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## COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT AT WORKPLACE: A WORK INTEGRATED INFORMAL LEARNING (WIIL) APPROACH

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### Abstract

Learning within the organization is not only linked to the formal training and education of the employees, but also to informal processes of sharing knowledge. The knowledge is often embedded in organizational activities, practices and norms, as well as in social ties among individuals in the organization. We analyzed employees' behavior and acceptance of online social networking as an information system (IS) of learning. The analysis is performed by a descriptive case survey within a telecom corporation in Pakistan. The purpose of our study is to bring an informal learning system at workplace. In this study we obtain quantitative data from 105 out of 180 targeted employees. The results show that a majority of the studied employees favor social networking to connect colleagues at different levels and more than half of the respondents share their knowledge and

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experiences using social sites. Nearly half of the respondents strongly agree that knowledge sharing is an important role of social sites within the organization and many are in favor of social media as an informal learning system. The results also show how the professionals use social networking sites to share their experiences and to build a virtual break in hierarchical levels of professions. This paper illustrates the benefits of social networking sites as an informal work integrated learning tool that also serves as an IS model for the organization.

## I. Introduction

The organizational environments are increasingly changing and the rapid development and appropriation of information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the reasons. This situation requires continuous development of knowledge and skills of the employees. The organizations demand flexible employees with more intense learning strategies to continuously prepare for changing work experience and competence development. An organization strives to foster and educate employees according to existing culture and requirements of the organization. The integration of practical-based experiences of work with theoretical studies in work integrated learning (WIL) programs is one of the steps towards such competence development practices in higher education, preparing for the work life to come. The term work integrated learning (WIL) broadly refers to student's learning programs that incorporate a workplace based learning to enhance students learning in various ways.

Research concerning WIL usually focuses on students' skills for production and development purposes during the education. However, the student is still a learner while he/she is working in a professional workplace and thus calls for a broadening of the usage of the context where work integrated learning is studied. Researchers in [7] and [3] have studied motivations for learning integrated to work focusing on the requirements of learning for employees at workplaces. Still, learning within the organization does not only involve the formal training and education of the employees, but also informal processes of sharing knowledge. The knowledge is often embedded within the organizational activities, practices, and norms, as well as the social contacts of the employees within the organization. This knowledge is institutionalized and so it has become tacit to utilize the hidden knowledge within the disciplines. If improper and incorrect rules of interpretation for such knowledge are applied, a waste of time and resources is expected [5]. With the ambition to capture and spread tacit knowledge within organizations, various researchers have suggested information systems for the support of informal knowledge sharing within and across

organizations. In the professional learning sector, information and communication technology has double role of being both innovations in the delivery of education and sometime as a subject of the education [5]. This dual role enhances that tacit and embedded knowledge needs to be captured and shared through some information systems within the organization, and perhaps through channels not necessarily formally supported by the organization. Today, at the workplace, where workers are dependent on communication with each other to perform different tasks, collective action and learning is needed. The emergence of specialized social network sites targeted towards specific user groups, including professionals, indicates that social networking sites can provide value to various types of users, in different ways by means of knowledge production [2] and learning [7] within the organization.

The research question in the paper is: How do employees experience and use non-corporate sponsored social networking sites for learning? The aim of the conducted study is to investigate the use of social networking sites for informal learning processes within a professional organizational context, and the effect such type of communication has on the employees' experience on competence development. In this paper, we investigate how employees within a telecom organization in Pakistan (Wateen Telecom. Pvt. Ltd.) use social networking sites for competence development.

