

# Enablers and Inhibitors of Engagement in Enterprise Social Networks from the Viewpoint of Executives – A Case Study in a Technology Company

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**Abstract.** Research on Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) agrees on the significance of top management commitment in the implementation of ESN in companies and identifies a lack thereof as one of the most common reasons for ESN initiatives to fail. While middle- and lower-level managers are suggested to be just as, or even more, important in promoting ESN, only few studies focus on their usage and perception of ESN. Against this background, in this paper, we explore enablers and inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage based interviews with executives at a technology company. We find the number of inhibitors to strongly exceed the number of enablers. In particular, technological and organisational inhibitors affect ESN adoption and usage. Our study contributes to literature on factors influencing whether and how employees use ESN. As such, it highlights the importance of a fit between organisational culture and the principles of social technologies.

**Keywords:** Enterprise social networks, adoption and usage, middle managers, digital leadership, governance.

## 1 Introduction

Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) have emerged as important technologies to support collaboration and knowledge work [1]. In the context of Enterprise 2.0, ESN promote the digital transformation of companies by enabling employee participation, continuous organisational learning, and overall, a more bottom-up organisational culture [2-3]. Along with the increasing adoption in companies, ESN have become an important topic in Information Systems (IS) research [4]. However, there remain unsolved challenges, one of which is how to implement and manage ESN successfully (e.g., [5]). ESN research generally agrees on the significance of top management commitment in the implementation of ESN and identifies a lack thereof as one of the most common reasons for ESN initiatives to fail (e.g., [6]). In addition, research by Chelmiss and Prasanna [7] as well as Majumdar et al. [8] point to a major influence of middle managers and direct supervisors on employees to adopt social software. Only few studies, however, have focused on the ESN usage, perception, and role in ESN initiatives of middle and lower-

level managers [8-9]. Against this background, in this study, we focus on the following research question: *What are factors enabling or inhibiting, i.e. enablers or inhibitors of, ESN adoption and usage from the perspective of executives?* By exploring what leads executives and their teams to use or reject an ESN, our goal is to better understand their role in ESN adoption processes. To this end, we conduct an in-depth case study including interviews with executives at a multinational technology company. Drawing on prior work by Chin et al. [10], we classify the identified enablers and inhibitors according to the categories technological, organisational, social, and individual factors. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we give an overview of related work on factors influencing ESN adoption and usage as well as the role of management in ESN initiatives. Section 3 introduces the case and provides details regarding the data collection and analysis. Next, we present the findings of the in-depth case study. The final sections summarise and discuss our findings in the light of prior research and outline the next steps of this project.

## 2 Literature Review

Based on prior work, ESN are defined as web-based intranet platforms that allow employees to send messages to specific co-workers or everyone in the organisation, to connect with others, to contribute content as well as to view the content and connections of others [11]. ESN integrate features such as profile pages, following, activity streams, search, group capabilities, discussion threads, and tagging [12]. In the following, we present related studies focusing on ESN adoption and usage as well as on the role of management in initiatives to introduce ESN.

### 2.1 Factors Influencing ESN Adoption and Usage

Prior scientific research as well as practice-oriented literature have dealt extensively with factors influencing the adoption and usage of ESN. As for adoption, previous work focuses on factors influencing the *decision to use* an ESN. For instance, the influence of privacy concerns [13], organisational climate [14] and promotional messages posted on an ESN [15] on employees' decision to engage in an ESN are investigated. Commonly identified aspects inhibiting adoption and usage include a lack of top management involvement and commitment, and an incompatible organisational culture, i.e., a culture that does not support social communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing [16-17]. A comprehensive framework of factors enabling (+) and inhibiting (-) ESN usage is derived by Chin et al. [10]. As such, it differentiates between enablers and inhibitors of ESN usage in terms of *technological* factors (e.g., accessibility (+), competing technologies (-)), *organisational* factors (e.g., reward system (+), lack of well-defined purpose (-)), *social* factors (e.g., collaborative climate (+), lack of feedback (-)), and *individual* factors (e.g., sociable personality (+), lack of ESN skills (-)). Besides studies focusing on the users' intention to use an ESN and their overall level of engagement, factors and motives influencing *how* users engage in ESN are investigated in prior work. For instance, Osch et al. [18] reveal a diverse set of motivations,

among them personal reputation building and resource sharing, underpinning user behaviour. Such motivations are closely related to users' perceived value from using an ESN. In this regard, utilitarian values, e.g., easier competence sharing [16], are derived from participating in an ESN. Enabling users to build relationships as well as to receive feedback and feel involved [19-20], ESN engagement also creates social values. Moreover, users may perceive a hedonic value in using an ESN, for instance, when using a platform for the purpose of entertainment or self-fulfilment [21].

