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Does using LinkedIn pay-off and why?

Cross-sectional studies have shown that users of business networks such as LinkedIn and Xing report higher informational benefits than non-users. However, it was unclear whether LinkedIn use causes higher informational benefits (media effect) or whether people who already have higher informational benefits are simply more likely to use these platforms (selection effect). Researchers from Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) Tübingen found evidence for both effects in a longitudinal study.

Tübingen, January 16, 2017. Prof. Dr. Sonja Utz and Dr. Johannes Breuer from the IWM followed a representative sample of Dutch online users for two years to examine whether users of business networks such as LinkedIn can retrieve professional informational benefits from their online network and whether these effects are really due to social media use. Examples for professional informational benefits are receiving relevant work-related information timely or receiving referrals to career opportunities from one's network.

Respondent received twice a year a survey on their social media use. The working subsample (n = 1959 in Wave 1, n = 1953 in Wave 4) also reported on their professional informational benefits.

The results of the study, which recently appeared in the journal *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research in Cyberspace* found across all waves that LinkedIn users reported significantly higher professional informational benefits than non-users. For a large part, this seemed to be a selection effect: People who have better access to professionally relevant information were more likely to use LinkedIn or other social network sites for professional purposes.

However, there were also concurrent and longitudinal media effects. Passively reading updates was less effective; posting professional content and especially activity in groups were positively related to informational benefits within the same wave. For the number of strong and weak ties on the network (i.e. close friends vs.

acquaintances), longitudinal effects occurred. Having a larger network at a certain time resulted in higher informational benefits half a year later. An interesting shift was observed: In the early waves, the number of weak ties mattered more than the number of strong ties. Over time, the weak ties became less important and the strong ties became more important for informational benefits. “We just asked for the number of strong and weak ties, but not for the names of the respective LinkedIn contacts. It could thus be that weaker ties that provided useful information are considered as strong ties half a year later” says Prof. Dr. Sonja Utz.

Taken together, the results show that using LinkedIn or other professional platforms can increase informational benefits. Active use pays off immediately, whereas it takes time to build a network. However, there are also personal characteristics, maybe better networking skills, that prompt people who have higher informational professional benefits to make use of business networks.

The study is part of the ERC-Starting Grant project ReDefTie (Redefining tie strength – how social media (can) help us to get non-redundant useful information and emotional support).

Link to the study (open access):

<http://www.cyberpsychology.eu/view.php?cisloclanku=2016112801>

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The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien

The Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (IWM) in Tuebingen analyses teaching and learning with digital technologies. In a multidisciplinary environment, around 80 scientists from cognition, behavioural and social sciences work on solving research questions concerning individual and collective knowledge acquisition in media environments.

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