

Case study
July 2014

Putting social media to work

Bromford

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Putting social media to work

Bromford case study

This case study forms part of a research project conducted in 2014. The main research report and other case studies can be found [here](#).

The context

Bromford's roots are as a housing association, but it now describes itself as a social business to reflect the full range of services it provides to local communities. As well as providing housing, these include social, educational and employment support and organising voluntary work.

Bromford has about 1,250 colleagues based at about 150 different sites, which vary from large offices to small support hubs with one or two people. As well as having a very dispersed workforce, it contains a diverse range of roles, including landscapers, maintenance engineers, support workers, housing managers and planners, and the typical services of HR, IT, finance and so on.

Around the millennium, Bromford looked at the *Sunday Times* 'Best Companies to Work For' magazine to find out what good practice they could emulate from the top 100 organisations:

What it really quickly did was dispel the myths that it was all about gyms, bonuses and, you know, fast cars. ... We started to realise it was about empowering people to make decisions, to do the right things for customers, or do the right things in whatever role that they were doing, and that's what we started to emulate. ... It's seeing things holistically. It's not just been about, 'Oh, that's a great way to drive sales,' or, 'That's a great

way to drive reduced contact and be commercial.' It's also been about, 'What's a great way to deliver a great place to work?' We've always recognised that that definitely ties up with the bottom line ... greater service to customers. People being more switched on and contributing to the business. (Helena Moore)

It is in this context that social media has been encouraged as one facilitator of creating a more engaging and empowering workplace.

The innovation

Bromford actively uses two platforms free of charge – Twitter and Yammer. While there is a strong work focus in Yammer discussions, there is also a strong social element to its use:

Yammer is the big conversation ... it's a flow of conversation about anything that colleagues want to talk about. ... There are no rules. So, if someone wants to share [that] they've just got engaged, that is fine. (Helena Moore)

Yammer is used alongside the company's intranet, *Our Space*, which provides a more traditional communications tool to 'push out' official news and information and provide resources. The two work well together. For example, for a communications drive on pensions, technical information and short videos were made available on the intranet and Yammer was used to

facilitate discussion and questions that colleagues had. This was seen to be an engaging way of communicating with colleagues on a subject that many find boring or hard to grasp.

Yammer is used in a limited way outside the organisation, with a specific network being set up for Bromford's Customer Influence Group, which it uses to test ideas and get feedback. In addition, the communications team often picks up good news or useful posts from Yammer and disseminates them externally through the Bromford Twitter account. A piece of software called Crowd Control is used to manage and protect the official Twitter account.

Some colleagues individually discuss their work through Twitter and blogs (on sites such as WordPress). The communications team supports this activity, for example by placing links to relevant blogs on Bromford's website.

Colleagues who use social media are expected to follow Bromford's guidelines on representing the company. All colleagues are trained and advised on data protection, in particular in relation to customer information, and any issues relating to this have become extremely rare, as the organisation has got more used to using social media.

Bromford also uses other social technology. SharePoint is used for colleagues to exchange information and collaborate, and *Be Bromford*

is an interactive platform, used for learning and development and performance management. Some information on *Be Bromford*, such as annual appraisals, is kept private, but other areas – most notably the learning community – are social networks. The learning community allows people to share and discuss ideas and articles relating to colleague development activity. The platform also provides open access to e-learning resources.

The journey

Bromford's use of an enterprise social network has evolved bottom-up over time, more than being directed strategically, although it has always been keen to use engaging colleague communication tools, from roadshows and annual events to chat rooms and surveys.

One of Bromford's first lessons on social media was during the 2011 riots in England, when it obtained up-to-date information from a policeman it was following on Twitter about violence in Wolverhampton and passed that on to local people following them. This illustrated the power of social media to get relevant information from trusted sources out to a wide audience.

Chat room technology was Bromford's first toe in the water of social media, being used for a specific branding exercise. Later in 2011, Helena Moore, Director of Communications and OD, heard about Yammer through discussions on LinkedIn. She posted a question and someone sent her a link to a free service:

And I realised that you had to send this on to make it social. I sent it on to a few people in my team. I didn't actually say to them, 'Oh, best not pass this

on.' So they completely clicked – because they're that generation that this is second nature to; sent it on to their friends around the business, no particular reason, other than they knew them. ... It was phenomenal. The growth of it was just phenomenal. ... 'Oh, blimey, look what we've done.' (Helena Moore)

Several hundred Bromford colleagues joined Yammer within a few weeks. Since then, its user base has continued to grow, particularly over the 18 months leading up to this research.

