Social media use in HR management; rule making, rule breaking and workarounds: a sociomaterial view

Abstract

Employees use alternative tools and technologies to modify existing routines such that shortcomings in organisational processes can be overcome by deviating from prescribed procedures. These practices are referred to as "workarounds" and present a recognised yet under-researched phenomenon. Our study investigates how employees use social media as tools for compensating for shortcomings of existing information technologies and the effects of these workarounds on the strength of the HR communication process. We present a multiple case study to demonstrate workarounds in large UK organisations and to describes the intended outcomes and undesired side-effects. We further suggest an extension to the established structurational model of technology to incorporate effects of workarounds and conclude with an outlook for further research. The findings further offer practical application in the HR field by demonstrating how social media can be adopted into the existing HR processes.

Keywords: Sociomateriality, Structuration, Workarounds, Social Media, HR Management

1 Introduction

Availability of a technology is not sufficient to lead to organisational transformation. Rather, it is *how* technology is used and applied in a specific context which results in the development of new capabilities, products and processes (Lucas Jr, Agarwal, Clemons, El Sawy, & Weber, 2013; Orlikowski, 2000; Park, Sawy, & Fiss, 2017; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). This paper continues the debate on sociomateriality of information technologies.

Social media, a "new class of information technologies" (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014, p. 275), requires a review of established strategic and organising approaches. In this paper, we present findings from an empirical cross-disciplinary study that has theoretical and practical implications.

This paper introduces a comparative case study in three organisations which exhibit different approaches to social media use. We analyse the practices and routines employed by the employees in the case organisations to circumvent existing barriers and to deviate from prescribed routines to achieve organisational goals.

We suggest that social media, offers qualitatively different capabilities from other internet-based communication technologies, enabling organisations to create and maintain relationships. We argue that establish models of technology use in

organisations require an extension to accommodate workarounds which are being made possible by the emergence, availability and persistence of social media. We find that organisational rules and policy have a moderating effect on the ability of actors to use the technology to build relationships. However, actors use workarounds to bypass organisational policy.

The research has theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical point of view, we uncover existing and emergent practices (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013; Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfeld, 2013; Stein, 2013). The practical implications arise from examples of *how* social media use can be strategically placed into business processes and lead to the development of capabilities (Sahay, Sein, & Urquhart, 2017). Employees are modifying organisational routines and use workarounds to eliminate shortcomings of existing routines (Alter, 2014; Feldman, 2000). We argue that social media provides employees with additional and novel ways to deviate from prescribed routines and policies to achieve organisational goals.

In this research, we investigate social media use in organisations in the context of human resource management (HR or HRM). The question under investigation is how employees use social media to deliver value for organisations. We start with an introduction of terminology and frameworks used in the study and provide a brief overview of the current state in social media research. Then, we present findings from three qualitative case studies in organisations with different approaches to social media use and highlight different approaches to social media use for workarounds. In the final section, we discuss the implications of the study and discuss opportunities for further research.

2   Workarounds and organisational routines

Organisational processes and routines, such as Standard Operating Procedures, are seen as a source of stability (Feldman, 2000). However, in a situation when restrictions and technologies prevent employees from "getting the work done" they employ workarounds to achieve their goals despite the shortcomings of idealised processes or insufficient IT support (Alter, 2014). The theory of workarounds has found broad recognition in recent management and IS literature (Alter, 2014; Ferneley & Sobreperez, 2006; Ignatiadis & Nandhakumar, 2009; Morrison, 2015; Spierings, Kerr, & Houghton, 2017). We develop our argument around the Structurational

