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# PROFESSIONAL AND CORPORATE DYNAMICS OUTSIDE THE COMPANY: ROLES OF INTERNET FORUMS IN CHANGE APPROPRIATION

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# PROFESSIONAL AND CORPORATE DYNAMICS OUTSIDE THE COMPANY: ROLES OF INTERNET FORUMS IN CHANGE APPROPRIATION

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## **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes the use of an internet forum by employees of a retail chain in France to exchange information and discuss about a major corporate change. We show how the forum takes on core functions being neglected by the company and how it contributes to the appropriation of change. Through detailed analysis of the posts, we identify the professional logic at work and link it to corporate dynamics. This helps explaining, among others, the homogeneity of the topics discussed, which directly deal with change issues, and the defusing of a massive rejection of change. The method used to analyze the posts (combining human and partially automatic processing) and the criteria used to identify professional dynamics also have a broader academic interest.*

**Keywords:** change appropriation, Internet discussion forum, professional dynamics

## **1.0 Introduction**

Corporate change implies specific information and communication actions. The accompanying strategy is a key factor of a successful change (Collerette, 1995). In this paper we show how players spontaneously create the structures and the tools allowing them to manage the uncertainty generated by the change if the corporation fails to take on the appropriate accompanying actions.

The opportunities provided by digital technologies (and mainly by Internet services) are in this respect extremely interesting since these technologies create the possibility for *ad hoc* alternative accompanying structures to emerge and to assume core functions which the corporation should provide through controlled strategies (like information and communication support to the change process, facilitating positive attitudes to change, etc.) and other functions which are usually difficult to provide through controlled actions, but which can play an important part in the success of the change process (free expression of doubts and fears, identification and defusing of emerging conflicts, etc.). In this perspective, online discussion forums and other communication technologies, like the social networks, can be considered as potentially alternative means which may, under certain circumstances, complete or stand in for corporate accompanying functions.

To discuss this idea, we analyze an Internet discussion forum created by the employees of a major hypermarket chain in France which was initiating a major corporate change. We show how a parallel information network emerged responding to information and communication needs being neglected by the company. We also analyze the nature of the information being exchanged, how this information is validated and how it impacts on employees' perception of change. Finally, from an academic perspective, we also discuss the characteristics of this online community and we define comprehensive criteria which can be used to describe and explain not only the logic of this structure but also of other online professional communities.

## **2.0 Bibliographical Review**

### **2.1 Online discussion forums and professional communities**

Many studies dealing with online discussion forums focus on communication networks created by individuals outside any particular corporate context. Some studies analyze online consumers' forums (Bickart & Schindler, 2001 ; Pitta, 2005) and other studies discuss thematic forums (like those specialized in healthcare for instance, Clavier et al, 2010).

Researches linking the uses of the Internet discussion forums to specific corporate issues are quite rare (Cohendet et al., 2007). When scholars consider this topic, most of the times they are not really interested in online forums created outside the company, on the Internet, but in how a local forum can be set up inside the company (Cohendet et al., 2007).

By contrast, online communities and interest networks or professional practice networks are largely discussed (Andriessen, 2006). Authors use an impressive variety of terms to differentiate variants of communities and networks: community of interest, community of practice, knowledge sharing community, internal community, extended community, learning community, professional network, in/formal network, etc. (Andriessen, 2006). This abounding terminology clearly reflects a real diversity of the concrete situations on the field, but it also points out the difficulty to conceptualize this emerging reality and to characterize it precisely.

The most elementary characteristic which is being shared by all these organized structures is essentially the one that commonly defines a network: people participating in these structures share the same interest and are open to exchange with other members. Different configurations can emerge depending on the constraints of the situation observed. Sometimes, the members of the network share a basic common identity and they rarely meet each others in real life (Andriessen, 2006). Other times, the group becomes a formal structure and it sets up work procedures and tools to achieve a certain activity. Botkin calls this organized structure “community of practice” (Botkin, 1999, p. 241). According to this author, the communities of practice are informal structures which emerge spontaneously and which are not easily identifiable from the outside world (thus, the community stays homogenous even if its borders are “open”).

Brown and Duguid (2000) initially use the term “network of practice” to describe the networks where members do not know each other and interact only within this network. This notion applies to structures where members come from different organizations and which are potentially larger and less homogenous than a community of practice.