## **2.2 The Role of Management in ESN Initiatives**

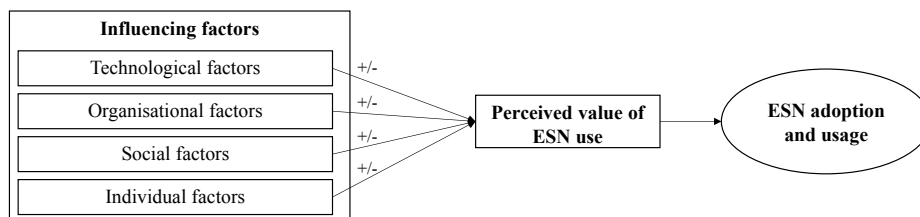
As mentioned above, management plays a crucial role in implementing ESN and fostering platform engagement. In terms of implementation strategies, Richter and Stocker [22] differentiate between exploration, i.e. a bottom-up implementation driven by employees, and promotion, which refers to a top-down strategy facilitated by management. Especially when pursuing a promotion strategy, management needs to define the business case and clear goals of the ESN upfront as well as motivate employees to use the new tool [22]. While such strategic tasks are often in a company's top management's area of authority, executives in lower hierarchical positions, i.e. individuals with managerial authority over a group of employees at different levels [23], are suggested to significantly influence social software utilisation in their respective teams (e.g. [24]). In a study by Chelmiss and Prasanna [7], middle managers are found to be more successful in promoting the adoption of a microblogging service than higher-level managers. As such, executives need to act as role models in order to drive ESN adoption. Yet, the introduction of social software entails changes in organisations which, in turn, have consequences for leadership [25]. While managers recognise benefits of social software, among them better access to information, improvements in communication, as well as the opportunity to establish personal contacts [8], in many cases, they are hesitant to engage in and take on responsibility for promoting the use of these platforms. According to a survey by van Dick et al. [26], this lack of engagement may partly be due to a lack of competencies and skills, e.g., skills in terms of using social media for work-related purposes, communicating on an equal footing with employees as well as fostering networking among employees.

In conclusion, prior work has dealt with factors determining ESN adoption and usage perceived by users in general. Due to their importance in driving ESN adoption, the factors influencing ESN engagement from the perspective of executives need to be better understood. As such, these insights indicate the extent to which executives act as digital leaders and help understand how they can be supported in becoming the same.

## **3 Research Method**

Our study seeks to explore factors influencing ESN adoption and usage from the perspective of executives. Drawing on our related work analysis (section 2.1) and in particular the study by Chin et al. [10], we consider the influence of technological, organisational, social, as well as individual factors in shaping the perceived value of ESN

use, which in turn, impacts adoption and usage (Figure 1). Within these categories, we differentiate between factors enabling (+) and inhibiting (-) adoption and usage, i.e. enablers and inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design was selected. Specifically, a case study [27, p. 46 ff.] including semi-structured interviews [28, p. 181] was conducted. The following sections introduce the case and provide details on the data collection and analysis.