Model of technology (Orlikowski, 1992). Technology restricts and facilitates human action and has an impact on the organisational setting (Figure 1).
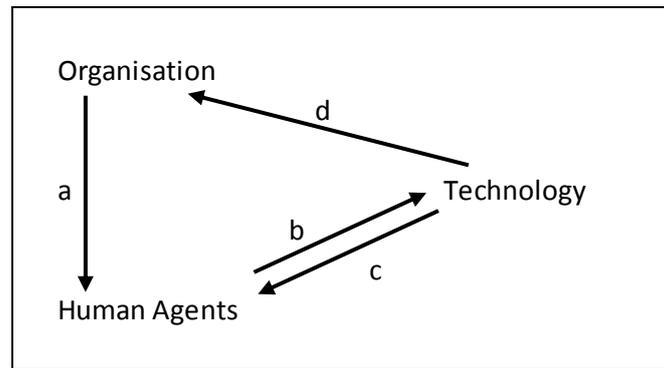
Figure 1 – Structurational Model of Technology (Orlikowski, 1992)

The model assumes that human interactions with technology are restrained and enforced through organisational settings (arrow "a"). The technology itself is the outcome of human activity (arrow "b"). Human action such as design, development and implementation brought a technology into being. Once available, technology facilitates as well as restricts human action (arrow "c"). The interaction of human agents with the technology has a direct impact on the organisation's properties re-shaping or re-enforcing existing processes and structures (arrow "d").

We argue that social media allow employees to deviate from the prescribed paths and patterns of technology use and to a) interact with technology in a qualitatively different way than that prescribed by the organisation and b) influence organisational properties while bypassing the organisationally prescribed and defined pathways. We are using the context of HR communications to demonstrate the effects on workarounds on organisational properties.

3   Social Media in HR Management context

There are several lenses to define HR Management (Guest, 2011). One of the lenses is that of HR as a communication system between management and employees (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). The effectiveness of an HR system is derived from three main properties: distinctiveness and consistency of messages, and the existence of a shared understanding (consensus) between the managers and employees (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Sanders & Yang, 2015). Distinctiveness refers to the recipient's perception of the importance of the message. A distinctive message "stands out" among other similar messages, e.g., because it comes from a trusted source, a close friend or a high-level manager. Consistency is understood both in a spatial and temporal context. In a spatially consistent HR process, similar messages are sent by managers at

different levels and in different departments. Consistency over time requires similar message content in job adverts, selection-, on-boarding-, promotion-processes, as well as dismissal. Consensus is achieved by strategical alignment across hierarchies and departments, as well as provision of feedback channels to ensure employee's and management's interpretation of the message content are consistent.

With this approach to HR communications, the organisation needs to maintain control over the communication media and limit the employees' ability to speak or to create their own message. The ever growing penetration of social media tools and platforms of personal and business environments makes control of communication difficult if not impossible (Feuls, Fieseler, & Suphan, 2014; Huang et al., 2013). Social media changes the HR processes at individual and organisational levels (Table 1).

	Individual	Firm
Process	- Job search and "one-click apply" on LinkedIn vs adjusting CV and cover letter for each position, applying via application forms	- Application Process on LinkedIn vs proprietary applicant tracking systems
Relationships	- Access to colleagues' knowledge and relationships over intranet/LinkedIn/Skype vs departamental and location silos	- Direct access to candidates on LinkedIn vs proprietary candidate pools; - Continuous alumni engagement vs irregular alumni events
User Experience	- Direct access to information and conversation with managers (e.g. CIO blogs)	- Fusion of recruitment and marketing activities on public social networks (YouTube, Facebook)
Markets (Information Consumption/Provision)	- Information about the organisation is received over social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Glassdoor) vs traditional newsletters and internal comms; - Direct feedback and voice on public and private social media vs Employee Surveys	- Direct Sourcing vs Agency Recruitment; - Up-to-Date Skills and aspirations of current employees vs outdated information based on CV at the time of application; - Anonymous instant feedback on Glassdoor vs bi-annual employee surveys
Target Audiences	- Making personal profiles available and visible for potential recruitment - Targeting specific potential employers by engaging with them on LinkedIn	- Targeting passive candidates and Alumni for recruitment vs only dealing with applications received

Table 1 – Examples of HR Routines Changes through Social Media use

Previous studies have found that employees use "workarounds" to modify existing routines such that shortcomings in organisational processes can be overcome by deviating from prescribed practices (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Our study investigates how employees use social media as tools for compensating for shortcomings of existing information technologies and the effects of these workarounds on the strength of the HR communication process.

