

Social ITSM: exploring challenges and benefits

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The exponential growth of social media platforms in personal space has enticed businesses to use this platform in their business internally and for service delivery to their customers. This trend will continue to grow as more and more “Gen Y” staff and customers dominate the business world and they expect social media communication at their work in the same way they use outside of work.

Responding to this growth, IT service providers are embracing social media in their service delivery processes. In this article, pertinent challenges faced by the ITSM industry dealing with this social paradigm shift that redefines the structure of communication processes will be discussed. An insight into the benefits of social ITSM will then be presented after an analysis of Broadband Internet Service Providers in Australia about their current use of social media for support as provided on their websites.

Social ITSM: An introduction

The core foundations of IT Service Management is based on Quality Service Management which puts greater emphasis on some of the key quality management principles, namely “customer focus”, “involvement of people” and “mutually beneficial supplier relationships”. These principles are dictated by effective communication. Since social media is becoming ubiquitous in peoples’ way of communication today, it is quite clear that adopting these quality management principles will require embracing social media in the service communication framework. This

includes using social networks within the intranet using enterprise social networking like Yammer to manage staff communication and more importantly using it in the public space with popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to “engage” with customers. It is important to understand the difference between social media and social network: the former focuses on the social “contents” while the latter looks at social “platforms”. Besides the popular social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Yammer for enterprises, support community forums, blogs or wikis are also components of “social media” that equally contribute to enabling social ITSM.

In his report, *The applicability of social media for IT service management*, Mark Blowers goes as far as specifically suggesting IT service managers to implement Twitter for support as part of their service desk strategy. He recommends integrating ITSM with Twitter feeds so that a tweet is transformed into a customer support ticket: “twicket” - that can then be responded either publicly or via the Twitter messaging feature privately. A number of IT service providers have started to incorporate social ITSM into their processes as evident by the presence of Facebook and Twitter icons on either their home page or on the Technical Support or Contact us landing page.

A quick look at the fifteen most popular Internet Service Providers (ISPs) offering broadband Internet services in Australia suggests that above 70% of firms actively use Facebook, Twitter or both to engage with customers and evidence is found that their commu-



ISP	Facebook	Twitter	Customer support forum	Other social networking sites	Comments
Telstra Bigpond	No	No	No	No	No evidence of usage of social media from the website support page
Optus	No	Yes (Follow and Ask for Support)	Yes (My Optus Community)	No	Twitter used for support directly
Vodafone Broadband	Yes	Yes (Twitter Help)	Yes (Vodafone Community)	No	Twitter used for support directly
Virgin Mobile Broadband	No	Yes (Twitter Support)	No	No	Twitter used for support directly
ClubTelco Broadband	Yes	Yes	No	Google+	Social media not used directly for support but for online marketing; however, support requests are handled
TransACT	Yes	No	No	Youtube	Social media not used directly for support but for online marketing; however, support requests are handled
Amaysim	Yes	Yes	Yes (Blog)	Youtube	Twitter and Facebook used for support directly
Dodo Australia	Yes	Yes	No	Youtube (Dodo Support Videos)	Twitter and Facebook used for support directly
Eftel Limited	No	No	No	No	No evidence of usage of social media from the website support page
Exetel	No	No	Yes (User Help Forum, Wiki)	No	No evidence of usage of external social network.
Internode	Yes	Yes	Yes (Discuss on Whirlpool)	No	Provides service updates from Facebook and Twitter
iPrimus	Yes	Yes	Yes (Support Forum, IPGN – iPrimus Gaming Network)	Yes (LinkedIn)	Twitter and Facebook used for support directly
myNetfone	Yes	Yes	Yes (Blog)	Yes (Google+, LinkedIn)	Twitter and Facebook used for support directly
SpinTel	Yes	Yes	No	No	Social media not used directly for support but for online marketing; however, support requests are handled
TPG	No	No	Yes (Forum)	No	No evidence of usage of social media from the website support page

nication includes service requests, service inquiry or service status updates. 8 out of 15 ISPs also have some form of customer support forum to interact with online communities in a social network setting. It is observed that while most of the ISPs use social media for both online marketing and support services only seven ISPs use Twitter for direct support. A brief overview of the ISPs usage of social media in their support services is illustrated in the table below:

Key challenges of social ITSM

Unstructured Communication

In most if not all of the IT service management processes that deal with the customer directly, the customer is identified and their service level agreements that define the scope of service is defined from the Knowledge Management Systems and CRM systems of service providers. Hence the communication process in ITSM is highly structured and “process-driven”.

Unfortunately communication in social media is largely unstructured. The contact person might be a potential or existing customer. It is also likely that the person is a media representative, an assessor, a competitor or a “wanderer” who has nothing better to do! The purposes of communication may also be diverse: to find out about the services, to report an incident, to request status information about an event, a serious complaint or a compliment! A social media policy should address these variations and route them as an input into structured processes if required.

Diverse contact points

Whereas most of the service desks respond to phone calls, emails or service requests from the helpdesk support tickets, social ITSM must prepare to open itself to diverse contact points wherever the business has made its presence in the social network, for example: Facebook page, Twitter feeds, YouTube videos and LinkedIn business profiles. Besides the social networks, new modes of contact points that are increasingly being used are Instant Messaging (Live Support), wikis, blogs, support forums and even gaming networks!

Being a “social” organisation means effectively managing all contact points. Social Media policy of IT service providers should carefully address all communication in social media and divert all requests related

to IT Service Management as proper inputs in relevant processes related to Business Relationship Management and Service Delivery.