**Figure 1.** Factors influencing ESN adoption and usage

### 3.1 Case Organisation and ESN Platform

This case study is conducted with a globally operating technology company that belongs to a large corporation. The case company’s ESN was launched in 2013 based on an initiative of the parent company. It allows users to create a profile, connect with other users, to join groups, and access news in a general or customised activity stream. Dealing with e.g. project work or common interests, groups have emerged as the most used communication channel on the ESN. Moreover, users may upload files, share links, start polls, highlight certain articles as new ideas, search for specific topics and keywords, and create own challenges to collect ideas on a topic area or find solutions for problems. Furthermore, the ESN features virtual meetings, which are similar to a live chat and facilitate moderated discussions. Including these features, the platform was launched to enable collaborative work and to promote the exchange of knowledge and ideas among employees across geographic and hierarchical boundaries. To date, the level of engagement on the ESN is generally low and varies strongly across different departments. Especially the company’s top management shows a lack of engagement.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In preparation for the interviews, an interview guide [29, p. 43] was compiled to support the discussion with the participants and to enable comparability of the answers. Organised into different topic areas, the interview guide includes questions concerning the ESN implementation within the organisation, the interviewee’s behaviour on the platform (e.g., “Please describe your usage of the ESN during a typical working day.”), as well as perceived enablers and inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage (e.g., “What motivates you and your team to / prevents you and your team from using the ESN?”).

<sup>1</sup> For confidentiality reasons, detailed statistics regarding the usage of the ESN were not provided by the case company.

While the ESN is available to members of the case company worldwide, for this study, only participants located at one of the company’s German offices were selected. The sampling strategy aimed at achieving variation regarding adoption and usage levels within the interview participants’ departments, as well as in terms of their hierarchical level (e.g., department manager versus executive), and gender. Interview candidates were contacted via email and, in total, 12 managers agreed to take part in the study. As can be seen in Table 1, the 12 interviewees work in seven different departments and hold (management) positions in three different hierarchical levels. In this regard, nine interviewees are team leaders with a personnel responsibility of up to 25 employees. I3 and I9 are department managers and I10 is member of the company’s top management. The usage levels within the different business units range between *medium-high* (BU1), *medium* (BU3, BU5), *low-medium* (BU2), and *low* (BU4, BU6, BU7).

All interviews were held in German language at one of the company’s offices over a period of two months from mid of April to mid of June 2017. Eleven interviews were conducted face-to-face and one interview was done over the telephone. The interviews, which have an average length of about 33 minutes, were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. Using the software for qualitative content analysis “MAXQDA”, the material was analysed following the steps of a structuring content analysis by Mayring [30]. Accordingly, the topics included in the interview agenda and elements of Figure 1 served as given categories, which were assigned deductively to applicable passages of the material. Next, relevant statements of the interviewees were filtered out, compiled in an Excel table, paraphrased, and summarised. For instance, statements regarding perceived advantages of ESN use due to the platform’s features (e.g., “*It allows me to share information quickly*” (I1)) were classified as enablers in the category *technological factors*.

**Table 1.** Overview of interviewees

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Business unit</i>	<i>Personnel responsibility</i>	<i>Level of ESN usage</i>
I1	m	BU1	1-25	high
I2	m	BU2	1-25	low
I3	m	BU3	>200	medium
I4	m	BU4	1-25	medium
I5	m	BU5	1-25	high
I6	m	BU5	1-25	low
I7	m	BU2	1-25	low
I8	m	BU5	1-25	high
I9	m	BU1	>200	low
I10	m	BU6	>200	low
I11	f	BU2	1-25	medium
I12	f	BU7	1-25	low

## 4 Findings

This section presents findings regarding the ESN implementation at the case company, the usage behaviour of the interviewees as well as the identified enablers and inhibitors of platform adoption and usage.

### 4.1 Implementation of the ESN and Perceived Value

Concerning the implementation, a project group in the marketing communications department informed the executives about the ESN in an email, which included links to the platform itself as well as video tutorials and further information material (I2, I9). As neither upper management nor the project group in charge did provide any specific instructions on the ESN (I2, I6, I7), many of the interviewees arranged team meetings to discuss how the ESN could be integrated in their work (I3, I8).