4   Case Studies

This section describes the study design and findings. The descriptive findings from each case are summarised and discussed in the final sub-section.

4.1 Study Design

The case studies follow a multiple interview-based case study approach (Yin, 2009). The data was collected in the series of face-to-face or telephone interviews with employees in HR-related roles in three multinational organisations with headquarters in the UK. From a macro-level perspective, several environmental parameters such as availability of employees to hire, language and culture in the host country, regulations and employment laws, consumer base and expectations are "comparable", although it is acknowledged that industry-specific factors can cause and explain some of the differences observed in the study. The data for the studies were collected in a series of in-depth interviews (Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2009) which were transcribed and analysed using a qualitative data analysis package NVivo. For the analysis the organisations were coded as "Country" + "Industry" + "Ordinal Number" (e.g., "UK FMCG 1"), as the three organisations presented here are from different industries, the ordinal number is omitted in this paper for readability. In some graphs and tables, the "industry" is abbreviated to allow better use of limited space.

The case organisations were selected based on their apparent activity on social media. The selection process aimed to identify organisations where employees privately and acting on behalf of the organisation demonstrate different behaviours. From a pool of 30 organisations, each organisation's activity on Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and the Organisation's careers page was assessed. Organisations were scored on two dimensions: (1) organisation's activity on social media, and (2) employees' activity on social media (Figure 2). Based on the two dimensions, organisations were assigned one of the four quarters: "Social Organisation", "Social Employees", "Un-Social Organisation", "Un-Social Employees". The "Social Organisation"-quarter is characterised by active interactions on public social media between the organisation and its employees (e.g., firm posting job advert on LinkedIn and employees sharing it and adding comments). "Social Employees"-quarter included organisation where employees were active on social media, but the organisation itself was not (e.g., LinkedIn groups "xyz employees" ran by an alumnus had 10 times more current employees and ongoing posts versus a "dead" official LinkedIn group where the last post was made over a year ago). "Un-Social Employees"-quarter included organisations which visibly tried to engage but did not get (much comparing to others) response from their employees (e.g., LinkedIn groups where only the "organisation" posted, Tweets which were neither liked nor retweeted). Finally, "Un-Social

organisations"-quadrant included firms where activity from neither the organisation nor employees was visible (e.g., YouTube channel with 4-year-old videos and comments turned off, empty "official Facebook page" or tumble-weed-like Twitter accounts).

While at the beginning of the study it was not clear whether the same interaction patterns would be prevalent inside the organisations, these publicly visible interactions provided sufficient support for selecting the case organisations as candidates for study (Wolf, Sims, & Yang, 2015)
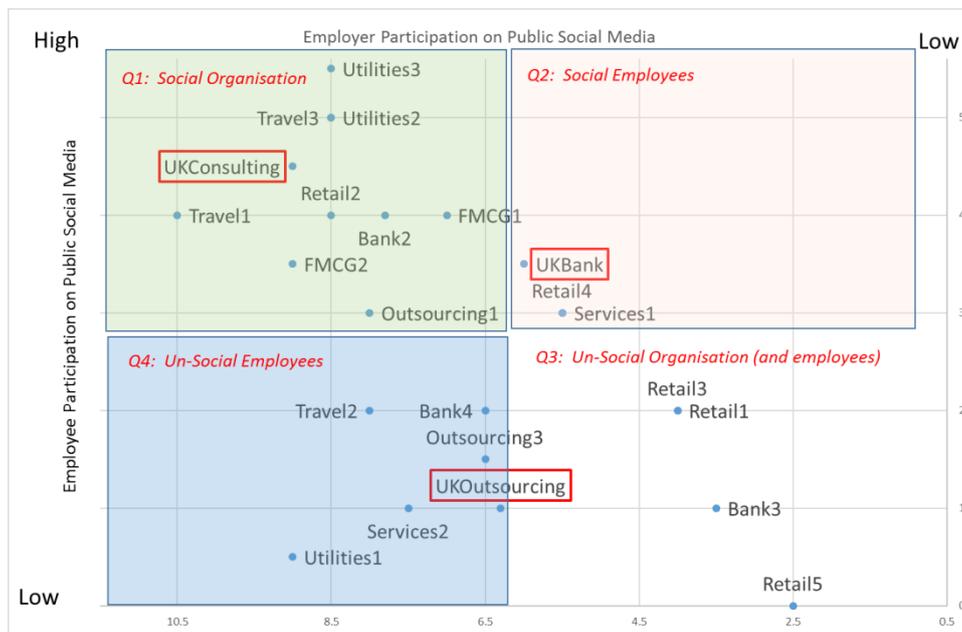
Figure 2 – Employee-Employer engagement levels for case selection

