

Deployment, Usage and Impact of Social Media Tools in Small and Medium Size Enterprises: A Case Study

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Social Media (SM) are today engaging millions of users over the Web. Within this realm, it has become a necessity for Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) to be present and get feedback about their products and services, as SM can be a great venue for increasing their customer base, implementing customer relationship management, targeting advertisement campaigns and performing networking tasks [1-3].

In this context, technology aiming to support corporate users to implement their SM strategy plays an important role. However, it also requires specific organizational and operational affordances and thus entails perceived difficulties in implementation which in turn might discourage a company from engaging to SM usage. As a result, despite the wealth of opportunities that SM usage can offer to SMEs, many have been slow to adopt new technologies due to perceived barriers such as lack of money, time, training, negative views about their usefulness, as well as unfamiliarity with technology [4,5].

SM tools aim to lift some of these barriers by helping companies manage multiple SM networks, enhance their social presence and perform brand monitoring tasks. To what extent these tools can actually support corporate users and especially SMEs to adopt, engage effectively with and integrate SM in their everyday activities has to be assessed. To this end, case studies on the deployment, usage and impact of SM tools may provide valuable insights on best practices in fostering intention to use them, defining or re-establishing a SM strategy, selecting tools that would embrace changes in organizational and structural levels and measuring their impact and return on investment (ROI) [6].

This paper presents a case study aiming to introduce SM tools in typical regional SMEs. Evaluation results are analyzed from three perspectives: the deployment, the overall user experience with such tools, and their impact on business objectives. Three SMEs with diverse profiles, business goals, operational and organizational structures participated in the study. SME1 employs 16 persons and is active in undertaking research and development programs. SME2 is a six-person software design and development company. SME3 employs eight persons and acts as an online meta-retailer of shopping deals on a variety of products and services.

Figure 1 presents an overview of the evaluation methodology. Initially, a semi-structured interview was conducted capturing SMEs' business profiles, existing SM presence, policies, and needs. Next, a set of SM tools was introduced to the participating SMEs, followed by a training session in which training material was provided, including contextualized use cases of the tools. Subsequently, the SMEs used the tools for a period of one month. During this period and following a ten-day interval,

three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each SME in order to collect qualitative data on the tools' deployment process (e.g. level of effort required, training quality), user experience (e.g. usability, usefulness, learnability) and overall impact (e.g. business goals support, change in policies). The study concluded with a post-study discussion. In addition, we collected quantitative data related to the SMEs' social networking presence (e.g. likes on the Facebook Page, number of Twitter followers) before, during and after the study.

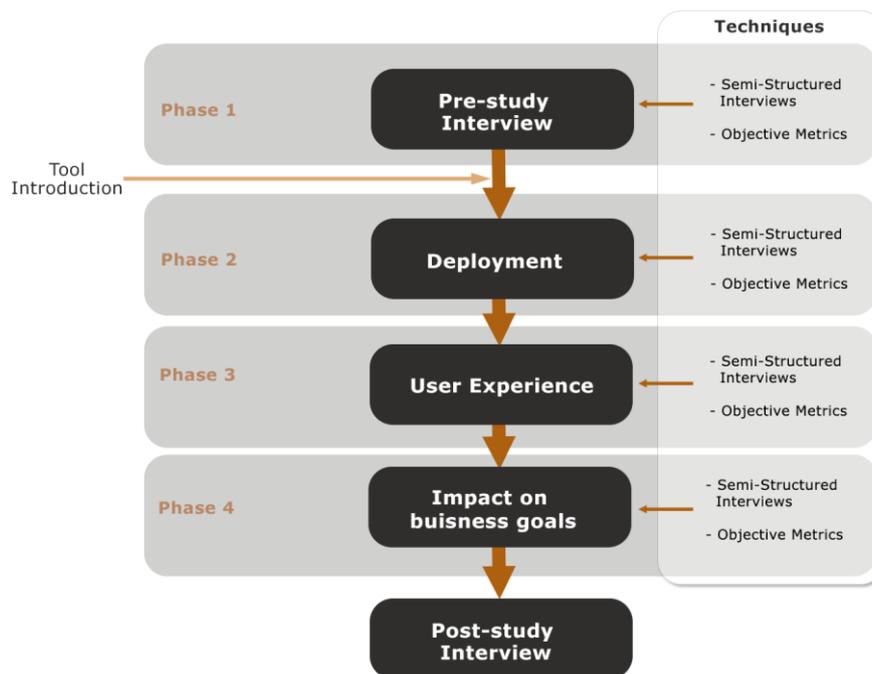


Fig. 1. Evaluation methodology applied

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) [7] was used to analyze the collected interview data, and statistical techniques were applied on the collected objective metrics. Results revealed that the usefulness of the SM tools as well as intention to adopt and integrate them in future activities varied considerably among the participating SMEs. This was a generally expected result since these companies differed considerably in terms of organizational structure and SM management needs. The main common effect that the introduction of the tools had on all SME's was a renewed interest for engagement with SM activities in general. All SMEs that participated in our study increased their SM presence to some extent either by engaging in new SM networks or by increasing their activity on those they were already using. The provided SM tools helped some SMEs to realize that they lacked an overall SM strategy with specific objectives and measurable goals. However, apart from the positive effect and intentions to integrate SM tools in their everyday activities, the SMEs confronted difficulties in aligning their business goals with continuous usage of such tools.

The work presented in this paper is primarily driven by an effort to understand the perceived difficulties of SMEs in integrating and adopting SM tools. The practical implications of this work are the elaboration of an empirical evaluation framework along with lessons-learned for the deployment, usage and impact of SM tools on SMEs with diverse business profiles and objectives.

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