Public Engagement with Research Case Studies

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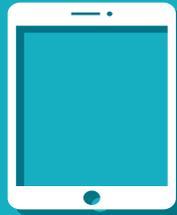
The Research

Chris' research focuses on the use of technology (currently, social media) within organisations to improve communications between employees, between employees and partners, and between employees and customers. He's interested in how social communications might span common organisational boundaries – e.g. hierarchical issues between managers and employees – and how they might drive competitive advantage through the likes of enhanced innovation and co-creation of new ideas amongst employees. He's interrogating whether potential return on investment is directly related to the use of social media software as opposed to arising from collaborative behaviours that could equally be achieved through different methods.

The Engagement:

The key publics: Knowledge Intensive Professional Services (KIPS) organisations (e.g. the Environment Agency, Deloitte).

The type of engagement: Collaborating with these publics in a dialogic way to develop his research ideas and to secure hard data to inform his research.

Chris is working in an emergent research area. The application of social communications for competitive advantage is a new space in academic research and organisations themselves are just beginning to consider how they might leverage such tools:

> *"The research focuses on how ideas are generated, how human capital, which is a 'personal' asset, can be converted to intellectual capital owned by a firm. One way of achieving this is through the socialisation of ideas."*

To develop his thinking and to stimulate his ideas in an area which he terms 'enterprise social media', Chris initially engaged with two KIPS organisations: the Environment Agency and Deloitte. These firms are always looking to improve their use of enterprise social media and so keen to use Chris' knowledge and experience to help shape their thinking. Chris undertook a range of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with key personnel to generate hard data for his research but also, to advise the organisations on their emergent social media approaches.

Chris' relationships with the Environment Agency and Deloitte resulted from a mix of serendipity and a more planned approach:

> *"My link with the Environment Agency arose from a chance conversation with a colleague about my research. He knew an MBA student working for the Agency and thought she might be interested. Sure enough, she was! The Deloitte link arose following my targeting of a practitioner's conference on the use of collaboration tools in organisations, and emerged from a chat during a coffee break."*

Having completed two case studies based on his work with the Environment Agency and Deloitte, Chris is now in the early stages of planning an action research project with another organisation:

> *"My plans for a new project have grown out of my previous research. Action research methodology is the logical next step for me; it'll allow me to work more proactively with practitioners on a reflective process of problem-solving embedded in a real-world situation."*

If you would like to discuss how you might engage publics in or with your research, please contact the University's Public Engagement Unit at: public-engagement@bath.ac.uk

The Motivation:

Prior to becoming a researcher, Chris accumulated 25 years of practitioner experience, ending up as a managing partner of a consumer intelligence agency. In that role, he engaged with students and professors to undertake collaborative pieces of work and found the experiences beneficial:

"The academics and students fed back theories and frameworks to us as an agency from which we were able to generate value. When I became a researcher, it seemed natural to forge similar partnerships from my new position."

Chris finds the dialogue between academic and practitioner perspectives particularly illuminating and it helps to ensure the applicability of his research:

"I think a key role of Schools of Management in universities is to contribute to making business work better, not just for shareholders, but for other stakeholders: partners, customers and employees."

The Professional Development:

Through engagement, Chris has the opportunity to try out some of his ideas in a real-world setting. Within the enterprise social media field there's only anecdotal evidence of a return on investment through the use of social communications. Through engagement with his collaborators, Chris can generate hard data to prove a return or otherwise.

He has also found that his ideas have been improved through engagement:

"By externalising my ideas and inviting others to contribute, they have definitely improved. Engagement isn't just about communicating the value of my work; it's an integral part of making my work better."

"The process of engaging with research partners really makes you think hard about the practical applicability of your work as well as the theoretical contributions."

The Learning:

It's important to ensure that the authority of research is maintained in collaboration so that academic integrity isn't compromised. There's a balance to be struck:

"I'm conscious that I don't want to be perceived by my collaborators as criticising them but equally, I don't want to be scared to give challenging feedback if merited."

Chris has addressed this issue by managing expectations upfront. He advises his collaborators that he's not there to solve problems for them, more to ask the right questions that will give him the information he needs for his research and enable him to give them objective feedback. As such, it's the process of engagement that adds value to the collaborator, giving them a critical space to think through the issues in hand:

"Right from the outset, I'm open and honest about my research needs and have found that my partners have welcomed working with someone who's not trying to flog a product or a service and who can provide independent, unbiased expertise."

Finally, Chris conceives engagement as an on-going, cyclical process, not as an outcome to be achieved. When he's completed a piece of research and fed back the outcomes to his collaborators he uses the opportunity to discuss 'what next?' shaping his research into the future.

"Having seen both sides of engaged research, first as a practitioner and now as a researcher, I am convinced of the mutual benefit that can arise from research collaborations."

Top tip:

"Be really exact about the benefits to your collaborator of engaging with you – answer the 'what's in it for me?' question. It's all too easy to come up with generic, vague benefit statements that could apply to anyone. Rather, articulate how engagement with you could support their specific goals."