The cases in our study exhibited different interaction patterns on public social media, and it was expected that the value proposition, value creation, segmentation and internal interaction patterns would be different. Following the comparison logic (Eisenhardt, 1989; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009), the differences and similarities of these patterns should explain the different outcomes in the development of new capabilities and thus in contribution to the creation of competitive advantage. In UKBank, the interaction pattern was that of "social employees" – the employees interacted on social media, while the "organisation" in the form of official accounts was not visible. In UKOutsourcing, the pattern was that of "unsocial employees" – the organisation over official channels was much more active on social media than its employees. UKConsulting occupied the space of "Social Organisations", where both the organisation and its employees do interactively post on social media platforms.

4.2   Findings and Analysis

Each organisation provides an insight into how and when workarounds were used by HR employees to deviate from the prescribed communication routines. We list the organisations in the order of their approach to social media use: discouraged by UKBank, encouraged with limited success by UKOutsourcing, and embraced by UKConsulting.

UKBank is an internationally operating financial services company. Most of the interviews were conducted in and with employees from the head office in London. The main tools used within the company are Avature (a customer relationship management-like system focused on broadcasting targeted information to large groups of people) for selection and attraction and an internally developed chat client for internal group or individual instant communication. Externally, LinkedIn is used differently by recruiters, employees, and alumni for attraction, broadcast and socialising.

UKOutsourcing is a services company with contracts in security, maintenance, and transport. The head office functions are distributed across the UK and employees from the South-East of England, London and Birmingham were involved in the study. An internal communication platform – Yammer has been recently introduced but is not being used for inter- and intra-team communications to the extent expected, with managers more active than employees. Externally, it is company policy to "monitor but not to engage" on Twitter.

UKConsulting is a technology consulting firm which concentrates on consultancy services in the HR technology space and is a part of a US-based group of companies. The study focused on the UK based part of the firm. UKConsulting makes a plethora of communication tools available for employees for content sharing and intra-company communication. The main tools used are an internal in-house Facebook-like tool "Networking" and LinkedIn.

4.2.1   Workarounds in UKBank

UKBank operates in a highly regulated environment. Operations relating to financial transactions are expected to be transparent and compliant with laws and regulations. However, the compliance extends to other parts of the business operations. For example, to ensure equal opportunities and fight corruption and nepotism, all recruitment-related communications need to be recorded transparently and follow a

defined process. Recruiters are not allowed to use LinkedIn or other communication media to engage with candidates. UKBank's views social media as a vehicle for delivering controlled information. The value proposition for the employees is described as receiving "targeted, relevant and timely communications". The problem with the internal applicant tracking systems (ATS) is that the data is stale and only candidates who have applied before can be found. Further, direct one-to-one communication between recruiters and candidates is not possible. UKBank's recruiters, however, use their personal devices and accounts to source and contact potential candidates. Once relationships are established over LinkedIn, Skype and WhatsApp, and a vacancy has been "sold" to a high-potential candidate, they then are put into the "normal process" of applying through the sanctioned ATS.

