



Social media & mobility: Empowering citizens toward social and economic participation

Working Paper Number 1 – April 2014

The [IBM Cúram Research Institute's](#) research project: **Social media & mobility: Empowering citizens toward social and economic participation** aims to explore the role of social media and mobility based solutions in empowering citizens to achieve better social outcomes within the social protection system (in this context the term social protection covers social security, social services and social care).

During February and March the first round of interviews and workshops were conducted with several organisations and individuals from across the Nordic countries and Western Europe. The purpose of this working paper is to provide some preliminary commentary on the workshop and interview outcomes and identify a unifying theme to be explored and tested in subsequent rounds of interviews and workshops.

A list of general observations is also included at the end of this working paper which will be expanded/validated in subsequent workshops and interviews.

An interim report on this project will be delivered at the International Social Sector Forum in Vienna June 2-4 2014.

The final report will be launched at the IBM Cúram Health and Human Services Summit in Washington DC, October 2014.

Feedback and comments on this paper are most welcome and should be sent to: Brian Lee-Archer at eloise.oriordan@ie.ibm.com



A new relationship model?

Overall we were pleasantly surprised at the level of enthusiasm for social media and mobility solutions within the social protection industry. We posed the rhetorical question ‘Can social be social?’ and while the research aims to uncover the proof points to support this proposition, the level of interest and activism in social media is an indication of substance to this enthusiasm rather than just a fad or a follow the crowd mentality. At the same time, some interviewees expressed genuine concerns at how social media could be misused resulting in negative or unintended consequences from the distribution of uncontrolled and misleading information.

While very early days, there is some evidence to suggest a new model of relationship between individuals and their social protection organisations has emerged which has been enabled by social media and mobility based solutions. Rather than being a new channel of communication, social media is perhaps opening up a new multi-directional relationship model that addresses some of the power imbalances in the traditional service model. The traditional service model tends to be top down and rules driven. The new relationship model may hold the key to empowering (some) people toward greater social and economic participation and result in breaking down cycles of long term welfare dependency and/or social disadvantage.

It is possible however that the people who may benefit most from this new relationship model are those who are already well positioned and/or skilled in acting independently when addressing social risks e.g. a person becoming unemployed who is a self-starter in finding a new job and can identify employer prospects via social networks. The question to be explored further during this research is whether social media and mobility solutions offer new avenues for disadvantaged people to attain better social outcomes.

An asymmetric relationship model to achieve better social outcomes?

The common reason put forward as to why social organisations invest in social media were words to the effect “we need to be where our clients are”. This appears consistent with a trend away from the traditional model of service delivery where clients are expected to present themselves to the social agency either in person or via a call centre or to even access an organisational website to obtain information. There is a subtlety within the phrase that represents an ecosystem view of the social protection system. This represents a move towards an asymmetric relationship model rather than a traditional master/servant style relationship that is often characterised by a top down communication approach.

In the world of social media the asymmetry of communication enabled by sites such as Twitter and the Like/Fan/Follow features of Facebook and LinkedIn, threatens (in a positive manner) the power imbalances embodied in the traditional service delivery model. (Relationship Symmetry in Social Networks: Why Facebook will go Fully Asymmetric, 2009) The traditional model places the social organisation as the source of truth in terms of the law, rights and entitlements. People’s



relationship with the social organisation is then symmetrical in nature - information can flow in both directions between the parties, often as a result of a stimulus from the other. The new service model enabled through social media offers alternative sources of truth (or not in some instances) thereby offering people the opportunity to access information from many sources, in their own time and manner, leading to decision making based on who and what source of information they trust.

Addressing long term dependency

But what does an asymmetrical relationship approach via social media potentially offer for people and social protection organisations? A report by the Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand, published from the SAS Global Forum 2013, examining the work of the Welfare Working Group, which had been established in April 2010 to examine ways to reduce long-term benefit dependency for people of working age, offers a perspective to be pursued further in this research. (O'Neil, 2013)

The report promotes a risk based approach when targeting interventions with the aim of reducing the probability of long term welfare dependency. Key to the approach is the measurement of the social impact of the interventions to justify the upfront expenditure of public monies. The report went on to say "Unless we do this, the central agencies that direct state funding allocation will always be able to say that as an agency we merely participate in the stories of the lives of our clients, and cannot demonstrate that we actually make a difference to the outcomes they experience." This report is highlighted as it offers a potential rationale for why social organisations are saying they need to be where the clients are. Perhaps it is those organisations with a desire to be proactive in enabling people achieve better social outcomes rather than those who wish to remain as participants in the stories of people's lives, with potentially the most to gain from embracing social media and mobile based communication. This is something to be explored further.