The ICT team had some initial concerns about security, as it had not been introduced in a strategic way, but these were easily checked out. Yammer quickly got the backing of the senior leadership, which realised that Bromford could have ongoing organisation-wide conversations without the effort and constraints of setting up a chat room. It also had the advantage that conversations could be viewed afterwards to reference or build on the discussion (this was not possible with the chat room software used). The CEO was one of the early adopters and this sent a clear message:

Everybody knew it was definitely okay to use. Even more than that, people who were savvy realised this was a pretty good way to have a voice and influence across a dispersed organisation. It's a way of getting your talent recognised outside of just your functional silo. That can't be bad for developing your career.' (Philippa Jones)

More recent developments include a dedicated innovation team, whose role includes picking up ideas and suggestions made by colleagues on Yammer to improve the business. In the last year, Bromford has

also started producing quarterly podcasts, hosted on the intranet, to engage colleagues with important business issues such as financial performance.

Take-up and use

Colleagues are universally encouraged to use Yammer and this shows in the figures. At the time of interviewing, about two and a half years after Yammer was first introduced, 89% of Bromford colleagues were registered on Yammer, with nearly two in five colleagues (38%) active on Yammer in the previous week.

About a third of people access Yammer from mobile devices, including personally owned smartphones. This is seen to help in particular for those working remotely. Leaders throughout the organisation are particularly encouraged to use social media.

We absolutely expect leaders to go on and look at Yammer every single day. ... It's a great tool, it's a great insight into the business, don't lose it, it's a tool for you.' (Julie Leo)

The wealth of information ... is huge, and it can help you to do your job better. ... For Yammer, it is being part of the conversation, because if you just do your job in isolation, how can you do your job well? You need to be aware of what is happening in the organisation to get a flavour of it.' (Alex Abbotts)

Yammer is often used to encourage colleagues, celebrating good work and giving moral support or advice for those facing challenges. For example, during our interview, Helena Moore showed one of the latest posts by a maintenance engineer that showed before, during and after pictures of housing improvement projects.

✓ To get one of our engineers to do something like that, without even asking – we would never have had that [before]. ... It brings alive what we're really about. It's actually showing colleagues what we do. ✓ (Helena Moore)

Many posts celebrating good work are hash-tagged with Bromford values, #BeGood, #BeBrave, #BeDifferent or #BeCommercial, as well as #GPTW (great place to work).

Colleagues' blogs can be used to enhance Bromford's brand as an employer or service provider, as people are talking in an authentic, non-corporate voice about their experiences, what their work comprises and how they go about it. It is powerful storytelling that the organisation can use to its benefit.

✓ Anyone can set up a blog and blog about the job they do, and it's great to get alongside those people. After all, they've just written a story that can make the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end, which is written from the heart from a person who's out there, delivering and making a difference. ✓ (Helena Moore)

Yammer is used alongside many regular activities in Bromford. One example is the colleague representation that occurs through the company's Sounding Boards. Representatives can use Yammer to contact colleagues and solicit their opinions and 'Yammer Time' sessions can be run as closed groups with the Sounding Board members.

It is also used for non-work activity. Typically 30–40% of posts are personal, relating to subjects such as a fortieth birthday,

leaving to have a baby or passing qualifications. Although some colleagues feel this is not a good use of an enterprise social network, the communications team felt the organisation had a healthy balance of professional and personal.

✓ It brings personality to the organisation. ... You get a more rounded view of people. It personalises the organisation; you're not just dealing with 'John in accounts'. ... It brings the organisation to life, as well. I think if it was all business on there, I don't know whether people would engage in it as much. ✓ (Alex Abbotts)

Bromford colleagues appear to handle the simultaneous use of different platforms well. The learning community on the *Be Bromford* platform tends to get all the requests for advice or information that broadly falls under learning and development. The intranet remains the place to go for information and Yammer has been established as the place for conversations.

Social media adds to, more than replaces, traditional communications tools. For example, if a colleague saw something on a Bromford site that needed attention, they would be likely to phone or text in a message to get it sorted. In a different way, they might also post a picture on Twitter or Yammer to share examples of great work being done.