Other authors study the communities which use an internal exchange technology (like an Intranet for example) to discuss practical matters. This is what Andriessen *and al.* (2001) call “problem solving community”. The same authors also describe another kind of community (the group of interest) where different individuals get together in order to learn from each other about a specific topic. This is a semi-formal structure since these individuals are not necessarily working together on the same task (this case is different from a project team using a groupware for instance) but, in the same time, members of the group belong to the same company (Andriessen, 2006).

The summary of the work conducted on these topics could continue with many other authors and studies. All these works describe particular situations where people create, spontaneously or not, different technology-based structures in order to exchange information and knowledge and to communicate with each other. In spite of their diversity, it seems to us that all these situations are shaped by four structuring principles:

- The goal: all these structure emerge because people share (in different ways and to various extends) a common goal. This objective can be unique (like working on the same task, bringing various forces together and making them converge to the same goal); but, in most cases, this common goal has multiple expressions since it adapts to every particular need (in many cases, what brings the community together is the need to “learn more” about something; the topic is unique, but the needs are personal and different).
- The identity: the community draws its identity from different sources. One source of identity is the existence of the community itself; this is obviously a very uncertain and basic identity which can be more or less assumed by the members. But this identity, which is initially derived from the simple fact that members share the same objectives, can be strengthened by external factors (like the professional situation of the members, the fact that they belong to the same company, the values, the past or present experiences they might share, etc.).
- The autonomy: what defines professional online groups comparing to other communities is that these groups cannot be completely cut off from existing corporate or professional structures. They can be more or less autonomous from a company or a professional organization, but they cannot be extracted from this environment. This environment often explains many structural and functional characteristics of the community (how members join the group, how are the borders kept, and sometimes even why the community exists).
- Technology: the technology often materializes deeper organizational or professional constraints and sometimes it gives them a different shape. Once a technology has been chosen (or imposed), it gives the community a particular structure and explains many of its formal characteristics and functioning scenarios.

The analysis of these four dimensions may allow identifying professional and corporate dynamics at work within an external and uncontrolled structure like a community, a group of interest or even a social network (see section 4.2 below).

## **2.1 Change management and communication**

The abounding literature on change management shows the key role of the communication strategy (Lewin, 1968; Kitchen & Daily, 2002). It helps successfully managing change and preparing the organization to accept it (Axley, 2002). Communication also contribute to increase employees' motivation, to make them an active part in the process (Armenakis et al., 2002 ; Klein, 1996) and to create positive attitudes towards change. These proactive functions are essential since change usually creates uncertainty and reluctance (Teneau, 2005).

To accomplish these functions, the management can exploit a wide range of technologies and actions from local communication *in situ* (various meetings and communication supports) to symbolic action (a new visual identity, new logo, etc.). The technology is an essential vector in this process, and many studies analyze it, but most of the times from the unique standpoint of the managerial communication: thus, technology is considered to be a tool controlled by the management (Wagner, 2006).

Indeed, there are relatively few studies which analyze the specific uses of online Internet technologies in response to problems addressed by change management. Little is actually known about the role played by the discussion forums in change communication, about their interaction with strategic top-down communication or about their impact on the emergence of attitudes, behaviors and practices which could be favorable or, on the contrary, hostile towards the change in progress.

## **3.0 Case Outline and Methodology**

### **3.1 Description of the discussion forum**

We discuss the ideas introduced above with arguments and examples from a case study which we have conducted on a discussion forum. To preserve the confidentiality of the corporation involved in this case, we shall refer to this discussion forum further on as the "C forum".

The C forum has been initiated by the employees of a supermarket chain belonging to a major retail group in France when this company decided to radically change the store concept. The traditional concept of this supermarket chain was to be abandoned and the stores had to adopt the concept of another chain of the group. This change implied, among others, important modifications of the products range and brands (and consequently of the supply chain), a new approach to the customer and new services, the reorganizing of the physical space of the stores, new departments, etc. As a symbolic mark of this change, the supermarket chain also had to give up its traditional name and take the name of the new concept.

The first experiments have been conducted in a few selected stores starting with October 2007 but more complete official communications have been made only during the summer 2008: the group announced that the change was to be extended to all the stores (that is about 1000 all over France), but little information about the effects, dynamics and schedule was given. As a consequence, starting with September 2007, the employees of the retail chain initiated a discussion forum focused on these change topics. We have analyzed the messages posted on this forum for 20 months until May 2009 when the frequency of the online exchanges clearly diminished. This is mainly explained by the fact that most of the stores had already adopted change by that date.

