

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CHANNEL FOR PUBLIC SECTOR TRANSFORMATION VIA ONLINE MENTORING

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Abstract

The mediatisation of communication leads to different and innovative ways of interaction, even in the public sector. Moreover, internal communication in cross-functional teams is part of projects in public management, so communication via social media not only has to work outwards, but also inwards.

Online mentoring is regarded as a part of social media communication. This study focusses on how mentors and mentees experience online mentoring, as working with online media makes the process of mentoring special. The concept follows working methods of agile teams, which use asynchronous handling processes and retrospectives as added values to achieve objectives.

Counselling concepts such as mentoring continually influence working methods of the public sector. Thus, social media elements open new paths to change strategies concerning working tasks.

1. Unbounded Work and Mediatisation of Communication

The mediatisation of communication leads to different and innovative ways of interaction, even in the public sector [1]. New work environments require cooperation and collaboration between public organisations as well as between the public and the private sector [3]. Moreover, internal communication in cross-functional teams is part of projects in public management, so communication via social media not only has to work outwards, but also inwards. Social media also plays a part in management trainee programmes of public services when it comes to virtual and therefore unbounded counseling and concepts of support and guidance. Counseling concepts such as mentoring continually influence working methods of the public sector. Thus, social media elements open up new paths to change strategies concerning working tasks.

1.1. New Work, Agile Work and the Public Sector

Cause for the necessity of new working methods, even in the public sector, is the dynamisation of the world of work, which is exposed to changing priorities of individual customer concerns in an interlinked, increasingly digitised world of service by competing service providers. The change in the public sector has been perceptible for several years. It is internationally more advanced than in Germany, particularly concerning general internal administration. The focus is on municipality, due to the fact that they carry out tasks delegated from the federal government or the federal states as well

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as tasks within the own sphere of activity in the local area of cities or counties with direct contact to the citizens.

Yet, many towns, counties and communities are less ‘smart’ than it is common practice regarding technical possibilities in everyday life concerning financial transactions, errands or counselling. In 2018, about 30 per cent of all communities declared in the study ‘Smart City Readiness Check’ by the Innovators Club of the German Association of Cities, Towns and Communities in cooperation with TÜV Rheinland [4], that they provide little or no online e-government services for citizens. Moreover, concerning internal administrative processes there was no effort to automatise processes or services. Suitable support programmes or support instruments to push the financing of such measures were widely unknown.

Symptomatic for this lack of interest seems to be, that only one quarter of the communities queried follow training offerings concerning digitisation only sporadically or not at all. Corresponding counselling to implement and strategically align current administrative, financial, and technical resources the study advises to complement theses with training opportunities for employees to trigger a nationwide dissemination of the Digital Agenda.

The joint study of Bitkom and McKinsey [5] ‘Smart Government – Wie die öffentliche Verwaltung Daten intelligent nutzen kann’ also concludes that there is a need for catching up. ‘Digitisation of public services bears the chance to regain the lost trust of citizens’, comments the president of Bitkom, Achim Berg, the relevance of modernisation along ten international case studies of successful Smart Government initiatives.

Success factors and recommendations for action for the German public service derive from the analysis of this evaluation. Thus, strategic partnerships with the private sector, start-ups, science, and civil society can enable Smart Government, together with methodical profound agile cooperation in interdisciplinary teams and an openness for structural change with help of technology, supported by incentives.

External as well as internal requirements of digitisation are a first field of application of social media. Due to the necessity of regular agreements about not yet familiar paths of task completion also gives access to mentoring.

Digitised process design is not the only future challenge. Also, concerning the variety and width of tasks of public organisations, an increase in dynamics and complexity of requirements becomes visible, such as the amount and speed of legislative initiatives and political agendas. Parallely, there is an increasing amount of authorities, which allow a comfortable virtual or local visit with help of key points and design-oriented service standards [6].

