Social media for knowledge sharing in African development institutions: a viewpoint paper

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Abstract: Social media and its use have been studied in many contexts. An area that still needs to be explored is development institutions. This is a viewpoint paper that focuses on Africa. It is intended to wet the ground for a future systematic secondary and empirical study that should investigate the dynamics of using social media in development institutions.

Keyword: Social media, development institutions, knowledge sharing, communication, collaboration.

Background: Before answering the question of how African development institutions can use social media to share knowledge, it may be appropriate to establish what development institutions are, why share knowledge, why social media.

This topic takes me on a memory lane to my undergraduate days that culminated in 1983 with a dissertation on the impact of NACB (Nigerian Agriculture and Development Bank) on the agricultural sector of Cross River State. I realized that commercial contributions to economic development are limited because of their short-term view of lending. Investment banks improve in their lending term but are still inadequate perhaps because of their primary profit motive.

Sometimes too, government funds are inadequate to lend long-term for essential economic development. Thus development banks like the NACB come in and are able to attract funding from international agencies like the World Bank to needed areas. Among the clients of NACB involved in my primary research was a retired chief executives of a government department who was then in the fishing industry, poultry farmers and feeds producers and other agriculturists. I saw them perform at a scale to not only increase the food production but also generated employment to citizens.

Development banks are not the only institutions on the list of development institutions. At http://www.devdir.org/files/AfricaA.PDF is a 1,155 page directory of development institutions in Africa. The institutions range from international organizations, government institutions, private sector support organisations (including fairtrade), development consulting firms (including references to job opportunities and vacancy announcements), information providers (development newsletters and journals), to grant makers. So wide is the range of institutions that it would be difficult to cover in details how each of the institutions can use social media for knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Nonetheless, the common denominator for development institutions is the aim to fight poverty and to improve people's lives. Development banks for instance played a crucial role in the rapid industrialization process of Contential Europe and Japan (Aghion, 1999). They counteracted underinvestment and under-transmission of expertise in long-term industrial (and I would add, agricultural) financing. How does knowledge sharing come into their business?

The need for knowledge sharing

Knowledge or intellectual capital is increasingly recognized as a greater contributor than physical assets to organizational wealth (Hislop, 2013). Perhaps the most crucial aspect of managing this capital is sharing. Explicit knowledge is easier shared because it has been codified eg on computer databases but tacit knowledge is implicit and may not even be realized by the owner. In recognition of the importance of tacit knowledge, modern knowledge management systems do not stop at developing data or knowledge bases but also provide collaborative and communication tools.

The basic email system and intranets facilitate knowledge sharing. However, to take advantage of the innovative interactive and content-sharing facilities of Web 2.0 which was launched in the early 2000s, social media has emerged as a very important tool.

The rest of this paper will present (a) the need for knowledge sharing; (b) the need for social media; (c) how social media can be used for knowledge sharing in African development institutions; and (d) conclusion and areas for further investigation.

The need for social media

Social media can be defined in the broadest sense as any online service that enables users to design, create, edit and share a variety of content. Some of the common features of social media are (Li, 2011):

- Blogging: users can upload materials (photos, diaries, videos etc) which are chronologically organized;
- Grouping: users can join a group of people with something in common such as same college, company or city.

- Networking: users can add or remove friends at any time;
- Instant messaging: users can send instant messages to their friends.

Initially social media was for entertainment but its dynamism, interaction, collaboration, participation and trusting environment turn them into normal business and organizational tools. The technological support of Web 2.0 social networks and virtual communities creates an avenue for people to learn together and share experiences (Elia et al, 2009). Utilising the engaging power of social media in virtual relationships, organisations are immersing themselves into "people's internet" and learning to transform the "likes," "shares" and "comments" into useful customer knowledge (Andriole, 2010). It is therefore common to see businesses launch Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels and blogs to endeavor to maintain relevance among competition and to establish and strengthen bonds with clients (Mitic and Kapoulas, 2012).

Facebook was originally for sharing of personal information mainly with the use of blogging but organisations are using them too. Linkedin is mainly for professional information sharing in the social networks. YouTube is for sharing of videos, Flickr for photographs, DocStoc for documents and SlideShare for presentations and these platforms also allow other's evaluations and opinions on what are shared

RSS (Really Simple Syndication), podcasting, Atom (a web publishing language) and widgets are some of the new ways of broadcasting real-time text, video and audio information to customers or shareholders.