In terms of the ESN's purpose, half of the interviewees (e.g., I3, I5, I8) consider it as a tool to share and acquire information and knowledge. In addition, interviewees emphasise the use of the ESN as a collaboration platform and additional communication channel with worldwide reach. Consequently, the perceived value of the platform relates to using the ESN as a tool to find information and keep oneself up-to-date within the various groups (I1, I5, I8). Also, the ESN facilitates easier and faster access to experts on specific topics and solutions for problems: “[...] there are requests by people looking for a solution [...] I have already replied to such requests [...] because I knew someone who should know it.” (I8). In the team of I11, using the ESN contributes to improved knowledge transparency and to the reduction of knowledge silos. It further enables informal learning (I4) as well as higher levels of participation and self-organisation in teams (I3, I8, I11): “[...] using the ESN led to a much faster information flow and more intensive information exchange as compared to traditional methods.” (I3). In addition, I8 appreciates the possibility to collaborate with colleagues abroad using the ESN: “[...] a group of people not working at the same location has access to a single knowledge base. [...]” (I8). On the other hand, about half of the interviewees (e.g., I6, I9, I10) do not see an additional benefit in the ESN and rather rely on other existing applications.

### 4.2 Usage of the ESN

While the creation of an account on the ESN is not mandatory, all interviewed managers have a profile and are members of various groups. Yet, they use the ESN to different extents. As such, the group function is the most frequently used feature, followed by the activity stream. While more than half of the interviewees do not create posts in groups, they use them to keep themselves up-to-date about news in their community: “I follow certain topics and am member of these groups, but I am not really active. Rather, I'm a listener.” (I8). Others take a more proactive stance in terms of using the ESN: “[...] I use the ESN for sharing information. When I am on business trips, I keep my employees in the loop about what is happening.” (I3).

On the other hand, half of the interview participants show very low levels of ESN usage (Table 1). Although they have a profile and are members of two to four groups, they

mainly use other tools to perform their tasks (I2, I7, I9). Also, except for I1, none of the interviewees has ever initiated a virtual meeting either due to not being aware of this function or due to having no suitable use case for it.

### 4.3 Enablers of ESN Adoption and Usage

Enablers facilitating ESN adoption and usage are derived based on statements of those executives using the platform themselves and within their teams. As such, these factors relate to the perceived value of the ESN (section 4.1) and the positive outcomes achieved from using it. The identified aspects can be associated with the categories *technological* factors, *organisational* factors, and *individual* factors (Figure 1).

In terms of *technology*, enablers relate to the ESN's *usability and range of features*. As such, employing the ESN within the interviewees' day-to-day work leads to gains in efficiency and effectiveness, which motivate further use of the ESN. Specifically, using the ESN, e.g., to keep oneself up-to-date or finding solutions for problems, is perceived as timesaving and convenient: "*An advantage in comparison to email is that [...] all the information is stored in one place and can be accessed by all members of a team [...]*." (I11). Providing a uniform communication channel for everyone, the ESN also contributes to a more open corporate culture and improves knowledge work (I1, I8).

In terms of *organisational factors*, the distribution of work across many different locations, which is related to the company's *organisational structure*, entails a need to communicate efficiently across geographic boundaries. This need is met by the ESN: "*[...] you can collaborate virtually around the clock. Which is very important [...] as we have teams all over the world.*" (I8). As such, the geographic distribution can be considered as an enabler of ESN adoption and usage.

As for *individual factors*, several *motivations underpinning usage* can be identified. For instance, experts contribute to the ESN due to their intrinsic motivation to help others (I1, I5). Also, the continuous contribution of relevant content may strengthen one's reputation in the company (I11). Finally, individuals are motivated to participate in the ESN due to seeking (informal) exchange and learning from each other (I3, I4).

### 4.4 Inhibitors of ESN Adoption and Usage

Inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage are determined based on statements by executives contributing to the ESN (I1, I6) as well as by users focusing on consuming content (I3, I5) or hardly using the platform at all (I3, I9, I10). From the viewpoint of the contributing users, the mitigation of these inhibiting aspects would likely incite them to become even more active on the ESN. The derived aspects can be assigned to the categories *technological*, *organisational*, *social*, and *individual* factors.

