Assessing Online Behaviors through Discussion Forums in NGO's Daily Working Life

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Abstract— Traditional site traffic analysis based on site visits, page views, number of posts, and length of stay provides only limited insights to online human behaviors. The focus of the paper is to develop a systemic metric for evaluating online social software, and particularly online forums. In the context of NGO sectors, the metric materializes to fit the settings and interests of the organizations with a special focus on the forum’s values on human behaviors such as information sharing and peer support.

Keywords: Employment services for the mentally impaired, NGO, Performance evaluation, Human behaviors.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information technology definitely changes the whole world, but not everyone has a fair access to it. Profit is often the main concern of those technology giants. Advanced technology opens the door to creating new possibilities for the general public or just leads to the making of a few rich persons in the world. “Poor service for the poor” is a well-known saying in the area of social welfare. We now can rephrase it to say “Poor technology for the poor”. A shortage of resource is often experienced by the social and welfare institutions because their service focus is on the poor rather than the opposite. It is the reflection that leads us to study the IT solutions for the nonprofit organizations, especially for the technological needs of social workers. Comparing to profit organizations, the technology used in serving the poor in nonprofit organizations has been so far behind. However, recent research on helping the poor with technology has been increasingly developed.

Our research is interested in service learning [1, 2, 4], a pedagogy that integrates domain specific research and authentic learning. It is essential that curriculum of service learning encourages students to apply what they learn in the classroom to enabling NGOs to achieve more. In this case, we work with a NGO that provides supported employment services [7] for people with mental disabilities. Persons with mental impairments tend to be viewed as unemployable and systematically excluded from labor markets. However, this assumption has been challenged recently after the development of community rehabilitation, and supported employment services in particular. With sufficient and appropriate support on the job, many people with mental illness are capable of participating in the world of work to various levels, which not only provides them with financial support but also opportunity for social connection. In other words, employment service that allows persons with mental illness plays a key role in the process of social integration for the mentally ill persons [6,7,8].

There are eight supported employment programs in Taipei, Taiwan in 2006-8 funded by the Taipei City Government through a NGO-government partnership [16]. Four programs have agreed to participate in this NGO project. It is not hard to soon realize that coordination of supported employment services to those who are less privileged is complicated given challenging goals, scare resources and social workers that come from varied institutes and may have their own agendas.

The study in this paper has been conducted around the theme of service learning which often presents itself in the context of action research [1-2, 4, 14], trying to solve a local problem with actionable plans and involving researchers and participants in equity positions. Technology can be one form of intervening to make changes and aim for improvement. Through one year of problem diagnosis and action planning, an online forum was introduced to the supported employment NGO with 29 social workers and one supervisor from the four rehabilitation programs.

The focus of the paper is to develop a systemic metric for evaluating online social software, and particularly online forums. In the context of NGO sectors, the metric materializes to fit the settings and interests of the organizations with a special focus on the forum’s values on information sharing and peer support.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We describe the background of supported employment services and the process in Section II. Requirements of information systems are analyzed...