Open nature of communication

The perception of quality in IT service delivery is largely based on expectations, which may be dependent on the dialogue between service provider and customer. Social media presents the most transparent and engaging platform for both participating in conversations and observing others conversations. Since posting of most of the information in social media is essentially “public”, it can backfire if customer information exchanges among themselves or with the provider are not carefully monitored. A proactive approach in responding to all issues by properly directing them to relevant hyperlinks for information and to relevant departments as an input to initiate relevant service processes is necessary.

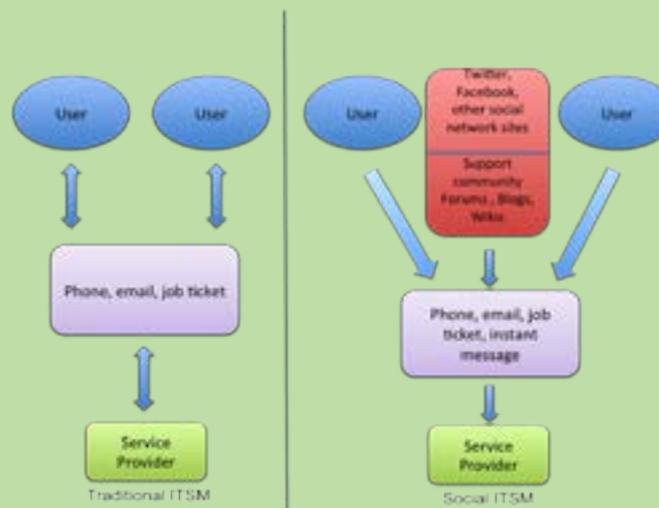


Figure 1: User – Service Provider Interactions in traditional and social ITSM

Figure 1 demonstrates the open and diverse communication options in social ITSM as opposed to traditional ITSM processes. Social media is a dangerous zone because of its open nature. Two of the major social media disasters in 2011: #qantasluxury promotion on Twitter after few weeks of Qantas fleet grounding and Nissan Facebook promotion being controversially awarded to a close friend of the promotion manager – had a massive online backlash that made two of Australia’s most recognisable brands suffer. These are examples of how easily things can go wrong in social media if not managed properly. Since everyone can see what is happening, it is important that a customer sees a “track record” of comments being responded in social media. Internally, comments

and responses must be studied using analytics to understand how it has impacted ITSM processes and work towards continual service improvement. Integration of social media with ITSM tools

Social media is volatile: Twitter does not have a permanent record and tweets are largely insecure and deposited on a “third-party” system. Facebook “owns” whatever is posted on their systems. Also the communities in social media are largely uncontrolled. Social ITSM is widely criticised as “just another job” for service staff because it cannot be well integrated with ITSM processes.

It is important to understand the role social media can play as another entry point into customer enquiry, service request or status update request. While integration of social elements in the ITSM processes can be challenging, it could be started relatively easily with a simple process integration of using social media just as an input for ITSM processes before looking at complicated integration of internal processes. As ITSM supports continual service improvement, this approach can serve as a starting point to get valuable customer feedback before any serious integration initiatives.

Benefits of social ITSM

Better communication in service desks

Service desks can improve communication with the help of social ITSM. The thinking of not allowing staff access to social media is old school. Governed by social media usage policy, the use of social media should be encouraged at work as it will become increasingly convenient to the relatively younger staff working on service delivery processes to follow the processes ingrained in social communication tools. Traditionally service desks use email and phone call to communicate with their customers and colleagues. Implementing social network tools will provide more contact points and better opportunity of gathering relevant information. Social media may even serve as the initial assessment of IT service providers’ service delivery operations to prospective customers. Hence effective communication on social media can be a “deal breaker” in competitive business. Eventually, better communication means better alignment of IT services to the business objectives.

Lower Support Costs

Social media in the public domain is free even if a “Facebook Page” is created for business purposes. Facebook and its 800+million users who are also “sticky” to the site spending considerable amounts of time daily is a huge user base. In such an enormous (and free) platform, presence and activity does not just ensure the maximum “reach” possible but also provides cost-effective medium of information dissemination and exchange.

For instance a Facebook page or Twitter hashtag dedicated to a particular service desk operation can feed information with regular service updates. This works as an alert system to users in an unobtrusive way delivering service information which may reduce service tickets and calls, call waiting times, number of abandoned calls to the service desk and resolution times. This will directly save time for service staff so that they can concentrate on an open high-priority incident instead.

Customer Satisfaction through empowerment

Besides some direct examples discussed above where use of social ITSM can save costs and improve processes, customer satisfaction is also enhanced from faster responses in social media and in service desks when managed properly. Even though using ITSM tools for logging incidents, problems or change requests is normal, this is not the friendliest method for end customers. Customers prefer the most convenient method to communicate to IT service staff. Social network-like platforms (Facebook wall or Twitter feeds) provide the most common and familiar way of communication to customers and using such friendly interface as the initial point of contact can increase their satisfaction levels.

An IT service provider that actively goes out there in social media and manages service requests reaching to the mass is also likely to attain more credibility in the market since this is an open demonstration of the service providers’ extent of service provision and how effectively they manage. This level of positioning in the market can play a key role in customer satisfaction. Moreover, social media itself can be a very good platform to obtain customer feedback through surveys or by simply analysing customer comments through analytics which can assist in managing

continual service improvement, a key discipline in the ITSM philosophy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no “one size fits all” solution to confirm that social ITSM can reap benefits as soon as social media is used in ITSM processes as an input. Nevertheless, social ITSM could easily be implemented with little risk in an organisation since it is so natural to many people which means greater chances of staff and customer acceptance and no requirements of stringent staff or customer trainings. It is the post-implementation processes of social ITSM at an operational level that must be in line with service management plans and can synergise benefits from ITSM processes. As evident by the increasing adoption of social media in service delivery processes, social ITSM is expected to grow and IT service providers with a “customer focus” philosophy should embrace and integrate it as key inputs to their ITSM processes.

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