Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: picking up the Slack in communication and collaboration

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Article begins on next page
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The use of social media to engage with audiences is becoming a standard practice for many businesses, organizations, libraries, celebrities and even political candidates. The popularity and importance of social media networks like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram cannot be ignored. The number of users on these networks continues to grow with 65% of American adults using social networking sites (Perrin, 2015). Social networking tools provide an ease of communication that allows for increased interaction and audience engagement. Many of the elements that make social networking platforms strong communication tools are now being used internally, allowing employees of these organizations and businesses to collaborate and connect with the same ease as with external audiences.

This connection is being made through Enterprise Social Networking (ESN) or Enterprise Social Media (ESM). The applications used for this method of communication are known as Social Networking Platforms (SNPs) or Team Communication Platforms (TCPs). As defined by PCMag, “Enterprise social networking applications are used in organizations to give employees and other stakeholders a virtual community where they can exchange information, set up and promote initiatives, and carry out a range of other tasks and activities” (Enterprise, n.d.). Enterprise social networking expands the connectivity of social media to include a variety of communication tools. These can include a variety of communication tools including instant chat, instant messaging, blogs, microblogs, wikis, file sharing, opinion polls, and RSS feeds. ESN tools provide functions that promote collaboration and communication between both individuals and groups. The use of ESN helps create a community within an organization just as the use of social media helps create community around organizations, business, hobbies and special
interests. Enterprise social media enhances internal communication and social interaction within an organization. It can serve as a virtual water cooler, as both a place for informal social interactions that build community or a more formal place for learning, collaborating and sharing. With the ease in which enterprise social networks can be searched and viewed, a new worker can quickly catch up on the history of a project, get to the know the major players and also see how that project fits into the organization’s strategic plan, thus enhancing their formal onboarding and training.

The promise of a streamlined communication system that seeks to avoid the clunkiness and clutter of email in order to enhance worker collaboration is hard to resist. In 2013, consulting company Deloitte predicted that by the end of the year more than 90 percent of the Fortune 500 companies would have partially or fully implemented an ESN, which would have been a 70 percent increase from 2011 (Deloitte, 2013, p.14). Document management company Margolis shows an increase in ESM adoption from its start in 2006. This increase appears to be slowing up in recent years and Margolis predicts a saturation point of 70% adoption rate by 2017 (Margolis, 2016). The study goes on to point out that organizations that have adopted an enterprise social network generally solve problems faster and increase time-to-innovation by 31% on average.

While the numbers do show more adoption of ESN, there is evidence that actual use and implementation of these platforms and tools is a challenge. A 2015 report from Harvard Business Review explores the actual use of the platforms and the challenges to fully embracing them while offering suggestions for better buy-in (Li, 2015).

There are a number of different platforms for Enterprise Social Networking and more are being developed as their need and use increases. PCMag lists their top ten which include Yammer, Slack, HipChat, Bloomfire and Basecamp (Enterprise, n.d.). Facebook’s Workplace
was released just this past month and is likely to be added to this list in the future. Of these platforms, Slack has received the most recent recognition, due to its rapid rise in both users and valuation. Yammer seems to be the only one that has been explored specifically in scholarly research on enterprise social media.

Scholarly research on social media tends to focus on the external use of networking tools, using social media to engage with audiences, users and patrons. A brief literature review of recent articles supports this, showing limited research on the topic of internal social networking. Cardon and Marshall (2015), in their study on the use of ESN found that most of the academic research about social media focused on the external use in marketing and public relations. Most of the research that does exist on enterprise social networking and its applications can be found in business and communication focused literature. Cardon and Marshall provide a brief history and description of enterprise social networking in their exploration of how professionals use enterprise social networking tools. In their study, the authors surveyed business professionals to determine the use of social media for collaboration and team communication. The results showed that traditional methods of communication were used more often but there was an assumption that social networking tools would continue to grow and be used more in the future. The authors share that many experts in the industry anticipate social networking overtaking email as the primary form of business communication in the next ten years. The article recommends that business communication scholars create a sub-field within the discipline in order focus on the use of enterprise social networking platforms for business communication with the prediction that increased adoption of ESN will dramatically affect the business communication field. Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfeld (2013) provide a definition of Enterprise Social Media (ESM)
along with a brief history and literature review of enterprise social media. They encourage scholars to continue to explore social media technologies in the workplace.

