

# **Social Media – Risky Business?**

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## **Introduction**

At three major IT Service Management conferences that I attended in 2010, social media played a big role in communicating the content, the mood and the social aspects of the conference. At two of these conferences, I witnessed and participated in lively discussions on whether companies should block social media in the workplace. Whether the presentation topic was on social media or not, there was obviously a desire to get this on the table for discussion.

And it was heated – every time! Many people have strong views on this topic, so this paper will look at the current industry commentary, and discuss the benefits and the risks of allowing staff to use social media in the workplace.

## **Commentary**

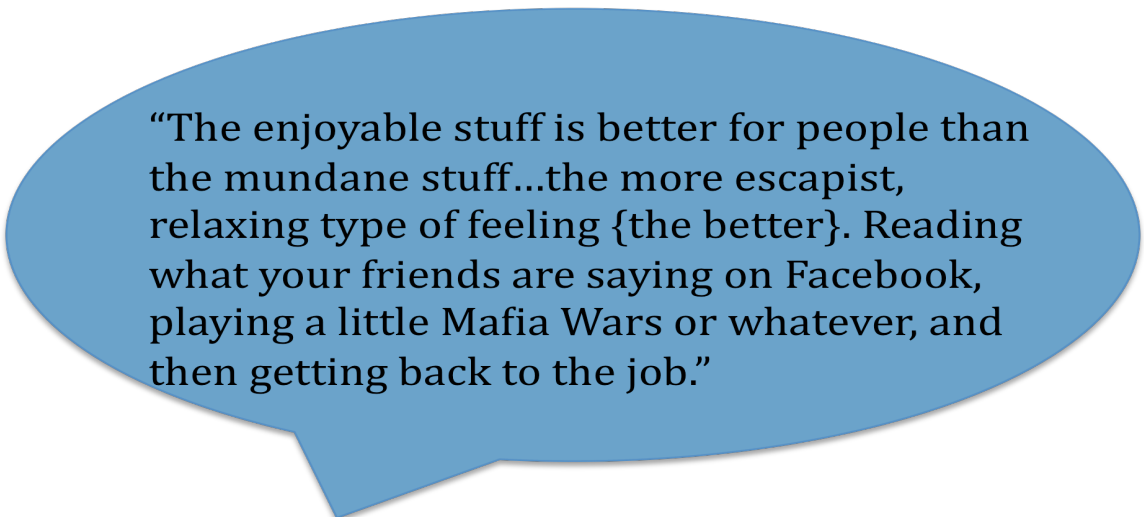
In 2009, DigitalMedia Wire published an article stating that the majority of US companies ban social media sites at work. The following is a breakdown of the statistics:

- 54% of businesses block employee access to social networking sites
- 19S% allow social networking for work-related purposes
- 16% allow limited personal use
- 10% allow full use

A recent article in the Sunday Age (Melbourne, Australia) entitled “Surfing the net good for workers and for business” reported that, according to new University of Melbourne research, “Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites, as well as music and online video sites like YouTube, are the most productive ways employees can relax at work. Searching for information about hobbies, reading online news, playing online games and checking personal email was also likely to refresh deskbound employees.”

The same article states that the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) say employers continue to block many online services to employees, including personal email and internet banking, as well as monitoring internet use when there is no need to.

Dr Brent Coker, a lecturer in Marketing at the University of Melbourne who carried out the research, said:



“The enjoyable stuff is better for people than the mundane stuff...the more escapist, relaxing type of feeling {the better}. Reading what your friends are saying on Facebook, playing a little Mafia Wars or whatever, and then getting back to the job.”

The findings also demonstrated that people who surf the Internet for fun, for less than 20% of their work time, were 9% more productive than those who don't. The research was based on a sample of 300 workers with access to the Internet at work.

Some organisations are taking an innovative approach to recruitment by using social media. For example, Ernst & Young (EY) believe that graduate recruitment is more about developing a marketing strategy and differentiating the brand.