This is one of the strengths of Customer Relationships of private economy. Due to the high acceptance of change and development within an interlinked society, branches such as the financial sector with fintech start-ups, the establishment of tech-businesses with digitised business models as Global Players, have recognised the necessity of agile work for innovative alterations in several business segments. The Future Institute defines this megatrend as ‘antifragile’. Nassim Taleb, financial mathematician, statistician, researcher on randomness, and author of ‘The Black Swan’, defines viable systems not necessarily as resistant, but equipped with the ability to develop evolutionarily from state of shock [7].

The economic sector in Germany tried to establish the importance of disruptive changes with the help of the internet of things, the internet of services, artificial intelligence in production, and service delivery to maintain competitiveness of the site and therefore ensure economic prosperity through political flagship initiatives such as industry 4.0, services 4.0, handcraft 4.0, or administration 4.0 of politics, industry, economy, handcraft, and administration [8]. To this extent, decision-makers decided to tackle the challenge of disruptive modernisation of state and public administration with ‘targeted deployment of smart objects, cyber physical systems, and artificial intelligence’, this reflecting reasonable fields of action [9]. In this respect, another field is defined on which a lively exchange in internal networks is worthwhile to create a tangible change in the culture of management of innovations. Digital economies follow the idea of platform economy and interlinked services for an optimised use of data – internally and externally – as technological basis of all social media services, internally implemented with a profile ID, providing tools such as chat, video- and data-analysis to allow immediate interaction for identification processes, establishing trust and permanent responsiveness via profiles.

The engagement is not only internal. Also, the development of external networks with collaboration partners with a general similarity in values, intentions, and extent of intention of cooperation in partnerships lead to approximation. The form of collaboration in so-called cross-functional teams with representants of various branches and disciplines requires working methods with agile components to cope with dynamically developing strategy approaches concerning complex issues with innovation character target-oriented.

Simultaneously, there is a need to classify such innovation hubs and think tanks in relation to routine tasks in organisations to prevent irritations, fears, or a two-class society among the workforce. Particularly credibility in a coherent masterplan is essential to convey on the part of managers to prevent negative effects on employee satisfaction among the staff [10].

The depicted restructuring means a deep cut into a stable system of public administration, as have meant the reform efforts of the public sector concerning strategy, structure, and culture, too, and therefore often lead to the development of insecurities and resistance [11]. The different kinds of resistance, the resistance against active players, or the innovation itself (as a system barrier), need different reactions. Thus, a comprehensible, continuous, and hierarchy-adequate communication is key, which, flanked by a resource development strategy, is connected to preceding changes in routine tasks of the organisation to establish integrally organisational learning [12].

Assumingly, the success of the implementation of transformational staff development is mainly visible in transformed places. There must be room for exchange of the various experiences of all the people concerned to finally re-transfer the discussed consensus back into their organisational unit [13].

This is still valid, as the actual figures of the sixth HR Leadership Panel by Rochus Mummert, which asked 180 companies of different branches about leadership satisfaction, show. Only one percent of the interviewees rated their manager as ‘exceptional’. 53 per cent explain this with the poor capacity of managers (57 per cent) and of employees (44 per cent) to adapt quickly to changes. Vision, personality, and strategy are, according to the interviewees, the top competencies necessary to tackle change. Particularly the staffing of management needs a dual chairmanship of leadership and management. The study shows an understanding of leadership as charismatic, visionary characters as well as analytic, organising managers to support change processes. Additionally, 71 per cent of the

interviewees predict that employees with such managers on top are optimistic concerning change processes, since motivation can happen credibly and immediately [14].

This might succeed in social organisations of public administration as well, together with a mentoring approach via different means of communication.

Literature also discusses approaches of viable leadership, which are based on the differentiation between creators of change and managers of change.

One of these approaches sees a successful transformation in responsible leadership, which means a manager who acts reasonable based on a positive idea of man. He or she can communicate actively and listen in the same respect, possesses a distinct ability to perceive and reflect. Gerhard Lippe describes four perspectives of responsible leaders [15]:

- understanding the past: provenance, historical experience, impacts of conviction for the present
- foresight: looking for and understanding what is about to form and develop, gains shape, and takes on leadership
- consciousness of the meaning of the organisation: understanding of work as an accepted part of life, not as a counterpart in life
- own interpretation of the social role in an organisation and its legitimisation as well as the self, guiding rules

A transparent vision needs to be formulated, strategic guard rails need to be put into concrete terms, distinction of conflicts of objectives need to be communicated in a practical design of leadership principles. Based on different disciplines, various instruments need to be deployed in a model together with managers in charge, increasingly with conscious use of new work elements.