Taking this advice, Kane (2015) seeks to consider the effects of social media on enterprises in his article in which he “identifies implications for managers as they consider the design decisions for an enterprise social media platform” (Kane, 2015 p. 1). The article looks at all forms of social media, not specifically at ESN, but does identify two capabilities of social media that can are part of enterprise social networking tools: the ability to establish and manage social networks in novel ways and the capability to find and access digital content. Kwahk and Park (2015) explore the effects of network sharing on knowledge-sharing activities and job performance in enterprise social media environments and their study confirmed the influential process of knowledge-sharing activities within a social media environment on job performance. Anders (2016) looks specifically at the platforms used in ESN, identifying them as Team Communication Platforms (TCPs). His study looks at early adopters of these platforms through their self-published blog posts. His results show that TCPs “enable affordances for communication visibility that support situated knowledge sharing and collaborative workflows” (Anders, 2016 p.224). The article contains detailed descriptions of team communication platforms, identifying Slack as one that has grown quickly and has been prominent in recent media coverage. The conclusions show that TCPs supports change in how communication and collaboration takes place between individuals within organizations.

While most of the articles address general ESN tools, there are some that focus on specific platforms such as Yammer which was developed in 2008 and acquired by Microsoft in 2012. Pinto (2014) explores the use of Yammer in Higher Education by looking at the use of Yammer in an upper-level marketing course where Yammer was employed to facilitate
communication and collaboration among project teams. While it was found that the students did not see Yammer as a helpful option, there was a correlation between the use of Yammer and the perception of effective team communication. A working paper by Riemer, Scifleet and Reddig (2012) explored the use of Yammer at Deloitte in Australia, and found that Yammer became an information sharing channel, a space for crowdsourcing ideas, a place for finding expertise and solving problems and a conversation medium for context and relationship building (Riemer, 2012). All of these findings support the mission of Enterprise social media and team collaboration platforms. An additional study by Feldt (2015) on Yammer looked at the use of Yammer by a group of UX consultants in a major Swedish IT firm. The findings show that Yammer did not support the specific needs but the study addresses recommendations for future use of ESM technologies.

While the scholarly literature on enterprise social networking is sparse, articles on these tools, especially Slack are not hard to find. Of those on PC Magazine’s list of the top 10 ESN applications, Slack has been gaining the most recognition since its official launch in February 2014. This recognition has been primarily due to its rocketing growth and quick rise in popularity, valuation and revenue. Early adopters spurred epic growth which has led to Slack’s current three million daily active users [1] and a value of 3.7 billion dollars (Shontell, 2016). With an estimated $64 million in annual revenue (Shontell, 2016), Slack has caught the attention of the media and potential customers. Slack has been named Inc. Magazine’s Company of the Year in 2015 (Bercovici, 2015) and has appeared on MIT’s list of Smart Companies in 2015 and 2016 [2], [3]. In the past two years, there have been multiple articles in business publications detailing the quick rise of the company founded by Stewart Butterfield, who also cofounded the image hosting social network, Flickr. Many of these articles (Tam, 2013; Scott, 2015; Tetzeli,
2015) describe the platform and detail the creation of Slack. Essentially the birth of Slack took place while Stewart was attempting to create a gaming platform. In order to better communicate and collaborate he and his fellow creators built an internal communication system to better manage their projects. The game failed, but that internal communication system eventually became Slack.

All of this attention to Slack is not unwarranted. Beyond its notable rise to the top of the ESN product field. Slack has amassed praise from its users who spread the word via the Slack wall of love [4]. There is an impressive list of customers on the website including Harvard University, Conde Nast, the Times UK and NASA [5]. A visit to the slack.com website greets a new user with a video tour of the product which highlights the main features; channels, chatting, sharing of files, integrations with other apps, distribution across platforms and notifications [6]. Anyone familiar with social media conventions which include hashtags, at sign (@), commenting and “liking” will quickly understand much of the Slack functionality. If a user is not as familiar, there will be more of a learning curve. As with any application, taking the time to learn the standard functionality and learning to harness the power will pay off in the long run. It is useful to seek out articles like a recent one in PC Magazine which provide tips on making the most of Slack (Duffy, 2015). Other sources for learning about using Slack include blog posts, newsletters, forums and even other Slack teams.

Slack centers around teams, all of the communication and interaction takes place within a team. At the time of Slack’s startup, typical teams ranged from 5-75 people, making it suitable for small companies and startups (Tam, 2013). This size also makes it suitable for many libraries and library organizations. With the success of Slack, the company is developing an Enterprise model that will be suitable for larger companies and their communication needs. It is possible to
be part of several different teams by either creating a team, being invited to a team or finding a team. There are open teams, either public or tied to a domain name. These teams can be searched for and joined by entering an email address and teams associated with that email will be sent to that address.