Bromford's use of an enterprise social network has been a safe way for some colleagues to dip their toe in the water of social media for work purposes. It has thus supported the organisation's external use of social media for branding and to engage with customers.

✓ [One] thing that has astonished me is the wealth of blogging talent that's been unleashed in this organisation since we've opened up social media and actively encouraged people to use it. We've got dozens and dozens of colleagues who are blogging about housing-related topics or other things like leadership or career development. ✓ (Philippa Jones)

Inappropriate use of social media is not seen to be a problem in Bromford. The view is that they can be guided and trusted and there is hardly any need to formally discipline them for misuse of social media.

✓ Bromford always starts from a position of trust. If there are any concerns about posts on social media, that person's leader would be expected to deal with it as with any other leadership issue. The need to turn to our disciplinary procedures has been extremely rare. In this organisation, we use the common-sense rule, 'If you wouldn't say it in the café, don't say it on social media.' This works for us. ✓ (Julie Leo)

Business impacts

As CEO Mike Kent phrases it, social media adds to the 'social glue' of an organisation. In Bromford it is a powerful way of creating a stronger community between colleagues in what is otherwise a highly dispersed workforce. It can also strengthen colleagues' pride in their work and the organisation and helps them see the line of sight between the two; or as Helena Moore puts it, 'What bit am I doing that builds the whole?' And it can reinforce the organisation's corporate values and culture.

✓ *We've just changed our branding to just Bromford – it's not got Bromford Living, Bromford Support and Bromford Homes any more, we're just Bromford, which is quite a brave move. ... Part of the reason we feel we're able to do it is [our use of social media]. ... People talk in terms of one Bromford family now. They cross boundaries much more. ... I wouldn't say [social media is] the driver ... but it's one of a number of planks that have helped us to be confident in the journey that we're making. ... People feel much more connected.* ✓ (Helena Moore)

✓ *It's very easy if you're working in finance, for instance, to lose that sense of what is it that Bromford is all about? What are we achieving here? When they're bombarded daily with stories posted by support workers and housing managers about exactly what's going on with their customers, it just makes it immediately real. ... [It's the] connection with our mission and purpose, the Bromford DNA.* ✓ (Philippa Jones)

It has also helped create more openness, creating better flows of information across the organisation. This includes not only giving colleagues a better sense of executive-level discussions, but breaking down some of the hierarchy by giving *'that sense that people can interact and have a conversation with anybody in the business that they want to'* (Philippa Jones). In this way, social media is clearly used as a tool to harness voice and influence. As Helena Moore puts it, *'It's almost like your meeting room walls have been melted away.'*

This is especially important as the organisation has gone through significant change over the last few

years, including restructuring, pay restraints and redundancies. It is felt that Bromford's use of social media has been an important factor in successfully going through such challenging times while maintaining employee engagement.

Yammer is seen as a great tool for recognising good work, motivating colleagues and also giving legitimacy to do more in the way of collaboration and initiatives.

✓ *Recognition is the biggie. Colleagues are telling stories about what they've achieved or about challenges that their customers have faced. Certainly for the execs the words used on Yammer more than any are things like 'Great work guys,' or, 'Congratulations'. As a leader, it's also good to follow up with questions, you can put little prompts in that hopefully somebody will pick up and say, 'Oh yes, I'd like to do that.'* ✓ (Philippa Jones)

Yammer gives the leadership greater colleague insight, flagging up common issues or perceptions, from mileage rates not keeping track with petrol prices to starting salaries for certain roles not being in line with other organisations.

It is also seen to help with forming better career paths and retaining and developing talent, as people are more aware of the range of roles in the organisation and what those roles entail.

✓ *It's about signposting people. They might think, 'Oh, that Yammer post. I'd love to be doing that in my job. Is that the next job for me then?' because they understand what people's jobs are now. We never had that before.* ✓ (Julie Leo)

Colleague comments

We asked colleagues through Yammer what they thought it brought to the organisation. A selection of their comments are presented below.

