



SOCIAL NETWORKING OR SOCIAL NOT WORKING?

WE TAKE A LOOK AT THE MOST POSITIVE WAYS IN WHICH COMPANIES CAN TACKLE THE NEW PHENOMENON OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES.

Not too long ago businesses were being told if they weren't on the Internet they wouldn't survive. Today, involvement in social networking and the more interactive aspects of 'Web 2.0' technology seems just as crucial. A lack of awareness or use of networking technology, whether it be an internal network or an external site such as Facebook, Bebo or LinkedIn, means disregarding a highly effective communications tool – one that can find you new recruits, retain current employees and help those workers do their job more efficiently.

There is no doubting the popularity of external social networking sites. In May 2007 the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) recorded 80% of students regularly using these sites compared with 40% in September 2006. The same research found 25% of employers actively looking at external social networks to cross-reference applicants. A useful tool then, and yet at the same time there are those who view the whole activity as a waste of time – research by AXA has included online social activities as an example of 'social not working', an activity that amounts to 50 minutes per day per employee.

Unsurprisingly approaches to social networking among employers are varied. Jeremy Burton, CEO and president of Serena Software, confesses to being an avid Facebook user and has adopted the site as his company's corporate intranet. Serena's 800 employees enjoy 'Facebook Friday' every week when they have one hour to go online specifically to keep in touch with their friends, families and interest groups.

"As our business continues to grow, the workplace becomes more and more distributed which can make us feel disconnected from one another," notes Burton. "Social networking tools can bring us back together, help us get to know each other as people, help us to understand our business and our products and help us better serve our customers." An entirely practical approach then - and Serena may also see benefits in employee productivity since giving people a particular time when they can engage in online frivolity, means they are less likely to do so when they should be working.



"information on such sites goes into the public domain"

Facebook plays host to dozens of groups dedicated to bringing together employees at PricewaterhouseCoopers, but unlike Serena, PwC has not officially sanctioned this activity nor does it give specific directions to employees to govern access. *"We've made no attempt to block access to the site," says Brian Bannister, director of communications. "We don't promote it either – we just say in our IT policy that employees should be aware information on such sites goes into the public domain so make sure you are happy with what's out there."*

For PwC, an employee who spends too long socialising will be easy to spot through deficiencies in their work. Until that occurs

there is no reason to assume such activities do damage the company or the work of the individual. But it may not be that simple, if Carole Gaskell, founder and CEO of coaching and leadership specialists Full Potential Group is to be believed.

"Today, everyone tends to work in virtual teams and we all work on shared content so these types of networks are clearly useful," she says. "But none of this replaces the traditional aspects of building relationships, looking people in the eye and getting to know the person who you're working with."



Gaskell worries that employees can end up hiding behind such networks – whether internal or externally hosted - and that what at first appears to be a useful and efficient way of meeting, sharing information and co-working, in fact leaves individuals at risk when they do need to work face to face: *"If you don't use your interpersonal skills you will lose them," she says. "People lose confidence about being able to interact with others and if they're too reliant on these networks, there's a danger they'll feel awkward in wider society."*

The strength and danger of social networking sites is that no one - especially not employers - can truly control the overall effect of this kind of online activity. If social networks, whether accessed outside an organisation or hosted internally across an intranet, are censored or manipulated by an organisation, it could well alienate users. An organisation's view of this activity is, therefore, most likely to reflect whether overall coverage of the business is positive or negative.

"be aware of the perception that exists"

Andrew Jordan, chairman of online reputation tracking and reporting company Reputica, notes companies now need to be vigilant constantly for online information affecting their business: *"The problem is the information that's out there does not need to be true to have an impact," he says. "Organisations need to be aware of the perception that exists."*

Jordan notes that the sources of such information are increasing on a daily basis. There are some 170,000 new blogs created every day, and it can take only one disgruntled employee to have a bad day at work and post a grievance online to start an avalanche of negativity.

While Reputica monitor organisation reputations, they can do the same for potential CEO recruitment. *"Again we're not just looking at what the person themselves has done or said," notes Jordan. "It's about the impact they've had on the people around them. A candidate might say they're the model public speaker, for example, but overall opinion from the public could be that that's just not true."*

A further problem is highlighted by Brian Fenwick and Stephen Brown, directors of Staffvetting.com: *"The problem with Facebook and MySpace is that around 25% of people don't set up their account properly so they're*



RISK VERSUS REWARD - THE MONITORING MINEFIELD

THE PREVENTION OF HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE TO ALL EMPLOYERS, AND THE PREVENTION OF THE INTRODUCTION OF POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE MATERIAL INTO THE WORK ENVIRONMENT, FORMS PART OF THE EMPLOYER'S DUTY TO PROTECT ITS EMPLOYEES.