4.2.2 Workarounds in UKOutsourcing

UKOutsourcing is a geographically dispersed organisation. With main offices located in several UK locations, teams are often distributed across multiple offices. UKOutsourcing places a focus on a consistent message across different parts of the organisation and encourages recruiters to use LinkedIn for Job-posting, attraction and searches using provided templates and tools. However, some recruiters feel that the corporate-approved templates are not attractive enough to capture the interest of the "right candidates". Additionally, some recruiters feel that searches on LinkedIn are not returning appropriate results. Finally, responses to vacancy adverts on LinkedIn are considered "too opportunistic" and as such not adding value. The recruiters thus deviate from the prescribed procedures to do their job. Some interviewees reported that they rewrite the job offerings and turn them into word-clouds to create attractive "images" which represent the job specifications. These "appealing" job descriptions are then posted on LinkedIn via the recruiter's personal profile. Other recruiters do the required minimum of posting the job adverts onto LinkedIn and use other (more familiar) search engines to source candidates and direct phone calls to establish contact (rather than connecting to candidates on LinkedIn).

4.2.3 Workarounds in UKConsulting

UKConsulting considers itself a "social media company". The employees receive a "social score" based on their engagement on internal social media platforms and this score drives a portion of their bonuses. Social interaction on inter/ and intranet has a

direct monetary value attached to it. The main platform used in UKConsulting is "Networking" – a LinkedIn-like application which allows one-to-one and group interactions between employees, customers and partners. One of the features of "Networking" is the Q&A section where anyone can ask the community for help. The issue with these Q&As are that the become "ghost towns" in which questions remain unanswered. This apparent silence results in frustrations, and a "why bother" attitudes. UKConsulting's employees use public forums (notably customer community on LinkedIn) to ask and answer questions. Interestingly, the willingness to contribute to Q&As on the LinkedIn group is reported to be higher than that on the internal platform. However, UKConsulting is not discouraging this behaviour and contributions to "unsanctioned" social media do count towards the employee's social score.

4.3 Discussion

In all three organisations, we discovered employee's behaviours and interactions with technology which do not comply with those prescribed by the organisation. In all cases reported, the intent was to "do my job" or to "get better candidates".

Employees were aware that their interactions with technology deviate from sanctioned paths. However, they believed that these deviations are benefitting the organisation as a whole. The reasons for non-compliance were consistently altruistic. The patterns of workarounds vary in each organisation as do the organisational responses to the workarounds (Table 2).

UKBank modified some of its rules and procedures to accommodate the workaround. UKOutsourcing, on the one hand, provides additional training to encourage employees to follow the prescribed procedures; On the other hand, the organisation "turns a blind eye" on the workaround, allowing it to take place. UKConsulting has modified its policy and has institutionalised the workaround fully embedding it into their standard practice.

Case Organisation	Situation	Workaround	Aim	Organisational learning
UKB	All recruiter-candidate communication must be logged in a centralised system. Access to LinkedIn is blocked from firm-network	Rule breaking: personal devices to source candidates on LinkedIn	Attract better candidates for the organisation	Recruiters in some departments in the UK are now provided with "recruiter licenses" and are allowed to put certain jobs as applications through LinkedIn directly
UKO	Recruiters must use approved Job-templates to post on LinkedIn. They must use LinkedIn for direct sourcing	Workaround: personal accounts used to post modified adverts. Alternative search engines used for search	Better engagement with the candidates. Better matching of candidates to jobs	Additional training provided to recruiters on how to use LinkedIn searches. Personal re-posting of vacancies is tolerated
UKC	Employees are encouraged to engage on the internal platform to share knowledge and participate in Q&A sessions	Rule making: employees use public forums instead of internal tools to ask questions and provide product-related answers	Direct engagement with customers and partners on media of their choice	Organisation recognises the value of engagement on alternative platforms and encourages it