✓ *It's a network which helps our customers. Teams can share their best practice, tips and information and in turn colleagues share these with our customers. Colleagues learn something new every day and it may be that piece of information which is going to help transform a customer's life and help them to be the best they can be.* ✓ (David Evans)

✓ *Yammer is a great source of information and gives us all the opportunity to learn about the work we are doing across both the geographical and business areas. [It] helps bring to life the real stories and challenges faced by those out on the front line and interesting also to read about the outcomes. Colleagues can stay connected even if they do not see each other on a day-to-day basis – makes our world smaller and more accessible.* ✓ (Sue Penny)

✓ *1,200 colleagues letting the rest of us know what's going on and what we are up to on a day-to-day basis that makes Bromford tick!! Just us inspiring people to be the best. Makes you realise just [how] many different activities / tasks / challenges / achievements / successes we all have on a daily basis.* ✓ (Jayne Forrester)

✓ *It does [for a working environment] what social networking does generally – allows someone to communicate/ keep in touch and share events with people they don't necessarily come into contact with regularly and make some new acquaintances along the way. It gives valuable insight*

into what other teams are doing and the work they perform – which is great for organisations where roles are diverse. It also makes a big organisation feel a little smaller/more family-like. I actually do think it is a great platform to ask for ideas and help from others – though not everyone will be reached this way, if the audience is large then it is still a useful exercise. / (Jayne Barnsley)

/ For me it has totally revolutionised internal comms, making it self-serve and really empowered colleagues giving them a voice. It has changed the way we work in terms of being more transparent and how we share and collaborate with each other. The biggest thing for me is how Exec really commit to making time every day for Yammer, they value what colleagues have to say and it has completely changed how we communicate regardless of role or geography. I could go on ... #loveyammer. / (Alex Bird)

/ Lots of emphasis is given on wearing our badges (great to place a name to a face) but Yammer goes even further than that – it gets us to the stories behind the name and brings all these stories together in one place ... how great is that?! / (Andy Johnson)

Next steps

Bromford continues to embrace new technology. For example, the *Be Bromford* performance management system has been running for 18 months and the plan is for this to become web enabled and accessible on mobile apps imminently. Other examples include adding video blogging and broadcasting to mobile phones that don't require an Internet connection.

Lessons

Part of the reason for the successful uptake of social media in Bromford is that it aligns with its general culture.

/ You've got to have a decent agreed culture to start with where people know that it's not ok to use inappropriate language and that kind of thing. ... [Social media is] not going to fix the culture, it's going to reflect whatever culture you've got. / (Philippa Jones)

For example, one common aspect of Bromford culture is embracing difference (*Be Different* is one of the Bromford DNA 'strands'). Colleagues are encouraged to feel that they can be individuals, bring their personality to work and not have to conform to a corporate mould.

/ There was a manager upstairs, and she loves those 1980s pineapple and cheese hedgehogs you get on cocktail sticks [on a grapefruit]. ... So we promised her, if she helps us with this project, we'd make her one of these pineapple and cheese hedgehogs. We made it, and we took a picture of it and put it on Yammer, and said, 'This is waiting for you; we just need that information.' ... You can bring that quirkiness to work. / (Alex Abbotts)

An important learning point on making the best use of available technology is to be confident in experimenting with platforms.

/ Don't be afraid to try some things out, because ... the technology world is moving so quickly that if you get too hung up on trialling, piloting and stuff, you'll never move forward, because the next thing will be out and you'll think, 'Oh, actually, that's

so yesterday.' ... So you've got to use something and get some longevity out of it, but to do that you've got to be pretty agile. I think trying things out and just getting up and running with it straightaway has got to be the approach to take. / (Helena Moore)

Further, having different platforms need not get in the way of its effective use. On the contrary, Bromford's experience is that making the Yammer enterprise social network separate from the more formal communications of the intranet is part of the reason it is so well used.

/ People don't feel like it's a corporate tool. ... I've spoken to a lot of comms people about Yammer, because ours has been successfully adopted, and theirs hasn't. My feeling is [that it's] definitely because they've come at it from a corporate perspective of, 'Right, [we] are going to launch this to you.' That's not how ours launched; ours was very organic. / (Alex Abbotts)

Allowing Yammer to develop organically, guided by colleagues' use, is also seen as an influential factor in how popular it becomes. As Helena Moore puts it, 'look at it through the lens of how you can support people to use it, rather than how you can control and contain it.'