Whilst it is perfectly acceptable for employers to monitor the use of the Internet at work, it is important to understand the limits that legislation has put around monitoring. Failure to understand the parameters of legitimate monitoring, risks potential claims for unfair dismissal, breach of contract and breach of privacy laws.

So what is acceptable monitoring?

Best practice for monitoring purposes would include:

- Implement an Information Systems Usage policy that sets out the parameters of the employer's right to monitor its employees' internet usage.
- Pay heed to the Information Commissioner's Office guidance which states that employers should not monitor internet usage beyond that which is necessary to verify any misuse of the Internet.
- Only monitor employees when the advantage to the business outweighs the intrusion into the employees' affairs to prevent claims of breach of privacy laws.
- Carry out an impact assessment before monitoring, weighing up the advantage against the intrusion - this will help in the face of any subsequent complaint of excess monitoring.
- Ensure that information discovered through monitoring is only used for the purpose for which the monitoring was carried out.
- Ensure that any information discovered through monitoring is kept secure and only for as long as may be necessary to reasonably allow an investigation to take place, and any disciplinary proceedings to be instituted and completed.
- Ensure that all those with access to the Internet have a clear understanding of what they can and cannot do and that they are aware of the level of monitoring taking place.

Crucially, employers should not undertake covert monitoring except in the rarest of circumstances. For example, for the prevention or detection of crime, when it has been authorised at the highest level, and, there is a risk that notifying employees of the monitoring would frustrate the process.



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open to identity theft," says Brown. "That has to be an area of concern, because no matter what your policy is on accessing these sites, there are people who will not do it right."

Clearly any chink in the armour of an organisation's IT structure and use needs to be addressed, since hackers and malicious surfers will exploit any loophole they can find to extract financial or personal gain.

The company specialises in staff vetting for clients and while they usually exclude social network information from their activities - Fenwick says it falls outside their usual parameters - it can be included at a client's request. Certainly for most organisations social networking has become most prominent in the recruitment arena. At first glance it appears these networks offer employers the chance to tap into a vast wealth of potential candidates - especially the revered high quality 'passive candidate' who doesn't realise they need to be employed by you but will do a fantastic job when they are. However, caution is to be exercised.

"Social networking sites are not built with HR or recruitment in mind," says Dan Richards, managing consultant at GRS Risk. "Facebook isn't going to tell you what motivates an employee or candidate."

"personal and professional should be separate"

Jayne Rowley, publishing director of Graduate Prospects, notes the type of information posted on such sites reflects the nature of the talent pool involved in this activity: "This is Generation Y and they see less of a divide between the social and professional," she says. "They're much more relaxed, much more extrovert, but they need to understand they're dealing with recruiters who do believe the personal and professional should be separate."

While cautioning graduates and other external network users to ensure they make full use of the 'privacy' settings included on these sites, Rowley also advises employers to be aware of the context in which this information appears. Not only that, but there is a danger that tapping into such personal details, realising their sexual, racial and even political persuasions, could lead to discrimination cases if candidates believe these aspects of their lives are used to determine selection. "If you have access to that information it could be influencing your choice," Rowley warns. "Some companies already have a policy not to use it at all."

The fact is that maximum value is not derived from these networks through targeting unaware potential applicants, but through exploiting the functionality of the sites themselves. Research from HECSU found 50% of site users were happy for recruiters to use social networking sites but the information placed on the site by those organisations had to be fit for purpose, contain clear value and be relevant to readers. In other words it's fine to tap into a user group in order to advertise an appearance at a careers fair, but it is unacceptable simply to drop in an indiscriminate advertising banner.

"If you want to put something on Facebook such as a recruitment fair or a campus visit, use the events listings,"

advises Jayne Rowley. "Make sure the message fits the medium - the way you talk to candidates in Facebook must be different from the way you communicate on your website or in print."

Facebook may be riding the crest of a wave at the moment, but even if it is replaced by a new site in a few months, the social networking phenomenon will continue. As Lisette Howlett, MD of HireScores.com notes, it is impossible and foolish to try and ban access in the workplace: "If you ban it your employees will use all their time and energy to work out how to get round the ban," she notes.

Far better then for employers to embrace and get involved with this area of technology. There is no certainty as to where it may lead, but that's part of the excitement. Sites such as HireScores.com - where feedback on recruitment companies and processes are recorded through a Web 2.0 environment - are already exploring the potential of this technology in an attempt to bring value to the HR and recruitment function.

"As an employer you need to take a step back," advises Lisette Howlett. "You can't fight technology but you can change the relationship you have with your people to manage that technology more effectively."

At the end of the day if you trust your employees to use social networking responsibly and leave them to get on with it, your trust is likely to be rewarded. Try to record or curtail such activity and employees will go online anyway and start to fight back.


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