To equip tasks of management positions with creative, autonomous projects, the present ‘intellectual capital’ as key resource needs to be identified with measurable tools. Responsible leadership also provides the formation of a code of conduct and value (e.g. team integration, availability, flexibility, and integrity) as a basis to interact with all stakeholders (also with external partners). This is only a small part of the necessary framework for a culture of trust, which expresses individual strength and intentions of groups of employees, particularly through leadership and specialist career perspectives. The manager takes on the role of a coordinator concerning the needs of the organisation, but also the needs of the employees, whose engagement is the greatest factor for the success of the overall strategy.

This expresses the degree of maturity of an organisation with simultaneous support of a value-based way to employee retention to master the requirements of disruptive influences of alignment on stable units.

The transparency of identified competency profiles is the counterpart of technical and artificial intelligence and means an added value, when an open-minded intention concerning the objectives of the organisation, together with creative skills of the workforce, supports the fulfillment of challenges sustainably [7].

In this respect, these approaches pave the way for contemporary mentoring approaches for various groups of employees.

1.2. Online Mentoring via Social Media as a Promoter of Agility in Public Sector Management Trainee Programmes

Therefore, the social media aspect of this article includes employee portals and organisational platforms with role-based access, which originally served human resources and talent management. It excludes social media as means of communication between public service and citizen as well as e-government measures. These internal social media with a personal profile, access to administrative features such as travel expenses management, requests for vacation, working time management, and recruiting, but also organisational information such as corporate blogs, wikis, learning facilities, and chat features to connect employees, are also used to support employee qualification [16]. This is, perspectively, independent from bought software, hosted software, or organisation owned software. The aspect of employee qualification also takes up the support of management trainees. In this case, mentoring is considered as one of the most successful concepts [17].

Agility as the result of integration alertness to internal and environmental changes needs the capability to use resources responding to these changes. This is in a timely, flexible, affordable, and relevant manner [18]. As a relatively unpracticed method in public administration, the establishment of agile work needs to be supported. Compared to a coach, who has good questions to answers, a mentor has good answers to questions. Coaching is a short-term counseling situation, in which coach and coachee work on the personal development of the coachee in business situations. Mentoring, by contrast, is construed as a long-term relationship, over six or twelve months or even longer, which focusses on career and personal development of the mentee. Agile coaches facilitate organisations and teams to work flexible and self-learning. Agile mentors, as members of the agile community, support employees, particularly management trainees, with actual practice of agile work [19].

Generally, management trainees are matched with successful managers settled in the organisation. Online mentoring as the virtual and therefore unbounded concept of support and guidance allows to have a mentor of another organisation, a partner organisation, a superordinate organisation, a department of the organisation in a different country, etc. [1].

The following study focusses on the virtualisation of mentoring as a concept of counselling and support. Conceptional discourse depicts independence from location, time, and hierarchy as main advantages of online mentoring [2]; [16]; [17]. 'People are no longer dependant on where they live and whom they happen to know.' [20] It intends to show how mentors and mentees experience online mentoring set up on an organisational platform. As stated before, working with online media makes the process of mentoring special: From building up an online tandem-relationship over continuity in conduct to resonance in online conversations. One of the advantages of video chat is the technical opportunity to record counseling content to use it for the deepening of content. This follows working methods of agile teams, which use asynchronous handling processes and retrospectives as an added value to achieve objectives [2].

