most social networking sites are about entertainment. Tweeting about Gail's birthday party decorations is only in the remotest sense "team-building." So, the question remains: at what point will consumer-oriented social networking get past the fun-factor and really become a force multiplier, driving value for business?

Most of today's social networking sites only differ in attitude, not in deep technical ways. Flickr, Facebook, LinkedIn, even David Hasselhoff's fan site, all have networks of friends with whom you share digital media, status information, location and comments. So looking for innovation by comparing brands is not the place to start. The game changing

transformations that businesses have to watch for now, will be found in how people begin to use these sites as tools in surprising new ways to manage and work. Once these new uses crystallize only then will the technological support emerge that will accelerate these new usage models, dwarfing what is being done today.

Consider the simple status line made famous by Twitter. Facebook's recent redesign has elevated the status line to an even more central position in their user experience. But there are subtle shifts that are beginning to appear in the way that status is being used. The predominant use is as a personal headline that tells the world what quirky thing you are thinking about. This is now widely known as microblogging. But in parallel, though flying under the radar, is a shift to a less entertaining and more practical application of status updates, which is called "micro-presence." This type of status update got its start with IM status messages, predating micro-blogging and internet-based social networks.

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Micro-presence relies on frequent real-time updates of practical answers to "Where are you? What are you doing? Can I interrupt you? How? Phone? Email? Text? IM?" The people that use the existing tools in this way aren't being followed by thousands of people because, honestly, who cares about where you are at this moment? Hold, on! Actually, your manager does. So does your spouse and maybe your extended family too. This means status' new focus on utility won't resemble the entertainment-focused Twitter of today, but may still revolutionize coordination inside and outside the office.

What will the features of tomorrow's tool look like? For starters it will have to have a much better sense of privacy and filtering. Research conducted at the Laboratory for Ubiquitous Computing and Interaction at the University of California, Irvine, has shown that about 5 percent of mobile status sharers have had an awkward or dangerous experience sharing their location. So, while it is fine to let the world know how great your sushi is, you may think twice before telling your housekeeper's estranged boyfriend that you're in a business meeting a thousand miles away. Yet, imagine the value to an organization if a co-worker could instantly let everyone know that they are running late with the client so there is no reason to rush to that budget meeting.

The next generation of status message will need to be much simpler to use. People won't keep their status up-to-date if forced to type out 140 characters on their mobile keyboard every 30 minutes. But what if they only had to click once to select a status - rather than retyping an update every thirty minutes? Research projects such as Nomatic*IM have shown that this is not as hard as it seems. Using machine learning techniques and the fact that we are creatures of habit, researchers have achieved up to 90 percent accuracy in reporting people's status from laptops. There are significant user interface challenges in moving the same technology to mobile phones, but there is promise that it's achievable.

Although there may not be much value for business in the consumer social networks that are dominating the Internet today, business is a very social enterprise. It is only a matter of time before the right tools, the right culture and the right uses come together to create value for managers and employees alike.

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