The sidebar below summarizes the main characteristics of this forum:

***The C Forum***

*Platform:* open Internet platform specialized in distribution topics.

*Moderator:* Yes.

*Participation:* free subscription and free access to the posts.

*Members:* a total of 87 members; 62 active participants (an active participant posts more than once). According to information gathered on the forum, most of the members are employees of the group, at different responsibility levels (from cashier to store manager).

*Posts:* a total number of 392, only 321 considered to be significant according to our method.

*Time period:* 20 months, from 20.09.2007 to 20.05.2009.

### **3.2 Hypotheses**

The bibliographical review and a basic analysis of the case led us to the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis no.1: This forum accomplishes two major functions: it communicates information and it allows participants to engage unrestricted discussions about the change in progress.

The forum provides complementary accompanying of change and one important question is how it interacts with the other accompanying structures controlled by the company.

- Hypothesis no.2: Since the forum allows free and anonymous discussion about change, we expect to find expressions of clear attitudes towards change (unambiguous acceptance or rejection).

It is notorious that change generally creates reluctance and anxiety. In most cases, these attitudes remain fuzzy when expressed inside the company or through formal facilities. We would like to know if the forum contributes to a clearer expression of these attitudes and if individual points of view can eventually impulse a global attitude (a kind of “mass effect”).

- Hypotheses no.3: The forum is a particular interest network and the contents being exchanged are shaped by structural factors like the goal, the identity of the community and the autonomy relationship with the company. These factors also have an impact on technological choices.

We believe that professional structures, even when they seem to be completely autonomous, informal and uncontrolled, are shaped by professional logic. One interesting question to discuss would be how this logic works and which could be its corporate effects.



### **3.3 Methodology of the Study**

We have analyzed the messages posted on the forum in order to identify the main topics discussed and the categories of information exchanged. To consolidate this analysis, we have also conducted a monitoring of the specialized press (in order to gather contextual information) and we have posted an online survey (only 8 participants responded). We use here information gathered from these complementary sources only to contextualize the analysis of the forum and therefore we shall not present the methodology of these complementary surveys.

#### *Selection criteria of significant posts*

Our basic assumption was that most of the messages posted on the forum are informative. However, given the particularities of this media we also expected to find messages having mainly phatic or incident functions. We have conducted a first analysis of the forum and we have excluded 61 messages of this kind (that is 15% of the posts). The other 321 messages are considered to be potentially significant for the topics discussed.

#### *Basic items: Questions and Responses*

We have determined criteria to differentiate Questions and Responses: these items help us understand what participants expect from the forum and how the forum responds to these needs. Questions and responses also define the basic content units which shall be analyzed further on and associated to a particular kind of information or topic. Basically, a question corresponds to a content expressing a demand and a response to a content which tries to answer in a certain way to this demand. Since questions and responses may not correspond systematically to individual posts (sometimes a post includes both questions and responses) we have considered them to be our basic analysis items.

#### *Content categories*

We basically assume that this forum is informative, but this does not mean that all the contents communicated can be considered to be “information”. Moreover, information itself is not a homogenous category. To understand how professional logic may shape content, we looked for finer content categories. One important criterion which can

help discriminating various types of professional information is how the content comes to be validated (Wresch, 1998). To distinguish between different validation procedures, we have identified the following content categories:

- Opinion: the validity of this content item is mainly based on more or less rational arguments; it essentially expresses what the person believes.
- Testimony: the validity of this content item is essentially based on the experience and personal life of the person.
- Information: the validity of this content item is based on other sources than the person him or herself (other people, media, core knowledge of the profession, etc.).

This last category can be divided in several subclasses, following the visibility of this “external” source. This finer analysis helps understanding, among others, the complex relationships between the forum and the official communication of the company:

- Official information: information that has been communicated through formal channels by the company or by its representatives (including local managers).
- Unofficial information: information that has been communicated through informal channels by the company or by its representatives.
- Practical information: information which is certified by objective facts or knowledge.

### *Topics discussed*

Finally, we have proposed criteria to identify the major topics discussed on the forum. To do that, we have processed the posts using Alceste (a French software for textual data analysis). The software extracted a list of thematic categories which we have reorganized and refined. Finally, we have identified four major topics:

- Group policy: these items focus on the global policy of the group, the reasons of change and its major implications, the global schedule, etc.
- Human resources: these items focus on the impact of change on the employees, on work environment, tasks and salaries, etc.
- Effective change schedule: these items discuss the concrete schedule and progress of change in local stores.
- Consulting: these items give practical information about professional tasks and help solving daily problems.