2. A Qualitative Study on Online Mentoring

2.1. Study Design and Data Collection

Interviewee's Profession	Cohort
A Chief Executive Officer	1965-1969
B Spokesman	1970-1979
C Consultant	1970-1979
D Professor	1970-1979
E Professor	1965-1969
F Chief Operating Officer	1980-1990
G Psychologist	1980-1990
H Business Programme Director	1970-1979
I Organisational Developer	1980-1990
J Computer Scientist	1955-1964
K Chief Executive Officer	1955-1964
L Economist	1955-1964
M Consultant	1970-1979
N Media Scientist	1980-1990
O Chief Executive Officer	1970-1979

Figure 1: Sample 1

Following the desideratum on how online mentors and online mentees perceive virtuality in online mentoring, three aspects were highlighted: the (self-)understanding mentors and mentees have concerning their role in online-mentoring, the impact of meeting online on the relationship of the tandem, and the challenges virtuality means concerning themes and topics worked on during mentoring.

To approach these questions, a qualitative research design was chosen. The subjective views of online mentors and online mentees were evaluated with guided interviews. The guideline based on an open narrative impulse³ to trigger the interviewee's

narration on their experience with online mentoring. Guideline questions, based on the state of research, included questions concerning the online mentoring relationship, handling

virtuality, topics in tandem meetings, and the role of mentors and mentees in online mentoring.

The first round of interviews includes 13 female and 2 male mentors. 14 of them were mentees before.

Qualitative Text Analysis is used to evaluate recorded and transcribed interview data [21]; [22]. Following this qualitative method, the guideline question leads to deductive categories, whereas working through the texts generates inductive categories [21]. Narrow text work promotes a specification of main categories, categories and sub-categories.

Currently, the category system is discussed in several interpretation groups with other researchers, to fulfil the quality criteria of intersubjective traceability of qualitative research. After a last validation of the category system, scientific findings will be consolidated, e.g. as types of mentors (the convinced, platform conductors, those preferring blended mentoring, sceptics).

3. First Results

The following paragraphs give an overview over the first empirical results of the described study.

3.1. Overview

Mentors and mentees consider the process of online mentoring as follows:

More than half of the interviewees were matched via an organisational mentoring platform, the smaller part of the respondents asked their future mentors themselves whether they could imagine to be their mentor.

³ 'As you know, I am interested in online mentoring. Please tell me about your experiences with online mentoring!'

Five of the mentoring tandems met body to body before an online meeting was appointed. All other tandems used e-mail or the chat feature on the mentoring platform, occasionally telephone, to arrange the first tandem meeting.

All the tandems, except one, met personally at least once during the mentoring period, mostly at the end of the mentoring process.

Regarding the depicted sample, mentoring is rather blended than completely virtual. Besides the means of communication offered on organisational platforms, mainly video chat, asynchronous channels of communication such as e-mail, or synchronous channels such as telephone or even meetings in person, are conducted.

The examination process of the evaluated data shows the perception and the experience of the used form of virtual mentoring. The current category system consists of four main categories, which differentiate themselves hierarchically into further sub-categories:

- The main category ‘roles in online mentoring’ includes subjective views of the interviewees concerning the perception of their own role and the role of their interaction partner.
- ‘Online mentoring relationship’ summarises specific characteristics of the experienced virtual communication process and their impact on the organisation and the experience of the relationship.
- In the main category called ‘conversation perspective’, statements on the content of conversations and on particularities of digitally supported conversation were coded.
- The category ‘future perspectives and visions’ shows subjective views on future developments of online mentoring.

3.2. Deeper Analysis: Online-Mentoring Relationships – Dimensions

The main category ‘online mentoring relationship’ is suitable to give an insight into the subjective views on virtual mentoring. This main category bases on the categories ‘supportive conditions’, which barely differ from offline mentoring relationships, and ‘digital forms of encounter and digital forms of communication’, which emphasizes particularities of online means of communication in mentoring. Again, this category is subdivided into three sub-categories. Whereas ‘flexible meeting rooms’ discusses independence of time and location, the sub-category ‘limited response’ indicates deficits of virtual communication due to physical absence of the conversation partners.

The sub-category ‘different dimensions’ depicts the phenomenon that the interviewees define virtual communication metaphorically as a dimension. This choice of terminology is surprising. Moreover, it conveys a specific understanding of digital communication presented along empirical material in the following. Interestingly, the interviewees use the term ‘dimension’ not classically as a definition of a scale or magnitude, as a category of a physical quantity, or the measurement of a mathematical object, but, to an extent, create an own definition concerning online mentoring. Different dimensions describe whether mentor and mentee meet up body to body in the same room, or if they see and hear each other face to face via video chat.