Table 2 – Workarounds in organisations: reasons, aims, outcomes

The study shows that new technologies provide additional capabilities to circumvent established and prescribed procedures to achieve personal and organisational goals. The original model (cf Figure 1) thus can be extended to accommodate the agent's ability to deviate from prescribed patterns (Figure 3).
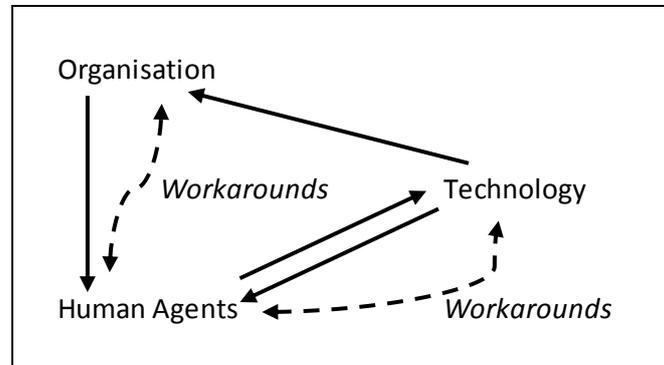
Figure 3 - Workarounds in the Sociomaterial Technology Model

The reported intentions of workarounds are "positive" – the aims stated by the employees are aligned with reported organisational objectives of better knowledge sharing, employee attraction and selection. The workarounds take on different forms of deviations. In the case of UKBank, the workarounds are *rule breaking*: employees consciously circumvent the barriers place by IT and use personal devices to access social media platforms to build relationships between recruiters and candidates. In UKConsulting the workarounds are *rule making*: the organisation recognises the shortcomings of existing policies and technologies and modifies existing rules to accommodate and legitimise workarounds. In UKOutsourcing the workarounds are in parts accepted and tolerated, with additional emphasis put on (re-)training the employees to discourage them from using workarounds. All organisations recognise that the causes of workarounds are legitimate and that workarounds are intended to eliminate the shortcomings of current processes. However, analysing the outcomes from the viewpoint of HR System strength defined by consistency, distinctiveness and consensus richness of HR-related communications, the consequences do not consistently align with organisational goals.

4.3.1 Consistency

In a strong HR Communication System, the consistency of the message is re-enforced over time and place. Employees in all three organisations use workarounds to be able to send out "personalised" messages. These personal statements may not be aligned with the organisationally desired content. E.g. recruiters in UKBank engage directly

with the potential candidates and "sell" their version of the vacancies to the candidates. Because this process happens "outside" of the prescribed systems and procedures, the organisation has no control or understanding of what is being communicated. Recruiters in UKOutsourcing use different tools to source the candidates. The processes and routines employed vary from recruiter to recruiter, as do the messages to the candidates. Due to the use of multiple disconnected systems, UKOutsourcing loses insight into how candidates are sourced and what is being communicated to them. Finally, UKConsulting is giving up control of the (proprietary) knowledge of its products and functionalities. Instead of keeping the Q&As in a manageable (and censorable) internal system, they allow potentially inconsistent messages to be sent from its employees, partners and customers.

4.3.2   Distinctiveness

From HR-management view, a distinctive message is one which comes from a "trusted" source. This could be a close relationship or a "trust-by-proxy", e.g. high-level manager. Employees in all three organisations participate in exchanges on public social media, notably LinkedIn. The communications originating from personal accounts on LinkedIn are directed to candidates, colleagues, partners with whom the employees have a direct personal relationship (to a smaller or greater extent). The distinctiveness of a message, e.g. personalised job-advert, may increase through workarounds and the use of personal profiles and connections. One of the case organisations (UKConsulting) fully embraced the benefits of closer connections and incorporated communications on LinkedIn into their standard policy. UKBank partially accepted and recognised the benefits and changed some of its policies to accommodate a limited use of LinkedIn for recruiter-candidate communications. UKOutsourcing, on the other hand, is re-enforcing its policy of "using LinkedIn as prescribed" by providing additional training and insisting on extant rules.

4.3.3   Consensus

Consensus is a shared understanding between management and employees. From HR-prospective, consensus requires an ongoing validation of employee's understanding of the management's message (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The workarounds reported by the study participants create shorter feedback-loops on the one hand. On the other hand, due to a variety of available social media to "escape" from organisationally

controlled platforms, the organisations will struggle with gathering and analysing the feedback from a plethora of applications. It is unclear, in how far the organisations are utilising or can utilise the shorter feedback cycles from candidates to recruiters.

