The Role of Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) in Maintaining
Organizational Rhythms During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

D. Andrew Dickinson

Ph.D. Student

National University of Ireland Galway

J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics

AOM ID # 129529

July 15th, 2020

Rapid Research Plenary: COVID 19 and Organizational Behavior

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 created unprecedented challenges that have impacted organizational productivity on a global scale. Where people work, how they work, as well as when they work were disrupted. As people shifted to work-from-home, daily routines of commuting to and from offices suddenly stopped. The valuable connections made with co-workers in hallways or over coffee in a break room disappeared. The rhythms of how people engaged in work as individuals and teams changed dramatically. Organizations were confronted with a significant challenge - how to create a productive work environment? To address this issue, many leaders turned to technology to provide a solution.

To overcome the challenge of organizational communication and collaboration, Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) exploded in use as the Pandemic spread. Current ESN's such as Microsoft Teams and Slack provided organizations with text and video chat enhanced with real-time document collaboration and presentation capabilities. They were a medium that could be leveraged to help fill the void left by the loss of in-person interaction. ESN's offered a lifeline to organizations trying to keep critical projects on track and daily operations afloat during times of significant employee, supply chain, and customer upheaval.

Before the Pandemic, ESN's were already experiencing significant adoption rates in organizations despite the products only being available for a handful of years. For example, in 2019, Slack reported 10 million active daily users, while Microsoft had stated that Teams had grown to 13 million (Bridgwater, 2019). As the Pandemic hit organizations rushed to deploy these tools to a newly created or expanded base of work-from-home employees. This growth is reflected in Microsoft's May 2020 release that Teams had topped 75 million active daily uses (Mamiit, 2020). There may be no business-focused software that deployed to so many organizations and individuals within such a short time.

The Pandemic has proven to be a crucible of workplace transformation. The rapid expansion of ESN use and its significant role in the "new normal" have combined to create a substantial change to the context of work that should be attractive to organizational behaviour researchers. This paper will outline a proposed study that, through its submission to the Rapid Research Plenary on COVID 19 at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, seeks feedback from scholars to help refine its plan. The study proposes to explore an ESN's role in maintaining organizational productivity during the changes brought on by the Pandemic. Specifically, during times of change, does an ESN facilitate employee entrainment to productive organizational rhythms?

Organizational Rhythm and Entrainment

The rhythm that emerges from an organization's shared experience of time-based events plays a fundamental role in the successful execution of any planned change. Poels, Tucker, and Kielema (2017) define rhythm as "the movement that ties events of the change together, establishing momentum and involving all organizational members in the change" (p.889). The impact of the Pandemic, though, as an unplanned or "Black Swan" (Taleb, 2007) event amplified the challenge of maintaining a productive rhythm within the organization. Temporal leadership was required during the Pandemic to ensure an organization entrained to the proper rhythm that would help it sustain momentum and move through the uncertainty (Chen & Nadkarni, 2017; Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016).

Entrainment is the process where the rhythmic patterns of an organization have become aligned to a dominant rhythm or *zeitgeber* – the German word for "time-giver" (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016). Pérez-Nordtvedt, Payne, Short, and Kedia (2008) proposed that entrainment to productive rhythms may create a fit or misfit with an organization and its environment that may impact performance. They also note that entrainment itself is not a rigid construct and can be measured across the dimensions of tempo and phase. Phase entrainment would require matching the internal activities to the *zeitgeber*. Tempo fit refers to matching the pace of those activities to the entraining rhythm (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008). The organization-environment fit that promotes performance must be sustained, or at least remain within tolerances, during times of change. Misfit creates a risk of failure or perhaps even organizational death (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008). Figure 1, replicated from Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. (2008), provides the implications and responses to organizational tempo and phase misfit. Organizations may wish to engage in action or "temporal enactment" to return to a previous rhythm or seek out a new one and return to a state of fit (Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008; Standifer & Bluedorn, 2006).

## Proposed Population and Methodology

The proposed study intends to engage an organization with a stable ESN deployment from the Small Medium Enterprise (SME) manufacturing sector. In addition, their sector of the economy also experienced widespread disruption resulting from the Pandemic (CM&E, 2020). Manufacturing SME's also present an appealing population as they often only have a single physical site that must align heterogeneous internal "temporal zones" (Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001). In a single-site manufacturing company, the most apparent split in temporal zones is between the plant floor and the office employees. Plant floor workers must be onsite and work to an 8- or 12-hour shift clock seven days a week and sometimes 365 days a year. Employees may also have to contend with changing shift assignments every few months. In contrast, the office staff operates on a standard office clock (i.e. 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM) throughout the entire year. During the Pandemic, however, office workers were asked to work from home, but plant floor employees kept their place of work.