Various paragraphs of the evaluated interviews show that three dimensions describe the encounter of bodies in a physical room, which make it easier for mentors to react to gestures and the facial expression of the counterpart. This also seems to be possible with two-dimensional mentoring, but technical challenges may complicate communication, e.g. a ‘juddering skype connection’ (translation by author, A, 32). In contrast to this, some mentors experience mobility, meaning the opportunity to walk around while talking, which is not possible in a virtual, two-dimensional conversation. ‘I take the opportunity to walk around a bit while speaking on the telephone.’ (translation by author, A, 55) Interestingly, these mentors do not evaluate virtual forms of communication as deficient, despite hints on technical complications, but as clearly positive.

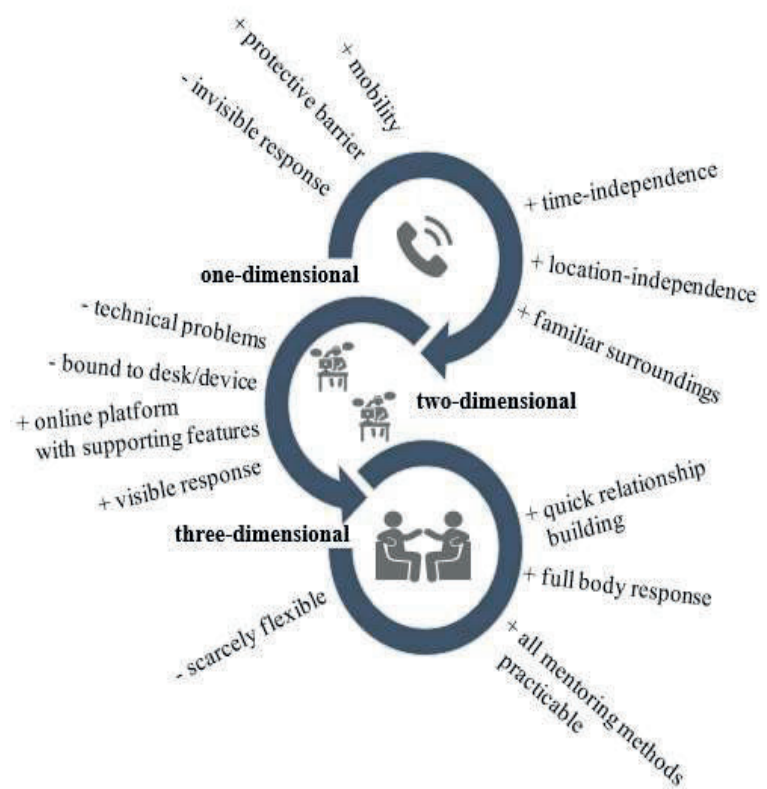


Figure 2: Mentoring Dimensions

Other actors describe the two-dimensionality as obstructive. They miss the resonance in communication. Therefore, they experience online tandem meetings as deficient. ‘Sometimes, I literally need to touch my mentor.’ (translation by author, H, 45) This hints on an ambivalent perception of virtual communication modes via video chat, because two-dimensionality can hardly replace a meeting body to body. Many mentors stress the importance of meeting at least one time in person during the mentoring period. Ideally right at the beginning and/or at the end of the mentoring path, ‘because this promotes mentoring.’ Online communication is organised with image and sound, ‘because you, er, find out what is going on, er, with the other person.’ (translation by author, B, 15-26)

3.3. Summary

The descriptions of the three different dimensions of communication in the interviewees’ statements indicate that online mentoring conversations tend to be evaluated as a pragmatic compensation for face to face meetings, because the empathic estimation of the counterpart in virtual reality is harder to do, which may influence building up a relationship. Again, online mentoring is evaluated as thoroughly positive.

4. Discussion and Perspective

4.1. Discussion of First Results

Even though a systematic consolidation of the mentioned results needs to be done in a next step, and even if the depicted exemplary interpretations only refer to a small extract of the category system, these are perspectives worth discussing.