### *Effective analysis and validation*

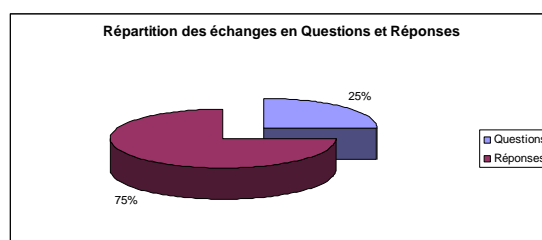
Using the categories presented above, we have analyzed the 321 significant posts of the forum. Two coders proceeded to blind parallel analysis and obtained an average Kappa score of 0.91 (minimum score for a particular category: 0,62; maximum score for a particular category: 1). We recall that it is generally admitted that scores above 0.8 show an excellent agreement between coders. In our case, this also indicates that the criteria used to associate items to categories are homogenous and efficient.

## 4. Findings

The main results of the analysis are summarized below.

### 4.1 Questions and Responses

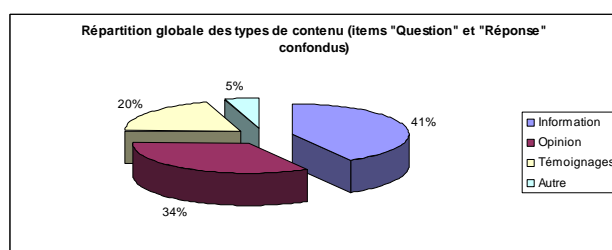
We have identified 357 items which are distributed as follows:



Little can be said about this ratio since we have not found similar studies on similar topics; therefore we cannot conclude that this ratio is typical or not for professional forums. However, several assumptions can be made about this ratio, and mainly the fact that it could correspond to a specific situation of dialog dynamics where people seem to need information (25% of the items are questions) and to be willing to discuss about the issues being submitted (there are more Responses than Questions). This assumption consolidates our first hypothesis which states that this forum assumes two roles: information exchange and free debate.

### 4.2 Content categories

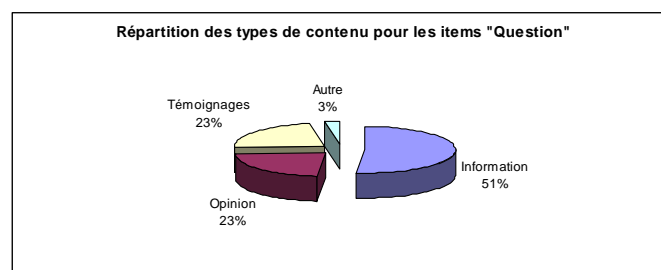
The figure below shows the distribution of the major content categories:



We notice that the Information and the Testimony items are majority. This finding consolidates our first hypothesis and indicates that this forum helps exchanging information. This information may come from "external" sources or it may be

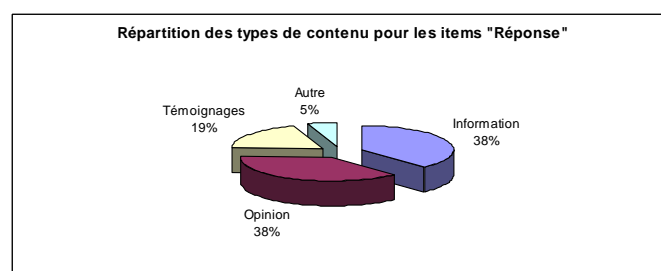
experience based. The substantial presence of the Opinion items can have two interpretations: on the one hand, it also consolidates our hypothesis since it shows that this forum is not only an information media, but also an expression space; on the other hand, it may be explained by the fact that all the information requested by the participants is not available and thus it is replaced by opinions. This assumption points out some failings of the official communication but it also suggests that the participants show a strong interest for the topics being discussed.

These interpretations are consolidated by the figures below which give a detailed presentation of the results for each basic item (Questions and Responses).



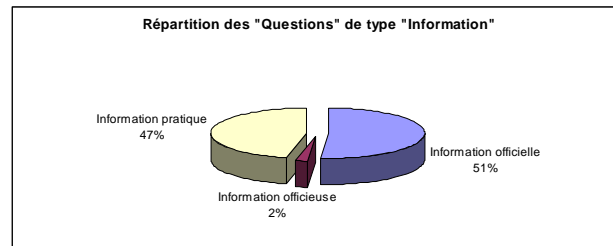
51% of the Questions indicate an information need and 23% directly ask for experience based information.