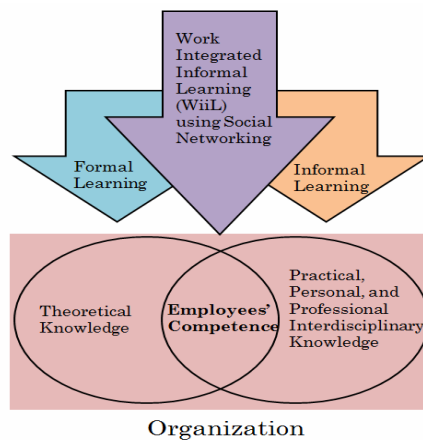
## **II. Previous Research**

The researchers have studied and investigated how institutional norms express their ideas regarding the transition of campus courses into WIL courses as a new teaching situation [4] and have focused on the role of technology for changing practices at the work place for social interaction and learning in various ways [1]. In [1], authors have investigated the use of social bookmarks that allow individuals to create personal bookmarks and share with others within the organization. They showed that the professionals used the internal social site to strengthen relationships among employees, and to reach out to employees they did not know. The work in [8] has described the motivation for use of blogging and other social software within corporate contexts for learning. In [7], authors have identified that both new employees and geographically distant employees used social networking sites for learning while working and that they actively searched for relevant information connected to their job activities [7].

A model for work place learning by integrating formal and informal learning using e-learning is presented in [6]. Informal knowledge sharing via

use of social networking sites has been shown to facilitate knowledge sharing within and across the boundaries for employees in organizations also advancing the current conceptual status of the use of ICTs at workplace [3]. In informal contexts where learners have more control over their goals with highly motivation, the use of mobile technologies support informal learning across different frameworks due to its portability.

The work in [2] enhances two major reasons for using online social networks for learning; first the social networking sites serve as direct and indirect supports for learning like providing an emotional outlet for school related stress, validity of creative work and school related tasks, and secondly, the online social networking can stimulate social and civic benefits, online and offline, which has implications for education. Given these experiences gained during education, changing practices and experiences in learning process become more spread. These practices share similarities to what has been described as a shift from learning processes to social and collaborative cultures by [5] linked to work integrated learning practices. The adoption and implementation of use of social media for team collaboration provides an efficient and accessible mean of encouragement and supporting team members working together on the same project [9].



**Figure 1.** Proposed WIIL model for employees' competence development.

In spite of the general suggestion of beneficial use of SNSs for learning in organizational contexts in prior studies, obstacles remain in various aspects both technically and socially. For example, how do employees address corporate practice of addressing each other at different levels of expertise? There is still a lack of empirical studies considering social networking as a learning tool at workplace that can virtually break

hierarchical levels among the employees of the organization in given organizational contexts and how employees are experiencing the use of social sites as learning processes in different cultural settings. Our proposed model for employees' competence development is based on the previous related researches. Figure 1 shows that WIIL positions in-between the formal and informal learning systems because the employees' competence is based upon his/her theoretical knowledge as well as practical, personal and professional interdisciplinary knowledge.

### **III. Methodology**

In order to investigate employee's usage of social sites and experiences of such use as work integrated learning processes, a survey was conducted within an organization in Pakistan.

#### **(a) The studied organization**

In the process of identifying a suitable case, Wateen Telecom Pvt. Ltd. is found to be the better option relation to our research idea. Wateen Telecom is a large multinational telecommunication organization from Dubai Group of Companies which provides telecommunication solutions in multiple areas of Pakistan. One of the main reasons to choose Wateen Telecom as a case subject of our research is that it is a multinational organization which has standardized IT structure with good internal and external communication system.

#### **(b) The survey questionnaire**

In this study our focused sample population is employees from different departments of Wateen Telecom including people from different professional positions within the organization. The data has been collected from the employees of Wateen Telecom at Lahore Head Office by publishing a structured questionnaire of 23 questions. The questionnaire was published through a public link by sending emails to 180 employees out of 500 of different departments and different professions. The overall period for gathering responses from the employees in the organization was around two months. Finally, 105 responses out of 180 targeted respondents replied. The online questionnaire is structured into five main sections.

(1) *Personal Information*: The inclusion of biographical questions allows us to collect simple descriptive details about the social life of respondents.

(2) *Work Related Information*: The nature of the job of an employee depends upon what kind of department he is working in, like his/her work is more technical and practical when he/she belongs to engineering department

while in a management or marketing department most of the job done is analytical and managerial. The questions designed for this section are to get the data about what kind of job activities an employee is performing within the organization.