/ I think if you try to control that too much, and try to control what you want Yammer to look like for your organisation, you're really going to struggle. It's not in your hands. ... You can put guidelines in place, and the only thing we've said to colleagues is, 'Don't say anything on social media that you wouldn't say in a café.' It's about giving guidance to people, but don't put loads of rules in

place, because people just will get scared by it. It will turn them off, and they won't engage in it. (Alex Abbotts)

I think you've got to be quite brave around it. I think you've got to see that sometimes it might sit outside your natural comfort zone of your business. What I mean by that is this bit about just let it have a life of its own, you've got to otherwise it's not social media. You can't put a whole load of rules and formality around it. You've got to let it have a life. You might have slip-ups along the way. You might have people posting the odd thing, but hey-ho. They're just going to post it on some other external network. At least you are aware of it and you can then deal with it and respond back to it. (Julie Leo)

Another lesson concerns the changing role of internal communications. Rather than directing, creating and disseminating messages, the communications team is increasingly seen as the engine that facilitates conversations and collaboration between colleagues.

Comms belongs to everybody now. There are too many tools out there to assume that you can control and contain [communications]. ... [If] you've got to get a triple sign-off for every tweet that goes out, you're paralysing yourself, really, and you'll never be effective with it, because it's not instantaneous; it's not in the moment, which is what it's all about. ... It's absolutely the comms team's role to explore new tools; see how they work; discover how they can add value to the business, and also to take responsibility for communicating some very key important messages, and facilitating conversation around those. (Helena Moore)

Communication isn't in the hands of your communication team anymore. Everybody in the business is a communicator; everyone has a platform. Anyone in the business can start a blog, let alone writing a Yammer that takes two minutes. Everyone's a publisher; everyone's a communicator in the business. (Alex Abbotts)

Moreover, social media is eroding the division between internal and external communications.

I don't think there's such a thing anymore as internal and external communications, and I think it's a mistake to talk about things in those terms. There is a grey area in the middle of that, and that's a good grey area ... which is just communications. Twitter is as much a colleague communication tool as it is a customer one, because any of our colleagues can access Twitter, and can read what we're tweeting as a business; can follow the feeds of individuals in the business as well as the official ones. (Helena Moore)

Data protection is an issue to be taken care with but it is important to do this with a view to supporting, advising and protecting colleagues from their own actions and not to hamper their engagement with social media.

Rather than, 'Don't, don't, don't,' it's more, 'Do, do, do,' you know. 'Do blog. Do have a voice. And just be mindful of these guidelines. Here's these guidelines made simple to help you.' Rather than 'Don't say that' and scaring people with a list of 'don'ts'. (Helena Moore)

Finally, various interviewees emphasised the importance of having leaders who are active on social media. For one thing, this helps embed it within organisational practice.

The big thing for me is to make sure your most senior people are engaged with it, and are using it. I think you're always going to struggle if your most senior people aren't into it, and don't get it ... it's going to be a pretty hard sell to the rest of the organisation. (Alex Abbotts)

But equally important is that enterprise social networks are an important leadership tool. Leaders in Bromford are all encouraged to use Yammer to make sure they are accessible, visible and in touch with the organisation. Philippa Jones, Bromford Deputy Chief Executive, put it thus:

It's such an easy way (a) for us to keep in touch and get a sense of what's going on out there but (b) for us to give some very easy recognition and get some executive visibility, even from the comfort of your own settee. It's always a big challenge for us ... to make the time available to get out, be out and experience it on the front line. ... I can so easily just put on [a post], 'That's really great work, well done. Have you thought about this?' It takes seconds. Those little interactions, cumulatively, I think make a really big difference to the way those dispersed project workers feel about: 'Are the execs in an ivory tower or do they actually interact with me?' ... I do take days out of my schedule to spend some focused time looking at some of our services in Gloucestershire, for example. If I meet a dozen colleagues in the course of that day, that's probably all I'm going to do. Which is great but I can add to this. When I get home, while I'm catching up on junk telly, I can actually interact with a dozen or so colleagues. That thread will be read by dozens more, maybe even hundreds more on some occasions. It's a massive impact for minimal effort. (Philippa Jones)

As a chief executive, or a senior manager, when it's really hard to keep in touch with people constantly because you're so busy yourself; but you want to make sure you're talking to people, listening to people as much as talking to them, sharing what you're doing; why wouldn't you want a free tool ... a nice app to use ... and it's just at your fingertips? (Helena Moore)

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