The preliminary results may lead to the following thesis:

Virtual mentoring, which bases on video chat communication, is, compared to body to body encounters, perceived as susceptible to faults and as deficient. Nevertheless, online mentoring is mostly evaluated as positive.

This thesis seems to fit to empirical results, which give evidence that technical problems or lack of competence lead to dissatisfaction on the part of the persons involved [23]; [24]; [25]. Against the background of these first results of the study, it is possible to interpret that these disruptions impede particularly the necessary empathic capacity and the opportunity to build up a trusting relationship. The virtual room seems to create, as the category system depicts, a lack of resonance between conversation partners. Empirical studies support this thesis. They describe online mentoring as an alternative, when a meeting body to body is not possible concerning location and time [26]; [27]; [28].

Despite these deficient perspectives on online mentoring, the interviewees thoroughly evaluate it as positive. This refers to the understanding represented in conceptional literature on online mentoring, that this form of mentoring offers advantages concerning independence of location and time [16]. Therefore, it is connective with current conditions of today's work in organisations.

Furthermore, the estimation of future developments of online mentoring shows that virtual forms of communication have potential due to their high flexibility, also in supporting the processes of participation and emancipation.

Whether and how these indicated ambivalent views on virtual communication influence the perception of online mentoring processes in general needs to be proven with further interviews, analysis, and consolidation.

4.2. Perspectives of the Use of Social Media in Public Sector Management Trainee Programmes

To establish an online mentoring programme for management trainees, guidelines are essential. From transparent platforms to support mentoring tandems over a platform management to rules of commitment.

As the study depicts, tandem relationships benefit from body to body meetings. These trust-building meetings are conducive for a long-term relationship. Therefore, online mentoring programmes should at least be blended, so that mentee and mentor will have the opportunity to meet in person, if they consider this as helpful. Thinking about further development in artificial intelligence, i.e. chat bots, commitment becomes more important. Moreover, data protection needs to be considered. Tandem conversations are not recorded. In this case it has to be distinguished between functional

conversations on business matters and tandem meetings. The latter have to take place in a protected framework, no matter if they are conducted via video chat or body to body.

It is important to install programme managers who flank the establishment of an online mentoring programme for future managers as change agents. This concerning management decisions as well as pedagogical aspects to support mentors and mentees with their roles, if necessary. Only with change agents who also act as facilitators the benefit and the value of online mentoring is conveyed.

Online mentoring might also be an approach for cultural change in an organisation and in public administration. At first, this might be a rather difficult process with different phases, which must be persevered for about two to five years. This also applies for social media elements in general to find acceptance in an authority. Therefore, counselling formats need broad acceptance, readiness to adapt, and change personal attitudes and values to transition into a new age.

Online mentoring can also be used to analyse the distance of the workforce to changes, to find out whether the structure of workforce is ready to establish new concepts.

Nevertheless, there cannot be something like a generalised recommendation. In any case, the present organisational culture needs to be taken into consideration. Basically, online mentoring is a chance to pave the way for the change from a structure of hierarchy and power to a culture of support and learning.

5. Summary

Dynamic changes of the present working world require working methods which base on participative fundamental values to transform these potentials into innovation. Regarding civic trends, this also affects public organisations. Collaborations between the public sector and private companies are also a component of increasing importance to create new services for the population.

The described combination of strategic guideline conception, agile methods in prioritisation, discussion, and coordination as well as integration of a systematic competency management are means to enrich the sustainability of organisations of different branches. Investment in a theoretically profound resources instrument to use human potential application-oriented in everyday professional life is the most important decision considering sustainability of employees in the public sector. A profound tool to use the advantages of social media in the process to find and create new public service, even to improve existing service, is online mentoring via the background of platform economy. It gives room for ideas and creativity as well as support to functional and personal challenges of the workforce. This implies the main goals in initiating a change in the organisational culture as well. Trust, support, methodological professionalism, and connected topics with a cross-functional background are good starting grids for a change to reach the requirements of our modern, disruptive world.

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