Published on *Digital Agenda for Europe* (http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda)

Author: Heather Blanchard [1], published in DAE blog [2] on 01/10/2012
I was invited recently to participate in a seminar on Socio-Economic Assessment of the Benefits of Social Networks for Organisations. The discussion quickly focused on how the Commission might change the way it engages in the future, and how it could champion web entrepreneurs to grow Europe's digital marketplace.
Share this

--- Posted by Heather Blanchard [3] - GUEST CONTRIBUTOR - Social Entrepreneur sojourning as a 2012 Global Communications Masters Candidate at The American University of Paris

I was invited recently to participate and present at the European Commission's Information Society and Media Directorate General - DG INFSO [4] - seminar on ***Socio-Economic Assessment of the Benefits of Social Networks for Organisations*** - #euseasons. The seminar focused on three core areas which were: (**1**) to establish a better understanding of the benefits and challenges of social networking and social media technology to organisations; (**2**) to arrive at policy options in this area; and (**3**) to help catalyse take-up of collaborative platforms by European organisations. The seminar is part of a greater study by being lead by Joint Research Centre [5] (Seville, Spain) in support of INFSO.

As any event goes, the discussion quickly focused down from the agenda to two key topics of conversation which percolated around the room. The first was *how* ***the Commission might change the way it engages*** in the future and the second was ***how the Commission may be able to champion (and support) web entrepreneurs*** to grow Europe's digital marketplace.

It wasn't long before a participant offered that, ***"You can't engage externally with an expected social behaviour if you don't have that internally."*** This is a common challenge in large institutions. That while perhaps leaders may advocate for change, that indeed change is an elephant which moves very slowly across an organisation. It involves systemic reconstruction and even then an organisation is a system which is seeking to engage with an ecosystem which has become every more fluid. Ever more complex.

This is evident by the next quote from another participant from the Commission,***"We tend to look at the world as our org chart. People looking at us don't look at us that way."*** To be fair, this isn't just a Commission challenge. Many companies and agencies also have this challenge. But this comment is an insight to how the Commission views itself and its place in their ecosystem. I often wonder why institutions may seek outside advice at times when in fact if it could empower its own people and provided the resources and authority that it may get the results it is looking for. Just a thought.

Getting back to my earlier point. ***These aren't social media challenges***. They do underscore my belief that we often interchange the term "social media" to describe the fundamental shift towards an information economy. This shift has created residual effects on organisations who as one participant pointed out, "is dragging around legacy like a ton of bricks on its back." **If you think about what social media may represent, it's really talking about the potential for adhocracy.** This isn't a new idea. Alvin Toffler [6] coined the concept in his 1970 book *Future Shock* [7] but folks like Henry Mintzberg [8] transformed it into management theory. Robert Waterman [9] wrote a book on it in 1992 where he defined adhocracy [10] as, "any form of organisation that cuts across normal bureaucratic lines to capture opportunities, solve problems, and get results." Perhaps what we are really talking about is how these ecosystem work and how they might work together in the future. Here were some thoughts I had at the seminar which might point in this direction:

1. **Examining the Role of Government:** Before moving into these areas, perhaps the Commission may want to define what the role of government would be to be effective in these areas, especially web entrepreneurship. ***What does government do best? What challenges can government clear to help make it easier?*** I think this would be important to understand.
2. **Seeding Participatory Engagement:** The Commission might want to look towards an adhocractic method towards building engagement in the future. How can the system by which engagement happens be built based on principles and values of the ecosystem which it engages. ***How can the Commission explore the ability to seed and coordinate participatory ecosystems in its three mission areas of policy, research and regulation?*** How can the Commission have a mechanism to ensure that under-represented voices be heard (besides just putting out for the public)? How can the Commission move beyond the "beltway" (funny to hear that said in Brussels!) to engagement across Europe? I believe in fostering the environmental conditions, being where people are and having iterative engagement which might lend itself to a participatory culture which the Commission may seek to operate.
3. **Understanding Entrepreneurship:** This is where I truly believe that there is a huge opportunity. First, get out there and meet the people who run all of the great co-working and innovation spaces in Europe. These are the people who can provide a lot of insight. But to be honest, ***you really need to go ask entrepreneurs themselves***. They don't have a trade association in Brussels who can engage, (although that would be great to have).

