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USE OF ANONYMITY AND RANDOM SELECTION WITHIN A GROUP CHAT TO FACILITATE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Corporations often seek honest feedback from their employees for different issues, such as changes to benefits, policies, strategies, product designs, etc. However, there are a number of factors that typically prevent employees from providing such feedback—fear of consequences. Many times, processes that are marketed as anonymous may not be totally anonymous such that when employees provide purported "anonymous" feedback, such feedback may not be completely anonymous and can cause employees to lose face with management or senior technical leaders, which can harm their careers. Open group dialog has demonstrated superior results to problems compared to individual inputs. Presented herein is an anonymous, representative group chat capability that can be utilized by corporations to facilitate employee discussions while removing factors that often prevent employees from honest participation in traditional settings.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Corporations, especially large corporations, often have a need to solicit employee feedback and discussions on various topics ranging from human resource topics to product requirements and design. A number of forces can prevent honest and controversial feedback in many situations because of the imagined/perceived consequences of participants stating what is on their mind. For example, corporate politics and the hierarchy in which participants/employees sit in relation management can prevent many employees from expressing opinions that differ from what is perceived as the leadership's direction, position, opinion, etc. Such situations can prevent company from obtaining an accurate view of employee opinions and can also prevent honest reviews of strategies, product design/architectures, and employees seeking out help from senior/respected employees because of the fear of reprisal or appearing unintelligent. There may be many instances in which a person's company or organizational "standing" (e.g., president, CEO, etc.) and

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their presence in a group chat could/would negatively impact other chat participants honest inputs. For example, having a company president identified in a group chat discussing the topic of executive pay would likely not garner honest feedback from chat participants.

Presented herein is an anonymous, representative group chat capability that utilizes participant anonymization with group chat capabilities in order to overcome the challenges of obtaining honest feedback from employees on important business-related topics. In addition, the use of topic and sentiment tracking on a per-employee basis can be used to identify potential participants in a representative sample of the entire employee population.

Techniques of this proposal leverage exiting group chat capabilities and extend such capabilities by completely retaining the anonymity of corporate employee participants for a set time period during a time-based chat, or by actions initiated voluntarily by a participant. During operation of an exemplary system that utilizes techniques of this proposal, the system will maintain an anonymized participant to employee mapping and will secure and limit access to the mapping based on the type of group chat created, as well as consent provided by a given participant.

An automated participant selection capability can be utilized for time-based chat/discussion sessions using a combination of employee demographics, information collected from previous employee engagement on specific topics (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, emailed suggestions, etc.), and availability. When the stated goal of the group chat organization is to obtain a representative group of employees to discuss and provide inputs on a specific topic, a Participant Selection capability, as shown below in Figure 1, can be used to identify possible candidates in the company that both have provided past inputs or those who have not that will provide a reasonable representation of employees in the entire company. This representative sampling can be based on the demographics of the entire company to include location, role, organization, etc.

Once participant selection is completed, the system can automatically analyze the content of a chat session and identify a group descriptive sentiment of the topic based on utilizing relationship extractor and sentiment analysis to generate a meeting synopsis. The analysis will produce a group and sentiment breakdown including a position, emotion, and argumentative rating.

If enabled by the Campaign organizer as an option, participants in the group chat can identify other participants (who also remain anonymous) with which they would like to have subsequent conversations/discussions. The system can send a request from the initiator to a target participant while maintaining the anonymity of the requestor that includes a synopsis and sentiment analysis of the requestor's available chat contributions and generalized demographics of the requestor that have been sanitized to remove individually identifiable information (e.g., if the requestor is a senior vice-president, the system can convert the title to senior leader, etc.). In some instances, techniques of this proposal could also be used to collect anonymous group discussion inputs for employee performance reviews and/or the like.