As for the Responses, we notice that less information is available (comparing to the need expressed) since only 38% of the responses belong to this category.

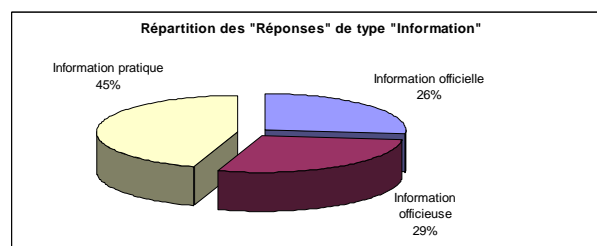


By contrast, this unavailable information is most probably replaced by opinions, since the fluctuations of these two categories are quite similar (-13% for Information, + 15% for Opinion), while the other categories remain relatively stable.

The same logic applies to the Information subcategories. While over 50% of the information demands express a need for “official” information (e.g. information coming from an authorized source), only a quarter of the responses can provide this kind of content.



This clearly shows a lack of official information which is replaced by information from “unofficial” sources.



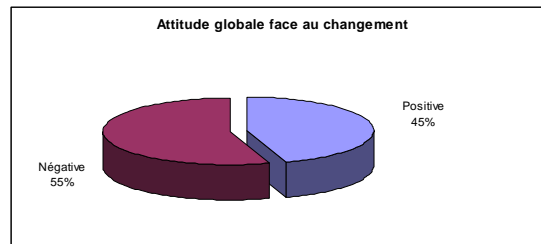
We find it interesting that the third category (practical information) remains stable. This fact makes us conclude that the other fluctuations are not random and that they are not the result of a disorganized attitude of the participants; we can basically presume that the participants try to provide the content being asked by the others when this content is available, and when it is not, they try to replace it with another similar content. This observation confirms our third hypothesis since it clearly shows that professional realities and logic shape the contents being exchanged.

### 4.3 Attitudes towards change

A very interesting finding concerns participants' attitude towards change. Contrary to our second hypothesis, there are very few items expressing unambiguous acceptance or rejection of change. There are of course many doubts and fears and a first superficial analysis of this forum could conclude that a global hostile attitude emerges. This impression is also enhanced by the fact that the company and the

management often fail in accompanying change and a serious consequence of these failings could be that employees could globally reject change.

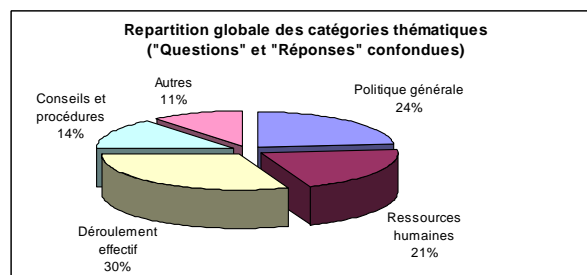
Our analysis of the forum shows that participants generally adopt a neutral attitude towards change; items expressing clear acceptance or rejection represent less than 6% of the total content.



Items rejecting change are slightly more numerous (55% negative attitudes and 45% positive ones), but this dominance is far from being significant and it does not indicate a global orientation of the forum. The mass effect one could have expected to see under these external circumstances does not take place. We believe that this is also a mark of the professional logic at work which contributes to diminishing subjectivity and rumors based attitudes. In this anxiogenic context, employees express doubts and fears but they seek rational and practical solutions and they seem to be able to distinguish between management and corporate failings and change itself.

#### 4.4 Topics discussed

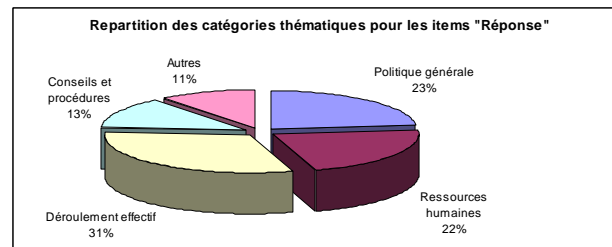
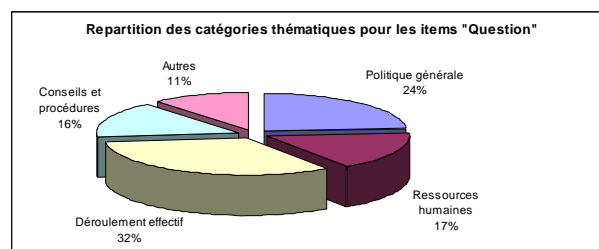
The figure below shows the repartition of the topics discussed.