As for *technological factors*, inhibitors related to the platform's *usability and range of features* are suggested to affect adoption and usage. Besides being considered as too complex and to lack structure (I15), interviewees criticise the support of the ESN for mobile devices (I1, I9): "*[...] if I have to make three detours, [...] before I can post something, my motivation is gone already.*" (I9). Moreover, important features, such as the uploading and sharing of larger files, a filtering function for the search engine, the

possibility to directly export communications (e.g., to a text document) and a single sign-on, are currently missing (I4, I6, I7). Also, inhibitors related to *information security* affect platform adoption and usage. The fact that content once posted to the platform is persistent and can be associated with its authors years later as well as uncertainty with regards to who will have access to content in the future, e.g., in case parts of the business are split off and new subsidiaries are created, worries the executives (I2). As a result, many discussions still take place off rather than on the ESN. In terms of the ESN's *integration into the existing IT landscape*, the interviewees affirm the lack of integration with other tools as well as the existence of competing technologies and tools (e.g., chat) to affect ESN usage (I4, I10): “[...] *It would be helpful and more efficient if one could switch directly from the ESN to other tools [...].*” (I4).

Concerning *organisational factors*, inhibitors related to the company's *top management and ESN strategy* as well as *ESN management* are identified. As for the *top management and ESN strategy*, the interviewees report the lack of a clear vision as well as a lack of support and involvement on the part of the senior management (I1, I6). Due to the lack of clearly defined goals and role models, many of the interviewed executives neither perceive the platform as a priority nor do they see any value in using the tool (I2). Consequently, from the top management via the lower levels of management through to the employees, the lack of role models entails as lack of engagement. In terms of *ESN management*, a missing code of conduct concerning what may be shared and discussed on the ESN and how it should be used or not used is suggested to inhibit usage. In combination with the lack of role models, potential contributors are unsure what may be shared and thus, lack the confidence to post something on the ESN. Furthermore, there is currently no systematic way to keep information on the platform up-to-date, which leads to a lot of content being obsolete (I5) or irrelevant (I8). In addition, the fact that confidential information must not be shared on the platform prevents users from integrating the ESN efficiently in their day-to-day work and hampers in-depth conversations (I2, I10).

As for *social factors*, especially the lack of a *critical mass* of users inhibits adoption and prevents contributing executives from become more active. On the one hand, the general lack participation directly leads to a lack of feedback on posted content (I4, I7), which demotivates the contributing users. On the other hand, many co-workers, among them experts for certain topics, cannot be reached on the ESN as they are not registered (I8). Also, the company's *corporate culture* appears to be not (yet) compatible with the ESN. In this regard, the combination of a top-down management style and the lack of engagement on the part of the upper management (see above) to some extent prevents lower management levels from promoting the use of the ESN in their teams. Furthermore, the case company has only little understanding concerning a tolerance for failure, which hinders open conversations and the discussion of mistakes on the ESN (I11). Along these lines, the visibility of communications on the ESN is suggested to lead to feelings of pressure, for instance, to respond to posts with a short delay (I1, I10).

In terms of *individual factors*, inhibitors relate to the *attitude towards the ESN* as well as a *preference for other means of communication*. In this regard, many executives are sceptical towards the ESN and do not understand why they should invest time to deal with “yet another tool”, the benefits of which are not clear (I2, I7). Indeed, participating



in the ESN is considered as an additional burden instead of contributing to a reduction of an individual's workload. Furthermore, some executives perceive other means of communication, e.g., face-to-face interactions, as necessary for collaborating efficiently: "[...] I share content on the ESN [...] To get real feedback, I need to meet occasionally with the people who I interact with on the ESN [...]" (I1).

## 5 Discussion

Based on the presented findings, Table 2 shows the technological, organisational, social, and individual enablers (7) and inhibitors (20) of ESN adoption and usage. Most identified enablers, among them better task support, are based on the perceived (utilitarian) benefits from actual platform use. While the identified enablers are similar to the ones suggested in prior work (e.g. [10]), many previously found drivers, e.g., a sense of connectedness, do not apply to our case. Also, values obtained from a hedonic or social use [21] are less indicated in our analysis. Furthermore, the lack of certain aspects at the case company, which are suggested to drive engagement in prior work (e.g., tolerance for failure or policy [10]), in fact inhibits adoption and usage (e.g., little tolerance for failure, missing code of conduct). On the other hand, most inhibitors relate to technological and organisational factors. The identified inhibitors can be connected with factors suggested to negatively influence ESN usage (e.g. [16-17]) and to obstruct the integration into work from the perspective of managers [9].