In a manufacturing company, both temporal zones must plan their activities carefully to remain entrained to the *zeitgeber*. Ideally, the senior leadership of a company wishes this entraining pull to be that of market demand. The internal synchronization of these two zonal rhythms must combine to create an organizational rhythm that is in sync to this pull. The rhythm must remain within the tolerances of the entraining force to drive positive firm performance (Ancona et al., 2001; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008). As a result of the Pandemic, though, the shared internal temporal clocks of those in the office, as well as potential external entraining rhythms experienced by employees, may have changed. Shared temporal mental models that were driving team performance became disrupted (Ancona et al., 2001; Standifer & Bluedorn, 2006). Figure 2 provides a potential model of the transition in entrainment as a result of the Pandemic and the points requiring temporal leadership and enactment.

Once a participating organization has been identified, the research will progress as a dual staged mixed-methods case study. Case studies provide a useful approach to examine phenomena within the context that they exist in the real-world (Yin, 2017). The use of stages builds in the process of reflection within the study. The first stage will be comprised of an extract of text-based chat data available on the cloud-hosted ESN systems as well as a report on email system meta-data (i.e. the number of emails and meetings per week/month). ESN chat data will be analyzed against measures such as the number of posts, post length, and time of day of the

post. There will be broken down further by an individual, team, temporal zone, and organizational level. An initial analysis at this stage will help provide the Principal Investigator (PI) with a preliminary understanding of the context of employee communication. It will also serve to identify ESN actors and how, or even if, Poels et al. (2017) five constituent elements of organizational rhythm (intonation, emphasis, pace, period, and repetition) may be manifesting in the data. The analysis will also provide insight into how the dual dimensions of entrainment (pacing and phase) and potentially if the organization is actively engaged in temporal enactment as a means to return to a state of fit and corporate performance.

The second stage of the study will leverage the insight gained from the first stage on two fronts. First, it will help inform the selection of 10-20 individuals to participate in a semi-structured one-on-one interview. Although the majority may be active daily ESN users, the PI will also engage less active users and non-actors from the organization. The PI will encourage participation from the different internal temporal zones and levels of the organization's hierarchy. Second, the analysis from the first stage will also serve to refine the questions for the semi-structured interview. Guidance obtained from the content analysis will be essential to make the interviews more effective as it asks participants to elaborate on concepts that may not be well understood. The content from the first stage may provide examples from practice for the PI to engage with the participants.

## Challenges and Limitations

The Pandemic also introduces unprecedented logistical and methodological considerations for the execution of the case study. The heightened safety protocols for both participants and the PI will be of primary concern. Also, participating in the research will not be a priority for an organization still undergoing significant business disruption because of the events of 2020. In using a staged mixed-method approach, the case study attempts to mitigate some of these risks using multiple data collection techniques spread over time. The semi-structured interviews will take a short but concentrated time from each individual. The second stage of data collection is less demanding and should only require a few hours from a single information technology resource from within the organization.

## Contribution

The output from this case study will make several contributions to academic discourse as well as practice. First, the proposed case study will explore:

- if organizational rhythms manifest on an ESN, and if so,
- if and how can they be used to entrain staff during a time of extraordinary change.

Secondly, the case study will contribute to the growing body of literature that addresses organizational rhythm (Atkinson, 2008; Lansmann, Schallenmüller, & Rigby, 2019; McGregor, Bidwell, Sarangapani, Appavoo, & O'Neill, 2019; Pérez-Nordtvedt et al., 2008). In particular, this study will apply Poels et al. (2017) multi-faceted conceptualization of organizational rhythm and Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. (2008) two dimensioned view of entrainment as it assesses data. Finally, this research will have practical implications for strategic planning for the inevitable next wave of COVID-19, any future pandemics, or *force majeure*. It will assist senior managers in exploring a more expansive conceptualization of the role that rhythm and entrainment may play in maintaining organizational performance. In doing so, may improve future change management and risk mitigation planning activities.

# References

Ancona, D., Okhuysen, G., & Perlow, L. (2001). Taking time to integrate temporal research. *Academy of Management Review, 26*(4), 512-529.