Wikis are special websites which allow entries and edits from different users. A good example is the Wikipedia (http://www.wikipedia.org/) which is internationally and freely written with the objective of collectively creating accurate and up-to-date common knowledge.

According to Bonsón and Flores (2011), social media is a good means for corporate dialogue even for financial institutions in this age that transparency is demanded of organisations.

How social media can be used for knowledge sharing in African development institutions

Many organisations such as IBM, General Electric and Shell have replaced cumbersome knowledge management systems with social media applications such as blogs (individuals' publishing sites that allow others to make comments online in chronological order) and wikis because they share the believe that social media is the antidote to many barriers in knowledge sharing (Grace, 2009). How can social media be used for knowledge sharing in African development institutions? Since social media is all about two-way communication, the question is, with whom? We can break down into these three main groups:

Customers

Development institutions have organizational and individual customers who they serve. For example, as already explained, a development bank can have individual and corporate customers to lend money to. A development institution can use RSS feeds to update the clients on new information from their websites. Tweets can also be used. In a wider sense, the general citizens of the society can be considered as customers of development institutions because eventually, the institutions want to alleviate their poverty and better their welfare. Since mobile devices (phones, tablets and laptops) are becoming very common even in developing economies and they are the main carriers of social media, there is plenty of communication among citizens of different groupings.

By tapping into these communications (eg through membership of groups) whether in the form of blogs or tweets, development institutions can guess their needs and their reactions to services provided. This useful information can aid them to create new products and services or even to adjust current ones. The social media can also aid them to gain accurate knowledge of their customer profiles which is crucial for organizational survival (cf Cader et al, 2013)

Development institutions can also set up Wikis to allow immediate and easy feedback on ideas and services. They can be used to monitor corporate social responsibility (Anonymous, 2012). Another interesting way social media can be used is to easily produce video material and post it on YouTube. That would more easily communicate to the public than just texts.

Staff (internal)

Organisational members constitute important source of intellectual capital by virtue of their qualifications, skills and experience. Successful organisations are those that can orchestrate these resources in a way that optimizes goals and objectives. Social media provides an easy and non-formal approach to unlocking this capital especially tacit knowledge. The University of the West of Scotland, for instance uses Yammer as a platform. Internal use of social media has not caught up as much as external. What development institutions may observe is that technology savvy staff have created a social media to share problems and solutions (Anonymous, 2013). In time, they may extend this effort to go beyond the organizational boundaries. Managers should take advantage and encourage the efforts including promoting staff use of LinkedIn to tap from internal and external knowledge stock.

For internal social media set up by institutions to work, institutions first have to adopt the qualities of a learning organization that makes members free to express themselves. However, to avoid disruption of such freedom, reasonable boundaries have to be placed. For instance, unreasonable personal attacks (character assassinations) can be outlawed. The employees' social media can also be used to enforce, re-enforce or introduce useful organizational culture. There is a known challenge of getting members to share knowledge. The social nature of the network should engender willingness to share. Besides, managers should consider different rewards (both intrinsic and extrinsic).

Inter-organisational

Most development institutions need to collaborate with sister organisations with whom they co-invest or operate and other organisations eg grant-makers. A Wiki can help the organisations to air their views on a common concern eg funding. Social networks of communities of practice can also be set up are on individual basis but crosses organizational boundaries. For example, members across institutions who are in charge of organizing and managing events can share a social media to exchange information as well as to advertise their activities. The same social media, eg Face Book, can collect blogs (information) from their customers. Vuori and Okkonen (2012) found out in their research that a mey movitation for using intra-organisational social media is the making of every-day work easier and faster as well as the media ease of use. For instance, not only is it easy to send instant messages but also easy to produce high quality video and share (using YouTube).

Other ways that development institutions can use social media is for recruitment. Tweets can be used to advertise and LinkedIn can be used for head-hunting.

Conclusion and areas for further investigation

Africa can be regarded as economically poorer than developed parts of the world. However, social media has penetrated there as its technologies (mobile devices and Web 2.0) make economic sense to both individuals and organisations. African development institutions can utilise its power of networking and collaborative knowledge sharing to communicate internally and externally to and from customers and stakeholders. A future study should perform a systematic desk research in order to develop a theoretical model which should explain the application of social media in African development institutions. Such a model should be validated with an empirical study so that conclusions drawn from it can be used to by development institutions to benefit from the potentials social media in their work.

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