Once a team has been joined, the communication and collaboration can begin. Teams begin with the default channels of #general and #random. Different channels can be added based on a team’s need. The channels can be public to all team members or limited to a specific group within the team via private invitations. This is where Slack helps “conversations happen in the right place” (McCracken, 2015). Channels provide different venues for the various topics of discussion. In addition to the private channels, direct messages can be sent to individual team members. Listed among the teammates is slackbot, an automated response system that provides guidance and assistance and does its best to answer your inquiries or refers you to the help center. The channel activity and direct messages appear on the screen in a news feed format, making it easy to follow a conversation as it happens and even after it has happened. A user can engage with the posts by reacting with emojis, adding comments or sharing. Other team members or groups can be tagged by using the @ sign. The interface is user friendly and streamlined and intuitive to those already familiar with using different social media tools. Users can post text, media, links and files to the channels or via direct messaging quickly and easily.

Integration with a variety of applications such as Google Drive and DropBox makes sharing and posting even easier. Slack’s integration with different applications separates it from the pack of other ESN applications. By integrating external services, Slack is able to bring all communications into one place, something that does not occur with traditional email or email systems. The list of integrated apps [9] includes fun ice breaker activities, project management
systems, calendars and developer tools. The development of an “Add to Slack” button allows outside developers to add Slack sharing functionality to their own apps. The “Add to Slack” button allows users to share an external apps content in Slack without having to leave the app.

Another feature that makes Slack unique is that it offers cross-platform synchronization in order to provide seamless transitions from desktop to mobile device. Along with the web browser client, there are mobile apps for iOS, Android and Windows Phone for mobile devices and native desktop clients for Mac OS X, Windows and Linux. The ability to use Slack whenever and wherever makes it more attractive than other applications that may be tied to only mobile or only desktop. External application integration is also supported across platforms when available.

Enterprise social networks seek to streamline communication and eliminate the clutter of email. It is no secret to anyone who has an email account that valuable time is often wasted sorting through spam and junk. The risk of missing an important email increases as the unimportant emails fill the inbox. Search functionality in many email systems is not always easy to navigate, nor does it inspire confidence in its results. A feature of Slack that should be of much interest to library professionals is its search functionality. The founder of Slack states that it was “built around search” (Zax, 2013) and a recent article discloses that the name is an acronym for “Searchable Log of all Conversation and Knowledge” (Kim, 2016). The search bar is a prominent field in the Slack interface and the search functionality includes contacts, conversations in channels and between individuals as well as the shared files. Essentially all content in Slack is searchable and thus the content can serve as an archive of institutional memory. The expansion of searchability to the external services like Dropbox and Google Drive makes Slack’s search functionality even more comprehensive.
There are many options and settings, too many to detail in this article and some that are only available to paid accounts. There are opportunities for customization that include uploading emoji’s or editing slackbot’s response to a team. Notification settings are highly customizable, allowing a user to determine when and how they are notified of new activity within a team. As with many ESN applications, Slack provides a free service with limited functionality and then the option for upgraded paid service. The free service provides up to 5GB of file storage, limits on searching, 10 apps or service integrations and person to person calling. Group voice calling, unlimited searching, unlimited app integration, larger file storage space and other extended features and options are available on the paid plans [7].

Slack is one of the many platforms in which to explore enterprise social networking in your organization. This week, Facebook released its own ESN, Workplace which is free for non-profits and educational institutions [8], and in six months there may be an even newer platform with two new startups already seeking to compete with Slack (Noyes, 2016). Regardless of what the platform, it is important to take note of the potential of enterprise social media within an organization. Many libraries and librarians are already well-versed and well-practiced in social media, reaching out to patrons and connecting with communities. It may be time to use this knowledge and these skills to streamline internal communication. Enterprise social networking tools like Slack provide the opportunity for organizations to take what works with external communication and apply it to internal communication. If the patrons are entertained and engaged by emojis, memes and gifs, it may follow that these are enjoyed internally as well. Librarians and libraries excel at providing both physical and virtual spaces for community, helping them grow, collaborate and communicate. Enterprise social networking tools provide the
opportunity to strengthen internal teams, enhance communication and maybe even spare everyone a few unnecessary emails.

References


[6] https://slack.com/is
[8] https://workplace.fb.com/pricing/