Generation Z - New communication habits
Special needs for service and communication in universities

Grzemski, Sarah[1], Decker, Bernd[2]

[1]IT Center RWTH Aachen University, Seffenter Weg 23, 52074 Aachen, grzemski@itc.rwth-aachen.de
[1]IT Center RWTH Aachen University, Seffenter Weg 23, 52074 Aachen, decker@itc.rwth-aachen.de

1. SUMMARY

On average, people surf the Internet three hours a day nowadays and a third of this time alone is spent on the Social Web (Grabs, Bannour & Vogl, 2018). Social media channels are the most frequently used channels and are an integral part of the everyday life of the so-called millenials (Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000). Studies show that the following Generation Z will focus even more on fast digital communication and information channels.

The digitization strategy of RWTH Aachen University [RWTH] considers the demands made on an educational institution by digital transformation in research and teaching. It is vital to further develop essential communication channels within a university. Therefore it is important to deal with the communication behaviour of those who are defined as target groups and to react to new trends.

For the IT Center as one of the central providers of IT services, this means both establishing additional communication and information channels and at the same time taking into account changes in routines and priorities on the part of the users. In 2015, these needs were met in a first step with the introduction of the IT Center Blog and the development and provision of chat support.

The user satisfaction survey 2017 clearly shows the wish that the IT Center ought to continue along this path and provide further modern social media channels for the provision of information and as a communication platform. The paper deals with the experiences of the introduction and use of current social media channels. The focus is on chat support due to the complexity of the application and the challenges for employees. Finally, an outlook is given on the planned extensions of the social media activities and the service range of the IT Center.

2. MOTIVATION

The IT Center of RWTH has been conducting annual user satisfaction surveys on its services since 2013. The aim of these surveys is to give users the opportunity to rate the services and support to recommend improvements to the services. Since 2015, the survey has been structured in a way that it can be compared and benchmarked with other North Rhine-Westphalian university IT centers.

The demand for fast information and interaction was already articulated considerably in the user satisfaction survey 2013. In July 2015, the IT Center responded by setting up the IT Center Blog as an innovative information platform. The blog provides news from the IT Center as well as tips and tricks about the services. With the comment function of the blog, readers were given the opportunity to publish and discuss their thoughts. The interaction between the readers and the IT Center is a central focus of the blog. At the same time, the blog offers a channel to the IT Center to quickly disseminate information.

As a further step, a feasibility study was initiated which prepared the project "Introduction of the Support Chat". The goal was to evaluate and decide whether an in-house development of a fast, simple support channel to the IT center was strategically sensible and could be realized with reasonable effort.

3. THE SUPPORT CHAT OF THE IT CENTER

In 2014, the IT Center conducted a status quo analysis of its key competitors. The goal was to determine whether and by who chat support had already been established. The analysis covered TU9 universities (TU9, 2019), the IDEA League network (IDEA League, 2019) as well as selected other institutions such as Forschungszentrum Jülich and the University of Cologne. Except for Delft University of Technology (NL), there was at that time no IT Center-like institution with chat support. The use of chatbots has also been discussed at that time, but the steering group of the IT Center clearly positioned itself against the use at the time. The decision at that time was based on the limited technical possibilities of these automated systems. The steering group deliberately decided to have the chat requests answered by employees.

After having evaluated all results, the head of IT Center decided in 2015 to offer users an additional innovative communication channel in the form of Support Chat.

In order to realize a chat solution adapted to the processes of the IT Center, the Support Chat was implemented as in-house development. The Audience Response System - direct feedback - already developed for RWTHApp (Politze & Decker, 2014) and established in teaching was reused as the basis for this.

3.1. Implementation challenges

The requirements analysis for the realization of the chat identified the following challenges: development of a front-end for users and a backend for employees, integration into the ITSM processes of the IT Center, formal guidelines for the general use of the chat, organizational framework conditions and employee qualification.

In addition, a time schedule was drawn up which foresaw a test phase in the winter semester 2015/2016 with integration of the chat support into the documentation portal of the IT Center as a web chat. The go live for the integration into the RWTHApp was planned and realized during the summer term of 2016. At the same time the test phase was finished.

At the end of 2017, the IT Center once again addressed the topic of chatbots in a project within the context of the central LMS RWTHmoodle (RWTH Aachen University, 2019). Experiences from the project showed that chatbots cannot be used in a target-oriented way in the context of teaching. However, the technical development of chatbots has progressed so far that it will be discussed again whether they can be used in Support Chat.

3.2. Goals for the introduction of chat support

Two different approaches were taken into account when defining the objectives: on the one hand, the strategic aspect had to be placed in the foreground. The IT Center was the first IT institution of the universities surveyed to offer its users a fast, modern and simple communication channel for support requests. At the same time it was made clear that the IT Center is ready to respond to the wishes and suggestions of its users.

On the other hand, the objective was to achieve a quantitatively significant reduction in inquiries by e-mail and telephone. The reason for this is that answering inquiries by e-mail or telephone takes much longer. Furthermore, the Support Chat was integrated into the ISTM processes of the IT Center and the opportunity was created to use the Support Chat via various entry points. In order to get used to the new kind of support, the chat was integrated into two less support consuming applications (RWTHApp, eduroam device management) and the IT Center documentation portal. In June 2019 the implementation into the LMS RWTHmoodle will start. This embedding in one of the most widely used applications is expected to increase the number of users.

In order to avoid unnecessary barriers, the Support Chat has been designed so that it can also be used by unauthenticated users.

4. CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Since 2015, both applications have been continuously developed further and relaunched in line with user requirements. The positive feedback on both applications confirms the decision made in 2014.

Regular training sessions were held to internalize the new way of communication among support and marketing staff. This experience prompted the IT Center to further expand its social media activities as an early adopter. A current project analyses various social media platforms, identifies the requirements for the employees of the IT Center and formulates a detailed target group analysis.

The IT Center wants to continue the customer- and service-oriented approach to user communication. Even the fact that the chat did not lead to a significant reduction of telephone and email requests is not decisive. It remains to be seen whether the step to integrate the chat in more widely used applications will increase the usage of this channel.

The self-image of being an innovative partner also takes into account the need to adapt to the shift in priorities in the choice of communication channels for students and young employees.

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6. AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Sarah Grzemski M.A. received her Master's degree from RWTH Aachen University in 2002. Until 2007, she worked as a research assistant in the Department of Economic Geography of Services. Her main research focus were employees in call and service centers. Since 2007 she has been working for the IT Center of RWTH. In 2010 she became division head of the IT-ServiceDesk. She was appointed to the position of chief communication officer in October 2017 and is responsible for the internal and external communication of the IT Center. In August 2018 she integrated Marketing and Eventmanagemet into the division structure. In October 2018, the department was renamed Service & Communication. LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/sarah-grzemski-1974a317b/

Dipl. Inform. Bernd Decker is deputy head of division of IT process support division at IT Center RWTH Aachen University since 2011. From 2006 to 2009 he worked at IT Center as Software Developer and since 2009 he is lead of the development group. His work is focused on IT solutions for processes in the field of E-Learning, E-Services and campus management systems. LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/bernd-decker-934716166/