Atkinson, D. (2008). Dancing "the management": on social presence, rhythm and finding common purpose. In (Vol. 46, pp. 1081-1095). Bradford, England :.

Bridgwater, A. (2019). Microsoft Teams Hits 13 Million Users To Tighten Grip On Slack. *Forbes, 2019(Web Page)*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/adrianbridgwater/2019/07/12/microsoft-teams-hits-13-million-users-to-tighten-grip-on-slack/

Chen, J., & Nadkarni, S. (2017). It's about Time! CEOs' Temporal Dispositions, Temporal Leadership, and Corporate Entrepreneurship. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 62*(1), 31-66. doi:10.1177/0001839216663504

CM&E. (2020, May 25, 2020). Manufacturing Business Conditions Survey. Retrieved from https://cme-mec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Manufacturing-Business-Conditions-and-Outlook-Survey-May-2020.pdf

Granqvist, N., & Gustafsson, R. (2016). Temporal institutional work. *Academy of Management Journal, 59*(3), 1009-1035. doi:10.5465/amj.2013.0416

Lansmann, S., Schallenmüller, S., & Rigby, M. (2019). *Teams Everywhere–Investigating the Impact of Microsoft Teams on Knowledge Worker*. Paper presented at the Pre-ICIS 2019, 8th International Workshop on The Changing Nature of Work, Munich, Germany. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338038787_Teams_Everywhere_-_Investigating_the_Impact_of_Microsoft_Teams_on_Knowledge_Worker

Mamiit, A. (2020). Huge gains for Microsoft Teams, Slack as workers stay home to avoid coronavirus. *Digital Trends.* Retrieved from https://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/microsoft-teams-slack-customers-surge-remote-workers/

McGregor, M., Bidwell, N. J., Sarangapani, V., Appavoo, J., & O'Neill, J. (2019). *Talking about Chat at Work in the Global South: An Ethnographic Study of Chat Use in India and Kenya*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

Pérez-Nordtvedt, L., Payne, G., Short, J., & Kedia, B. (2008). An Entrainment-Based Model of Temporal Organizational Fit, Misfit, and Performance. *Organization Science, 19*(5), 785-801. doi:10.1287/orsc.1070.0330

Poels, T., Tucker, D. A., & Kielema, J. (2017). The development of a theoretical framework of organisational rhythm. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 30*(6), 888-902.

Standifer, R., & Bluedorn, A. (2006). Alliance management teams and entrainment: Sharing temporal mental models. *Human Relations, 59*(7), 903-927.

Taleb, N. N. (2007). *The black swan: The impact of the highly improbable* (Vol. 2): Random house.

Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*: Sage publications.

Figure 1 – Pérez-Nordtvedt et al. (2008, p.7) Organizational Implications of
Tempo and Phase Misfit

| Pace | Phase | |
|---|---|---|
| | Fit | Misfit |
| Fit | **(I) Full entrainment**<br>*Organizational actions to achieve fit*:<br>None necessary | **(II) Out-of-phase misfit**<br>*Organizational actions to achieve fit*:<br>1. Seek entrainment based on aligning the timing of organizational activities with those of the newly changed environment<br>2. Seek temporal enactment based on making the environment entrain to a new or previously existing phase |
| | *Organizational performance*: Normal or above normal depending on within tolerance fit level<br>*Risk of death*: Low | *Organizational performance*: Below normal<br><br>*Risk of death*: Moderate |
| Misfit | **(III) Tempo misfit leader or lagger**<br>*Organizational actions to achieve fit*:<br>1. Seek entrainment based on acceleration or deceleration of organizational activities to match the rate of activity cycles in the newly changed environment<br>2. Seek temporal enactment based on making the environment entrain to a new or previously existing tempo | **(IV) Full temporal misfit**<br>*Organizational actions to achieve fit*:<br>1. Seek entrainment based on acceleration or deceleration as well as alignment<br><br>2. Seek temporal enactment based on making the environment entrain to a new or previously existing tempo and phase |
| | *Organizational performance*: Below normal<br>*Risk of death*: Moderate | *Organizational performance*: Below normal<br>*Risk of death*: High |

*Note.* Arrow in figure visually demonstrates how tempo misfit leads to phase misfit over multiple cycles.

Figure 2 – Possible Organizational Rhythm Change
and Temporal Enactment Due to Pandemic