

# Enterprise Social Media as a Barometer of Busyness

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## ABSTRACT

Social software has been deployed within large enterprise organizations to facilitate informal communication and improve collaboration among distributed team members. We observe, however, that employees have appropriated these systems to discuss matters of work-life balance. In this paper, we describe our research investigating the relationship between social media and acculturation, the process by which employees make sense of the norms and values of an organization. We highlight, in particular, our findings regarding the tensions that arise when “professional” work takes place at home.

## Author Keywords

social media; social networking; organizational culture; busyness; acculturation

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation

## General Terms

Human Factors

## INTRODUCTION

Large enterprises maintain global workforces that must deal with the challenges and opportunities that arise when collaboration occurs over distance and time zones. Social software has been deployed within these organizations to provide ways for groups to share information and coordinate more effectively. Such systems can support informal communication and have, as a result, been appropriated by employees to discuss topics of a more personal nature. For instance, users of Beehive, a social networking service deployed within IBM, shared information about their families and personal lives, allowing employees to gain a better sense of colleagues’ social sphere outside the office [1].

At IBM, the prevalence of home offices have resulted in expressions of organizational culture that are descriptive of the idiosyncrasies of such a working environment. In this paper, we describe two research studies in which employees used social media to reflect and transmit norms and values associated with remote work in this particular enterprise.

## PHOTO VIEWING WITHIN AN INTERNAL SNS

Beehive supports photo uploads and photo sharing, which proved to be a popular feature with approximately 50,000 photos shared at the time of data collection in the summer of 2008 [3]. Our interest focused on photo viewing and its potential for transmitting aspects of organizational culture to employees. In a multi-method study, we combined log analysis of viewer actions, conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 active photo viewers and examined the content of the 500 most viewed photos and the comments associated with the photos shared on the site.

Over 57.6% of the 44K registered users viewed at least 1 photo in the first 16 months of service, suggesting that photo viewing was a common activity. We also observed that 84% of the 500 most viewed photos depicted personal, non-work subjects, such as family vacations and personal hobbies, consistent with past research suggesting that users were interested in learning about their colleagues’ lives outside of the workplace [1].

One of our findings noted that photo viewing helped to reinforce the value of global mobility and flexible workspaces to employees. Figure 1 depicts the variety of home office photos shared on Beehive. Participants noted that these photos helped them get a better sense of what home life was for their colleagues around the world. In addition, a number of the participants reported that consuming content on Beehive helped to alleviate the social isolation they felt from working at home.

We also observed that photo viewing supported the expression of dissatisfaction with various aspects of the organization by commenting on photos that rang true to employee experiences of workplace frustration. For instance, we observed humorous complaints regarding the bureaucratic nature of a large organization and the efforts to deal with the overhead associated with numerous processes. The data from our study also suggested that photo viewing could help members of the organization learn about controversial issues in a socially acceptable medium and ask questions about such issues in a lower stakes channel.



Figure 1. Photos of home offices shared on Beehive.

### #STUFFIBMERSAY

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, which cross the boundaries of the firewall. In this study, we focused on how employees share aspects of organizational culture on microblogs outside of the intranet – specifically, Twitter.

The phrase “Stuff IBMers say” first appeared on Twitter on Thursday November 17<sup>th</sup> 2011 at 10:02 AM EST in the following tweet by @firsttweet<sup>1</sup> “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 17<sup>th</sup> to December 19<sup>th</sup> 2011. Figure 2 depicts sample tweets from the thread. The two authors performed a content analysis of 1952 tweets, excluding the retweets, using open coding to create categories [2]. Disagreements were settled via discussion and inter-reliability was then calculated on a sample of 60 mutually coded tweets ( $\kappa=0.84$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

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.

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

We observed that 55% of the active IBM participants on the #stuffibmerssay thread worked in a remote setting (31% mobile + 24% home) with the remainder listed with a standard office (41%) and unknown (4%) as a primary work location. Our content analysis of the tweets is consistent with this demographic analysis.

For instance, we noted that a portion of the coded tweets described the everyday experience of working remotely. The content analysis also revealed the idiosyncratic nature of working remotely from a home office with a distributed team where one of the primary forms of interaction is the conference call (11%). Examples tweets coded in the conference call category include:

Would the person washing dishes please go on mute.  
#stuffibmerssay

Would the person eating the crunchy salad please go on mute? #stuffIBMerssay

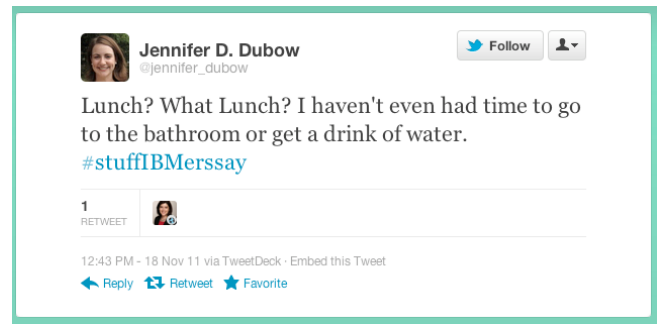
I'll take the dog barking to mean we have consensus  
#stuffibmerssay

Our analysis also suggests that microblogging also helped the participants to feel a sense of shared identity and experience as an IBM-er.

*I learned that I'm not the only one out there. (laughs) I recognize some of these things. (T, IT Specialist)*

*I realize that I'm not the only one who has these phrases. I think there are other people, who say these things at the same time....so you might associate with them and maybe become more social. (K, community manager)*

<sup>1</sup> Twitter names have been anonymized.



For our interview participants, connecting to a shared identity as an IBM-er was especially gratifying because they worked remotely from home offices and/or they were members of distributed teams.

As researchers in a corporate industrial lab, our main focus in designing, deploying and studying social media adoption has been primarily focused on how such systems can increase productivity and facilitate collaboration. In addition, at IBM, we are especially focused on knowledge work that happens outside of the traditional office. This has occurred, in part, because the consulting and services portion of the business has led to remote and flexible work environments, as employees then work at home offices when not traveling to client engagements.

between the domestic sphere and the professional one, when paid work occurs at home. While benefits to this arrangement can include flexibility in one's schedule and reduced footprint with respect to commuting costs, there may be underlying issues with the temptation to work anytime, if the office is just down the hall, or if family practices become disrupted with such an arrangement. We hope to use the discussions at the workshop as an initial starting point to think more deeply about these issues.

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