Chapter 12
People Company: Be Part of It

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we present results of our research on a collaborative platform that enables employees of a global company to present themselves, their business and company site in a company-wide autograph book. For the content generation the employees received an innovative technology, an application running on an Ultra-Mobile Personal Computer (UMPC) that enables users to generate video, sound, simple text, drawings, and photos. Main goal of this applied research is to bridge the gap between the various company sites, to foster working relationships and to strengthen the common understanding that each employee is part of a people company. This chapter describes the application, it presents an analysis of the generated content, the evaluation of the users’ acceptance of the UMPC application and the autograph book and finally an outlook on further research activities informed by these results.

INTRODUCTION

Large distributed organizations often have the problem that, even though electronic collaboration takes place between the employees at different locations, they often do not know much about the habits, atmosphere and environment at the remote location. This fact makes it difficult to create social relationships similar to those that exist between people who work at the same location and as a consequence it becomes difficult to create and maintain communities of interest that span different company locations. This aspect motivates the research that is presented in this paper.

In 2008, the year of the Summer Olympics, a German company with 89 locations world-wide had a very special idea to address this problem: a symbolic baton travels around the earth, from company site to company site, from employee to employee, and gathers greetings, ideas, or stories which are collected step by step in an autograph book for the company. The motivation was: We
are a people company, be part of it. The relay was divided into five stages, located in different regions of the earth. The start of the relay was the summer party of the company in Berlin in July 2008. From Berlin the baton traveled to Newbury (Europe), Pittsburgh (North America), São Paulo (Latin America), and Hong Kong (Asia Pacific). Later the relay traveled around the world. Until the end of December the baton visited up to twenty-five company sites. By-and-by an autograph book grew up wherein employees present themselves and their colleagues, their business, company site and their surroundings.

The practical demand for such an application as well as the attached research goal is to enable the employees to become acquainted with the variety of the company; to enhance the dialog and cooperation between the company sites; to strengthen working relationships by overcoming organizational coherence and diversity by increasing organizational transparency (Reichling, 2005), thus making it easier to create and maintain communities of interest. With our technical approach we wanted to add to the state-of-the art organizational community systems (McCarthy, 2008) with the introduction of a mobile device as the primary tool for content generation in the actual working situation.

In the following we describe how the idea of a symbolic baton that collects messages and impressions from different employees and locations of the company was realized and how this information is presented in a Web-based autograph book. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the collected information, the users’ acceptance of the tools and an outlook on future research and design implications.

RELATED WORK ON COLLABORATION SUPPORT

Collaboration research and development in the past decade yielded in a number collaboration and community systems. Although none of these systems matched exactly the requirement of our application we will present a brief overview on major concepts as they have provided a valuable input for the developments of the Baton application.

Since about 15 years Web based applications are available that support the coordination and cooperation of distributed teams by the provision of shared workspaces, called team rooms (Roseman, 1996; Bentley 1997). Initially these systems were developed in the research area, but quickly the ideas and concepts were employed by commercial products such as Lotus Notes and later MS-Sharepoint. These systems can be described as general purpose cooperation systems that provide a configurable collaborative working environment for many different working situations. Thus, they often provide much elaborated group management and access control services, but they focus mainly on the support of distributed working situations and less in the provision of community support interfaces for multi-media information.

In parallel to these systems a number of community and social networking applications such as Facebook, LinkedIn or XING have received a lot of attention and a growing user base. Although these systems actually raise the awareness about the importance and potential of social networking platforms within a company, they could not be applied for our purpose, since their use cannot be restricted to users of a specific organization. However, important services of such platforms like recommendation, tagging and annotation services were considered as very relevant for our Baton application.

To conclude this brief overview, we argue that many of the currently available systems provide already very useful services to realize the envisaged Baton application. Shared workspace systems provide elaborated group management and access control services, while social networking and community platforms contribute recommendation and networking services. We believe that the integration of collaborative working environments