It can be argued that one of the failures of the traditional service model is the symmetrical nature of the relationship model where from an individual's perspective the relationship is one to one. By positioning the social organisations as a single source of truth with the power to administer the law and exercise rights, is it possible this is a factor leading people on the path to dependency on the services and benefits provided by the organisation? Communication and information sharing is transactional and episodic from the individual to the organisation and vice versa. Business is conducted in a private and controlled manner. Rather than encouraging empowerment towards social and economic participation, it could in some circumstances disempower and disenfranchise people who subsequently lose trust and confidence in the very (sole) organisation designed to help them manage their social risks.

Giving people/encouraging the right skills while people are in the social protection system

In an asymmetric environment, people seek out information from many sources including the use of anonymous personas and crowd sourcing techniques – e.g., posting a question on a social website



that is accessed by many different people unknown to the person posting the question. These alternative sources of information may help validate or raise doubts about information gained from the traditional source of truth. They may get incorrect information which they may act on and if so who is responsible or accountable for any subsequent misadventure?

This question of responsibility and accountability for information accuracy and by whom and how information is acted upon drives to the heart of the issue of empowerment. As consumers we deal with multiple sources of information on a daily basis and make judgements and decisions. People in the social protection system in the main want the skills and capability so they can exercise choice and make decisions leading to better social outcomes rather than being directed by rules and regulations.

The proposition we will explore further is how far social organisations should go in helping people achieve better social outcomes using the very tools and techniques such as social media and mobility solutions that people will use to further their social and economic participation after they break out from the social protection system.

Targeting and Segmentation

There is already evidence that the principles of segmentation and targeting are important when determining where social media and mobility solutions offer value for individuals and social organisations. Justifying the investment in such solutions will depend on whether value is added where there are gaps in service and service outcomes or is it merely adding value where value is already being realised – i.e. the people who gain the most from social media and mobility solutions are those already achieving good social and economic outcomes. If this is the case then we need to identify the factors and/or barriers to be considered in bridging the gap to making social media and mobility solutions a value adding option for people who may not consider using them and/or who lack skills and capability. Given for example, organisations are looking for ways to promote digital channels for delivering services (lowering costs while broadening the reach), there is potential for social media to assist in generating trust and confidence within disadvantaged communities or segments such as people with disabilities, carers and those living in remote areas, to transact business via a digital/online channel.

Observations

Following are some general observations (not an exhaustive list) that will be expanded/validated in subsequent workshops and interviews.

- Facebook and Twitter were the most common social media platforms in use with one organisation having a Facebook presence with over 50,000 “Likes” (or followers)
- Families with young children are a common target group for social media based offerings
- Organisations with Facebook and Twitter presence are moderating unlawful/racist/sexist etc. commentary but are not removing critical feedback and/or bad language



- Countries with acquired rights based social insurance are concerned about inaccurate information that may be exchanged on social media
- CEOs value Twitter to communicate quickly with journalists and politicians on issues of public importance
- There was generally a relaxed view on staff using social media in client time - no different to making personal phone calls on work time – managing people’s time on social media is a line management issue
- Access to internet based services is increasingly occurring via mobile devices - up to 30% in one organisation
- There is considerable discussion/debate occurring on the development of mobile applications vs. dynamic web sites with a leaning towards more investment in dynamic websites
- Assisted living technology and devices for social care (aged and disability) is an area of mobile based solutions with the potential to generate a rich source of data - this is yet to be exploited – *this topic will be explored further in Working Paper Number 2.*
- Organisations are bringing in people with communications/media/public relations expertise to manage social media channel rather than relying on regular social protection staff
- Serious effort is being made to personalise and keep simple the messages that are published on social media platforms
- Competence level for issuing messages is kept at lowest possible levels

Bibliography

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