What I'd ask you to do is to think about what their reality might be like. They have a dream and are trying to make it happen. Many are trying to make rent and pay their cell phone bill. They might need a space to collaborate with big pipe Internet connectivity. **They might need access to tools such as server space, expensive software and even just everyday office resources. Co-working and innovation spaces are so important in the life of an entrepreneur.** It creates a social structure that is organic and much needed because building something new can be very isolating. You spend all of your waking hours trying to make the dream come alive. You need to be around others who are doing the same thing. Not every entrepreneur has ability to access to awesome co-working

spaces like La Cantine [11] in Paris and The Hub [12] in Brussels. The Commission could even have its staff work from these spaces to better understand what's happening at the grassroots level. I'm a big believer in being where people are creating the magic.

While I don't know what it's like for all entrepreneurs, in my experience as a social entrepreneur, **I can tell you that mentorship, a solid business plan and access to people are three things that entrepreneurs might need**. In my case, I kind of ended up as a social entrepreneur (or at least I didn't know there was a name for what I was trying to do). In my journey I ended up leaving government to make a dream a reality. With that dream comes a lot of things that distract an entrepreneur from their core mission. At the time I didn't realise it but looking back what I really needed was a mentor. I needed someone to talk to who had been there before.

Don't get me wrong, I had two wonderful co-founders and we did everything as a team. We are still great friends. But being a woman in tech (probably anywhere else) has some unique situations. I remember leaving a meeting where all three of us were saying the same thing but the person we were speaking to would only respond to my co-founders. We left the meeting and the guys were baffled by what had happened. We laughed at the time thinking it was bizarre but sadly it happens. I was lucky and had a great group of women in tech who were there to help. **I'd like to think if I was in a co-working space and had access to a mentor that would have made a big difference.**

Aside from a mentorship, entrepreneurs might need business advice and planning. Often an idea gets created but the process of being critical of the idea, to survey what's out there is often not done. Everyone likes building the new shiny toy but the other pieces are just as important. **Entrepreneurs may need tools that have nothing to do with tech, but everything to do with strategy and how that idea is communicated.** The next Angry Birds [13] could be in a co-working space today but if they can't communicate their concept and if they don't have access to smart designers who understand usability to project that idea, it becomes really hard to break through the noise.

In Europe it may be harder on entrepreneurs. In the seminar one company spoke of the impossible task it is for a small business to roll out a product across Europe. **Every country has different laws, cultures and languages.** That the company would practically have to hire people in each of the markets they were trying to enter. What does an entrepreneur need then? Where do they go for help?

There are so many areas to consider. Shifting towards a participatory ecosystem and providing avenues where entrepreneurs have a voice at the table, but also going to where they are, would be a great starting point. I would leave on a note that policy is not the answer to these challenges. Policy in fact is the last thing that should be done unless is it re-evaluating current policy on its effective use. **As a closing thought, some of the best ideas of how to change how government works is by the very people who are within the bureaucracy. They just need the environment which allows for this to happen.**

Tags:

entrepreneur [14]
 entrepreneurship [15]
 Participatory engagement [16]
 social media [17]

Source URL:
http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/blog/legacy-ton-bricks-thoughts-social-media-entrepreneurism-and-participatory-

government

Links
[1] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/users/nblanhea
[2] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/blog_home
[3] http://twitter.com/#!/poplifegirl
[4] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/index_en.htm
[5] http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu/
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alvin_Toffler
[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_Shock
[8] http://www.mintzberg.org/
[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_H._Waterman,_Jr.
[10] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adhocracy)”
[11] http://lacantine.org
[12] http://brussels.the-hub.net/public/
[13] http://www.angrybirds.com/
[14] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/tags/entrepreneur
[15] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/tags/entrepreneurship
[16] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/tags/participatory-engagement
[17] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/tags/social-media