Figure 1, below, provides context regarding when and how various features provided by techniques of this proposal could be utilized. Various example uses of such techniques as illustrated in Figure 1 are discussed in further detail, below.
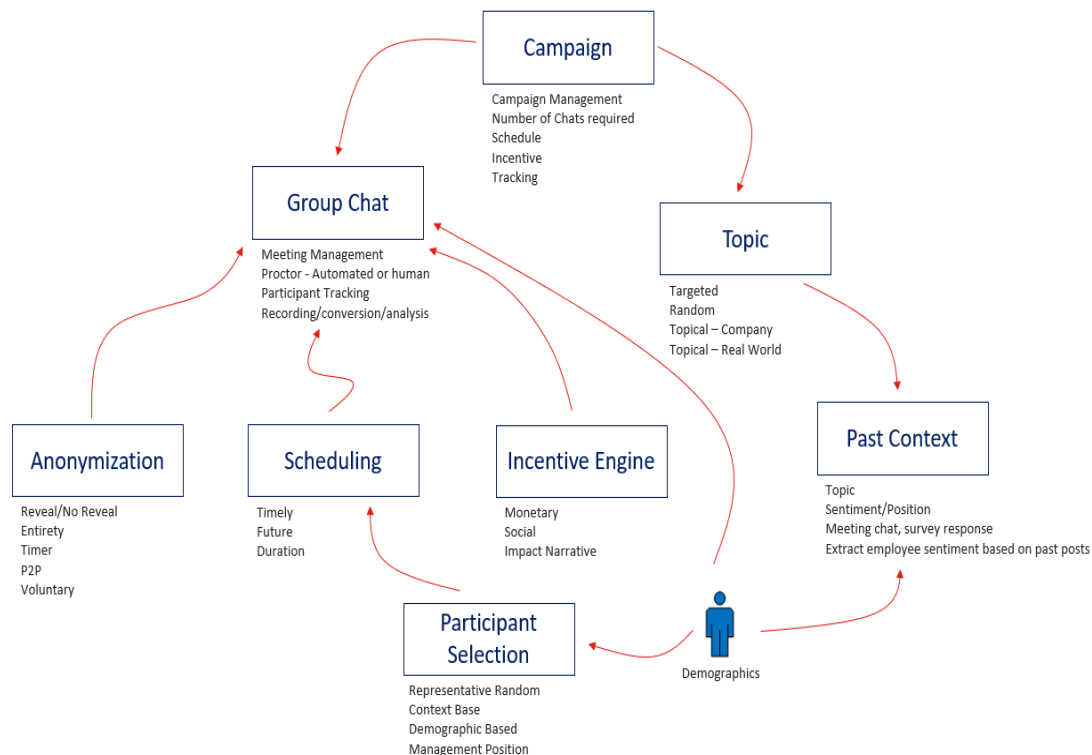

Figure 1: Illustrative Features

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In one instance, such as for a Group chat in which interesting ideas are often exchanged among participants, consider in one example that employees are pulled together to discuss a specific topic of interest, which can be defined by the person who created the campaign. Initially, all participants for the Group chat remain anonymous and, depending on how the Group chat is configured, may never reveal themselves, may all be revealed after a certain time, etc.

The chat conversation can be monitored and saved for subsequent analysis. A natural language processor (NLP) or a human can monitor the conversation to ensure appropriateness/keep the group on topic and to track participant sentiment. Once completed, a Group chat report can be generated by the system and sentiment at the group and individual level reported.

Consider another example involving a Campaign, which may be a mechanism that can be used to initiate one or more Group chats. For a Campaign, the Campaign creator can establish the type of Group chats, the size of groups, the number of groups to be run in a given time period, the time period, whether an incentive will be included, and the type with topic of the chat. A campaign can be driven based on a Topic configured for the Campaign. For example, a Campaign can be driven by a change or proposed company change (e.g., compensation, strategy, architecture, etc.), a specific timely topic (e.g., discuss a recent company guest speaker, Cisco Live, etc.), a random topic (e.g., to build employee affinity), or a topic that is introduced by a moderator.

Following Campaign configuration, the desired characteristics of the Group chat participants can be identified. The desired characteristics configured for a Campaign can be used to select employees to include in a Group chat. Such characteristics may include, but not be limited to, demographics, Past Context data, and/or any other constraints (e.g., organization membership, etc.) that can be used to identify a representative set of participants. In some instances, potential participants may need more than loneliness to drive their participation. Thus, an Incentive Engine can be utilized in some instances to generate incentives for participation, such as a call-to-action, monetary incentives, contributions to a charity, etc. The Incentive Engine can also track participation and fulfillment. Once participants are identified, Scheduling logic within the system can create

the Group chat and can send invitations to participants considering their work schedules, calendars, locations, etc.

During operation, the system can support different flavors of anonymization, such as complete (i.e., no one will ever know participant identities), admin only (i.e., only privileged administrators will know participant identities), timer (i.e., all participants will remain anonymous until a given period of time has elapsed in the meeting), person-to-person (i.e., a participant can ask another participant their name via a private chat), and voluntary (i.e., participants can reveal who they are at any point in a Group chat session).

As illustrated in Figure 1, Past Context can be maintained, which is collection of sentiment/opinion data of company employees collected from other sources for specific topics. These other sources could be surveys/questionnaires, chat comments in company meetings, emails to leadership, etc. Extracted past context data can be used when selecting participants for specific topics.

Accordingly, techniques herein provide anonymity in a group chat session that is made up of known participants within a company. The system can identify participants for a group chat, however, in order to facilitate honest and unfettered to an issue raised within a company (e.g., by human resources, etc.), employee identities can be withheld from other participants in a group chat. Information about the participants may be needed by the company to address proper employee representation in the group chat, however, ensuring the anonymity during the group chat is important to get their honest input. Thus, an anonymous, representative group chat capability can be provided that can be utilized by corporations to facilitate employee discussions while removing factors that often prevent employees from honest participation in traditional settings.