In comparison to findings of prior work (e.g., [10]), our analysis points to strong imbalance between the number of enablers and inhibitors. Possibly due to the generally low level of platform engagement, many advantages which might drive further adoption have not (yet) been realised at the case company. In this regard, the overall ESN usage level in a department does not necessarily correlate with individuals' usage levels (section 3.2). Indeed, the few contributing interviewees engage with the ESN on their own initiative, rather than due to external motivators. In addition, the interviews include many and various statements regarding inhibitors (especially by the interviewed occasional and non-users of the ESN) as compared to few statements regarding enablers. As such, ESN adoption and usage at the case company appear to be particularly hindered by the co-occurrence of a lack of top management commitment, strict confidentiality requirements and a top-down management style. In fact, it is interesting to see that enablers and inhibitors of ESN usage suggested by the interviewed managers show a strong overlap with previously identified enablers and inhibitors perceived by employees in general (e.g. [10]). While some interviewees assume responsibility in terms of promoting the ESN, hence driving adoption, most of them consider the top management to be in charge for making the ESN a priority. As such, they do seem to be aware of their power and / or do not see a need to drive ESN engagement even though their management position would give them authority to do so. In this regard, findings of studies conducted at other organisations suggest that neither formal responsibility nor authority are essential for promoting an ESN [31]. Due to the hierarchical organisation of the case company, however, it appears that ESN adoption and usage can only be achieved through a common effort of the company's top management and executives

at different hierarchical levels. The engagement and support of leaders in recognising and embracing their role is a major task in the process of digital transformation [25].

**Table 2. Enablers and inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Factors</i>	<i>Enablers (+) and inhibitors (-)</i>
Technological factors	ESN's usability and range of features	Increases in efficiency and effectiveness in day-to-day work (+); Better task support (+); High complexity of the user interface (-); Lack of support for mobile use (-); Missing features (-)
	Information security	Persistency of content (-); Uncertain future access (-)
	Integration into IT landscape	Lack of integration (-); Competing tools (-)
Organisational factors	Organisational structure	Geographic distribution (+)
	Top management and ESN strategy	Lack of a clear vision (-); Lack of top management commitment (-)
	ESN management	Missing code of conduct (-); Obsolete / irrelevant content (-); Missing content due to confidentiality requirements (-)
Social factors	Critical mass	Lack of critical mass (-); Lack of feedback (-)
	Corporate culture	Top-down management style (-); Little tolerance for failure (-); Social pressure (-)
Individual factors	Motivations underpinning usage	Enjoyment of helping others (+); Reputation management (+); Desire to learn (+)
	Attitude towards ESN	Scepticism (-); No / low perceived value-added (-)
	Personal preferences	Preference for face-to-face interactions (-)

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored enablers and inhibitors of ESN adoption and usage from the perspective of executives at a technology company. Based on 12 semi-structured interviews, we determined 7 enablers and 20 inhibitors, which were aggregated into more abstract factors within the categories technological, organisational, social, and individual factors. While most identified enablers relate to positive experiences from actual platform use, ESN adoption and usage is strongly inhibited by technological and organisational factors.

With this paper, we contribute to the ESN literature by determining factors influencing ESN adoption and usage from the perspective of executives. In addition, our findings inform research on digital leadership and social software. In terms of managerial implications, the findings of this study highlight the importance of aligning strategies aiming at fostering ESN adoption and usage with an organisation's culture. Especially in hierarchical organisations, ESN implementation and management requires clearly defined goals, use cases, and upper management commitment to be successful.

The results of the study have to be seen in the light of its limitations. In terms of the sample of interviewees, men as well as executives in lower management levels (i.e. with a personnel responsibility of up to 25 employees), are overrepresented. Also, our

findings are based on one case only and cannot be generalised. Yet, they may usefully inform ESN initiatives in companies in similar industries or companies with a comparable organisational structure and culture. To contribute to more generalised findings, we plan to conduct further case studies in other organisations. Also, in our future work, we will distinguish more precisely between factors influencing adoption as compared to factors influencing usage to understand better which factors should be considered during implementation and in the post-implementation stage.

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