5   Conclusion

Social media offer novel ways for employees to introduce workarounds into their day-to-day IT interactions. Access to social media, contents on social media and visibility of social media content reside outside organisational control. The workarounds using social media pose new challenges to organisations' use of IT and require new theoretical models to explain how these workarounds emerge and effect organisations, as well as practical recommendations for the organisations on how to assimilate workarounds into existing organisational routines.

Our study investigated how organisations use social media in the context of HR communications. The findings demonstrate that social media opens new possibilities for employees to deviate from prescribed policies and procedures. The findings are consistent with previous studies in that we are able to demonstrate that employees embrace new and alternative technologies when and if required to overcome shortcomings of existing IT (Morrison, 2015; Spierings et al., 2017). The application of alternative technologies to achieve organisational, professional and personal goals is defined as "workarounds" (Alter, 2014). Our findings extend the theory of workarounds by placing the focus on a radically new set of technologies – social media. These technologies are readily available and accessible by employees outside the control of organisations' IT departments. The use of social media alters the established structurational model of technology (Orlikowski, 1992) and requires the extension of the mode through the introduction of workarounds. The properties of the HR communication process (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) are affected by the workarounds by employees. While distinctiveness of the message improves and the workaround has reportedly positive effects, the consistency of and consensus on the message content may suffer and weaken the process.

The practical implication of our study is that organisations need to pay attention to emerging workarounds on social media. While these may offer some benefits, the loss of control and, ironically, transparency of the communications between employees

and external entities (e.g. candidates, partners, customers) may have a decremental effect on the strength of the HR communication process.

Our contribution to theory includes the extension of the structurational model of technology and accommodation of social media as an alternative path for human-technology interaction and the effects of these workarounds on organisational properties. Further, we validate findings from previous studies into the emergence and adoption of workarounds.

We demonstrate that employees are willing to break rules, change rules, work around the rules to achieve their goals. The employees report "good intentions" as a motivation for workarounds. These include stronger relationships with candidates, better knowledge sharing and improved candidate to job matching.

We further show that organisations react differently to workarounds. While UKConsulting is embracing the workarounds and incorporates them into the sanctioned processes, UKOutsourcing tries to discourage the workarounds by proving training and advertising benefits of the official procedures. UKBank is actively erecting barriers to workarounds on the one hand, and is softening some of its policies to accommodate partial workarounds (e.g. controlled LinkedIn use in the UK office) on the other hand. Our study did not cover the organisational motivations for adopting or resisting workarounds. This subject would provide a setting for another research project.

One of the observations of the reports was that all employees reported the desire to have a more "personal" connection to their counterparts as one of the reasons to deviate from official routines. Specifically, in the case of UK Outsourcing, while the organisation encourages recruiters to interact with candidates on LinkedIn, some recruiters do a "bare minimum" and prefer a personal phone call to the message exchange on LinkedIn. The value of social media use is reported not to be within "what" – creation, storage and retrieval of additional information. Other IT have been and continue to be successful in addressing this need. The value of social media use derives from "who" (do you know and connect to) – creation and maintenance of relationships. The value of personal connections as a motivational factor for workarounds, rule re-definition and rule breaking is a subject deserving closer attention in a different study.

The organisational routines are recognised as a source of continuous change and improvement (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Our study captured a snapshot of

organisational reality. To understand how employees adopt the workarounds into their daily routines or how these are discarded after a short period, an additional longitudinal study would be required in the same or similar setting. A longitudinal study into workarounds would provide insights into the emergence, adoption and assimilation of workarounds in organisational practices.

Through workarounds and social media use, employees can create additional information flows and new dialogic relationships which were not possible without social media (Huang, et al., 2013). The decoupling of information creation and dissemination processes (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2003) paves ways of organisational knowledge management and learning. Two of the case organisations report ad-hoc solution-finding and knowledge-sharing on social media among and between otherwise dis-connected employees from different departments and continents. These organisations demonstrate cases of organisational learning and show how organisational routines are changing in response to workarounds.

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