We notice a particular interest for practical information about the change schedule in local stores, about the global corporate strategy and about the effects of the change on

human resources. We also note that employees show concern both about global policies and about day-to-day local effects.

There are relatively few differences between Questions and Responses. This homogeneity can be interpreted as another mark of professional logic since it shows that participants strongly share the same goals and that the community is able to coordinate itself and to avoid proliferating marginal topics. This finding also confirms our third hypothesis.



The only significant variation between questions and responses concerns the human resources topics (+5% increase in the response categories). Two reasons could explain this progression. On the one hand, we think that this is a transversal issue also linked to most of the other topics and therefore more likely to be present when issues are discussed than when questions are asked. On the other hand, human resources is a very emotional topic and it is likely that some members find it easier to express anxiety and worries when discussing other issues rather than through direct questions.

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Roles played by the forum

One major conclusion of our analysis is that this forum takes an important part in accompanying change and that it takes on information and communication functions which complete or substitute for corporate actions. Indeed, our complementary surveys confirm that the company communicated very few information on core issues like change strategy and schedule, human resources and work environment effects. The lack of official information explains why these issues are the main topics discussed on the forum.

Thus, the forum gives employees the possibility to exchange information and to express their anxiety and doubts about change. It takes an active part in facilitating change appropriation and evicting conflicts. In spite of the tensions and reluctance between employees and top managers, there is no strong negative effect on the perception of the change process itself. Paradoxically, this external structure created by the forum enhances the common identity of the employees and help them focus on core issues for the company. This external discussion space remains corporate oriented and structured by professional logic.

#### **4.2 Professional and corporate dynamics**

When analyzing the findings of this case study, we have mentioned diverse professional and corporate dynamics at work. These dynamics can be summarized following the four structural dimensions identified in section 21.

- Objective oriented dynamics. All the participants in this internet forum show a great interest in a relatively small and homogenous number of topics. They are all concerned by change effects and they need to discuss and exchange information about it. This constraint facilitates professional dynamics: participants show a strong interest in valid information and clearly distinguish between different validation procedures (factual information, hierarchical position, personal expertise and experience, contradictory debate, etc.); topics stay focused on corporate issues and other topics tend to be evicted; rumors are kept under control; and, in spite of contextual problems, participants do not reject change.
- Identity oriented dynamics. The participants share a common identity because they belong to the same company but also because they share a particular common goal. This ephemeral identity plays a part in keeping the group together during several months and it also facilitates information exchange, open expression of deep doubts and rational debate. It is important to note that this identity is not based on friendship or personal affinities but on professional and corporate dynamics.



- Autonomy oriented dynamics. To understand why this informal network could play a part in change appropriation it is important to analyze the complex relationship between the discussion forum and the company. The discussion forum emerges outside the company because participants look for information unavailable at local levels and because they need to debate within an uncontrolled space without fearing any kind of constraints. But the topics discussed, the information exchanged and even the rhythm of the forum (frequency of the posts, etc) are directly connected to the activities of the company. At a surface level, the forum group seems to be autonomous, but in fact it is strongly influenced by corporate constraints.
- Technology oriented dynamics. The choice of this particular technology (an internet forum created on a specialized platform which is also open access) can be explained by autonomy purposes. At a deeper level, technological constraints materialize professional and corporate constraints. However, many of the features of the group result from constraints which are specific to this technology (free access, anonymous exchanges, uncontrolled information and debate, synchronous and asynchronous communication producing contradictory effects like condensed or diluted exchanges, over discussed or neglected issues, etc.; full text content available to anyone, no camera or private chat available). Had they used another technology, the structure of the group, the configuration of the exchanges and the part played in change appropriation would have been probably different.

## Conclusion

This case study shows how core roles in change management can be played outside the company by spontaneous and uncontrolled structures. We have analyzed how these structures contribute to accompanying and appropriating change. In our example, the impact of this technology based group was rather positive. Although it sought autonomy, the group was structured by professional and corporate logic which produced, in this particular case, positive effects. However, it would be a mistake to believe that professional dynamics systematically produce positive corporate effects. Whatever the effects are, the companies should seriously look into the dynamics at work in these informal structures.

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