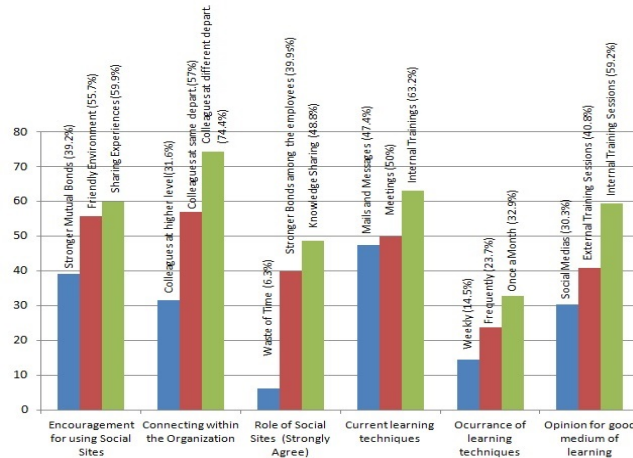
(3) *Personal Learning Information*: After collecting work related information from the respondents, it is necessary to understand individual preferences for learning at work. The inclusion of this section is mainly motivated from the work done in [1] about the shift of individual learning towards cooperative learning.

(4) *Company's Social Structure*: This section is to gain information about the social structure of the company, and to understand that whether the company has current structure to provide a learning atmosphere for the employees.

(5) *Current Learning Structure of Organization*: After gathering the information about the social structure of the organization the last section concerns the current learning strategies within the organization.

#### IV. Results and Analysis

The results from the questionnaire are systematized in different themes. Figure 2 presents this structured summary of results obtained from survey of the company. We analyze the results in two-fold; the use of online social networking as an information system (IS) in the organization, and virtual break of hierarchical boundaries within the organization.



**Figure 2.** Summary of results obtained from the survey for work integrated informal learning (WIIL).

**(a) Online social networking as an IS in Wateen Company**

Figure 2 shows that the employees of the Wateen Telecom are in favor of the use of social networking sites for sharing experiences, creating friendly environment and stronger mutual bonds among themselves. The respondents are interpreted as sharing the same view presented by [5], that the learning process is shifting from teaching culture to a social and collaborated culture. Figure 2 is also showing that the current learning techniques within the organization are internal trainings, meetings, mails and messages while the respondents are also in favor of external training as a good medium of learning. Interesting to observe is that 30.3% of the respondents suggests social media as a medium for learning, which is regarded as quite low compared to previous research suggesting that employees favors the use of social media such as the use of blogging and other social software within the corporate for informal learning [8]. The adoption of social media or SNSs for learning within the organization is not quite clear among the employees which relate unfulfilled organizational benefits of social networking sites where organizations are unsure about the actual benefits of using social networks within the company.

**(b) Virtual break of hierarchies**

The responses of the questions regarding what kind of social contact they preferred within the organization show that 74.4% of the respondents are in a favor of being in contact with colleagues at different departments that can help the learning of the employees across different disciplines. A total of 31.6% of the respondents are in favor of connecting with colleagues at higher levels within the organization. This is seen as potentially creating a mutual stronger bond among different positions of the employees. The employees of the organization connected socially with colleagues at higher positions create a virtual break in the hierarchical boundary. This result mimics the result of the study in [1].

**V. Conclusion**

In the light of our case study, we come to the assumptions that organizations like Wateen Telecom should take concrete actions in order to be more effective and innovative regarding use of ICT for work integrated learning in employees' competence development. The practices carried out for learning in the case organization's operations are basically traditional and the same interpretations are linked with the employees' learning and development programs. This leads us to conclude for the introduction of social networking sites in the work practices of the organizations, to evoke the more

opportunities of WIL for their employees. Although most of the employees of our case organization are satisfied with the current learning strategies of the organization, we still find them enthusiastic towards knowledge sharing and learning opportunities through the use of social networking sites. Given the suggested interpretation of the benefit of individual search for learning at work by interacting informally with colleagues, additional support for increased facilitation of such technology enabled interaction might be beneficial.

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