

# The Phenomena of Social Networking and the Work place

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The phenomenon of social networking through sites such as Facebook, My Space and the more professional sites such as LinkedIn have become major aspects of e-communication inside and outside the workplace in recent years. As such workplaces are encountering new issues which require understanding as well as policies and procedures to deal with these new aspects of work, to ensure they reap the rewards of these new ways of working.

It is important to understand what the potential benefits and problems associated with these tools in the workplace of the 21st century are. The consequences of these new tools are being experienced in a wide range of workplace issues. From a productivity perspective the excessive use of these social media tools can have a negative effect as employees become diverted from the normal day-to-day activities due to the immediacy of communication on these sites. In addition, organisational reputation can be damaged where employees make inappropriate comments about their employer. Issues of privacy and security have also been raised. However, as Chilvee and Cowan [4] note this medium is increasingly the preferred method of communication for many employees and organisations are increasingly looking at embracing this technology to engage with their employees and potential employees. For example with the increasing 'war for talent' social networking sites can be a tool to engage current and future employees and retain contact with former employees who may return to the organisation, as increasingly employee work in and across networks of organisation [10]. For example, Dow Chemicals identified that 40 per cent of its workforce will be eligible for retirement with the next five years, as such, Dow has made talent and career management core issues for the organisation. Dow has launched a corporate social network – My Dow Network - which serves retirees as well as former and current employees. Initial evidence for the social network site has found an increase in re-hires [4]. The site also achieved wide publicity with an Employer of Choice award from Workforce Management, Computer World and Business Week for its initiative approach. US-based software organisation Institute uses a corporate blog to keep employees globally involved in meetings [11]. Other major international organisations such as Ernst & Young and Unilever have established their own Facebook pages as a way of developing brand awareness and attracting new talent through listing jobs on their webpage [17]. Indeed, Ernst & Young claim to have 15 000 plus members across 140 countries [2] and KPMG uses the social networking medium to inform prospective employees of upcoming campus events [3]. Watham use their corporate page on Facebook and LinkedIn to announce job opportunities and medical organisation Innovis Health uses YouTube to recruit doctors [1].

Training and development aspects of the new media are also being explored as the complexity and geographical diversity of many organisations increases. Social networking sites can be used as a catalyst to connect new employees thus building a network to learn from each other and develop mentoring [4]. From these approaches to social networking organisations can develop highly integrated knowledge networks. These have been factors in the development of such networks at IBM. From a human resource management perspective, a recent study in the UK of 275 HR managers found 80 per cent of them belong to social networking sites [11]. The study found that the major use of the social networking was to develop

knowledge networks. The professional Human Resource Management body in the UK The CIPD- has developed a 'twitter' to inform HR professionals on the latest practices and legal development. However, as noted risk issues are also starting to be identified in organisation as the boundaries blur between the workplace and employees private life. As a Personnel Today/Charles Russell survey in the UK of 226 senior human resource practitioners found, their major concerns with social networking were time wasting, loss of productivity, security issues and inappropriate activities [16]. To deal with these emerging issues, organisations electronic communication policies and practices need to encompass these developments. However, study after study identifies a lack of urgency in organisations decision to develop social media and e-communication policies. A study by Buck Consultants - Employee Engagement Survey - of nearly 1500 employers worldwide found, only 45 per cent had social media policies [12]. A Deloitte Survey also found that whilst 30 per cent of organisations have a media strategy, this survey also noted that 55 per cent did not have policies in place to deal with social networking, and a survey by manpower of 7 710 SMEs in the Asia pacific region found 75 per cent of organisation did not have social networking policies in place [9].

A survey in the UK by the Society of Corporate Compliance and Ethics (SCCE) and the Health Care Compliance Associations of over 800 compliance and ethics professional in the private sector which found over 50 per cent did not actively monitor their employee's use of social networking. More significant was that the survey found only 10 per cent have policies specifically addressing social networks [13]. The Social Networking Regulation Pulse Survey – reported by US-based Institute for Corporate Productivity – of 10 000 employees found that the leading issue for organisations with social networking was the leaking of confidential information [12]. This is illustrated by a case against a former Hay Recruitment consultant who transferred confidential information to his LinkedIn site. Research by Chretien et al. [9] of 130 medical Deans in the US identified four areas of concern relating to inappropriate online posting. These were: sexual relations context; unprofessional comments about schools and their cohort; substance abuse and threats to patient confidentiality. The study also found that 82 per cent of the medical schools surveyed had no policies explicitly mentioning Internet usage. Other cases emerging around social networking issues include the example an employee of the UK retail chain Argos who was terminated following misconduct involving comments on Facebook, Virgin sacked a cabin crew for posting critical comments about customers and organisations safety standards [8] and

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the British Transport Police (BTP) gave a written warning to a senior staff member who had posted explicit details of his sex life and photos (in uniform) on his Facebook page. It also forced BTP to update its organisational policies regarding social networking [16].

A key issue arising from the development of electronic social networking sites is how organisations deal with these issues on external communication sites. Employee's off-duty and private social networking activities about their personal and professional life are increasingly areas for conflict. This is also an issue from a recruitment perspective, where a survey of over 260 recruitment management in the UK found that 45 per cent of these managers used social networking sites to undertake background checks on potential employees with further 11 per cent planning to. This is more than a four-fold increase in 3 years [14]. The major issues cited for rejecting candidates after undertaking online background searches included:

- Candidates posted provocative or inappropriate photographs or information (53%)
- Candidates posted contents about them drinking or using drugs (44%)
- Candidates bad-mouthed their previous employer, co-workers, or clients (35%)
- Candidates showed poor communication skills (29%)
- Candidates made discriminatory comments (26%)
- Candidates lied about qualification (24%)
- Candidates shared confidential information from previous employer (20%)

The escalating use of on-line information highlights the increasing blur between professional and private lives and information which these online sites hold. As Lyon, argues, employers need to consider the implication of social data mining (or backgrounding) this information as issues of discrimination could be considered against the organisation, particularly if these sites include aspects of the candidates political or sexual orientation, ethnicity and personal interests. This reinforces the point made by Dwyer et al. [6] that privacy concerns with regard to social networking sites are not well understood. This illustrates the issues of managing the social networking relationship between private and professional life, as employers may be acting unlawfully without proper policies as contracts of employment were unlikely to cover staff use of social networking sites [15]. What is clear is that organisational policies and guidelines need to be state what is accepted usage of these mediums and what safeguards need to be developed for example:

- Where social networking includes the organisations name it needs approval;
- Employers should stipulate that employees include disclaimers with their online postings;
- Clear policies on non-business use of the internet is not private and subject to organisational policy [12].

It will be of great interest to watch how organisations learn to manage this contemporary aspect of business.

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