Building a Facebook presence was one of the ways they did this. This allows them to connect with and deliver recruitment messages to their target audience. As of today, they have over 15,000 "likes", and their Facebook page is communicating the fact that they are currently recruiting for their Graduate Program 2011. I would hazard a guess that their staff members have access to social media in the workplace.

## **Benefits**

Apart from the above example where it can be demonstrated that it improves productivity when we allow employees to use social media as a 'diversion break' from the concentration of their daily tasks, there are also the obvious benefits of 'market intelligence'. By encouraging staff to get positive messages out there via Twitter, Facebook etc and also uncovering public opinion of your organisation that is being shared via social media, it is easy to see why organisations would permit and even encourage social media use.

Royston Seaward, a partner in Deloitte's technology integration practice, says

**"There are now many companies that are looking at taking the social media model and seeing how they can apply it both internally, as a way of connecting people across their organisation, and across their client and customer base. In many organisations, this is being driven by staff and teams working together and taking the initiative themselves".**

These changes appear to be coming from the bottom up. Mr Seaward says he hasn't come across many examples where enlightened senior management teams are championing significant change from within.

One of the most inspiring presentations at the recent IT Service Management Fusion 10 USA conference was by a social media guru, who has built a business around helping organisations to use social media in ways we have not thought of before. The ground-breaking concepts shared by ServiceSphere's Chris Dancy ([www.servicesphere.com](http://www.servicesphere.com)) makes one realise that this is not the time to 'wait and see' what will happen - we need to be a part of it, and embrace the opportunities afforded us by using the very human desire to communicate and share, and to use these tools when we need to enhance our means of communication, both within the organisation, and also with our external stakeholders.

And the latest statistics are compelling. According to Jacqui Levy. In the IBM Software Business Partners' Blog on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2011, "86% of B2B firms are already using social media, according to White Horse, and as Hitwise reports, 2010 was the

year that Facebook finally overtook Google as the most visited website on the net. Social media is increasingly one of the preferred tools that people use to communicate with each other and interact with businesses....”

What is the purpose of communication in the workplace?  
*To inform, to share.*

When is it most effective?  
*When it is timely, relevant, and when we feel connected.*

Our current attitude to workplace tools and systems is counter-intuitive for today's needs. By embracing social media, and by engaging our staff, we not only exponentially improve access to timely and relevant information, but a very useful by-product is employee engagement, and as a result, retention.

Anyone who has a Gen-y as a family member or a work colleague will recognise the difference in how they communicate, and they do it rapidly and effectively. They have already made email largely redundant in their arsenal of tools - why email when you can blog, tweet or post on Facebook? They intuitively know how to gain maximum exposure with minimum effort. If as employers we hamper them in their naturally inclined ways of communicating, the result will be frustrated, disengaged employees.



One of the major changes that we have seen in our work life is how we research. We now have information at our fingertips. Ready access to the world-wide-web means we can search newspapers, archives, and encyclopaedias online. Through social media we can also contact experts, politicians, world leaders, first hand! Never before has it been so easy to be opportunistic in business and product development and innovation. Market research is also at our fingertips - we can churn out a survey to our stakeholders, and get our responses back in timeframes that boggle the mind.

## **Risks**

We like our risk management, don't we? It allows us to identify risks, and take action to mitigate. Risk Management can and should be applied to social media usage. It makes good sense to manage the risk by having a very clear social media policy.

If an organisation thinks that reduced productivity will be the result of allowing staff to have access to social media, they are missing the point. People who want to waste time will find a way to waste time! This is usually a sign that the employee is disengaged.

Social media can be an excellent way to engage people across the organisation, both internally, and with external stakeholders, as long as the social media policy is clear, relevant, and communicated.

The social media policy needs to have clear guidelines about confidential or proprietary information. It should make it very clear to employees what the employer expects of them when they use social media, both in work and on their personal time.



It should include reference to the other policies that the employees are bound by, such as:

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• anti-discrimination,</li><li>• sexual harassment and bullying policies,</li><li>• referring to management, board, shareholders in social media etc.</li></ul> |
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Make sure your employees know that they need to issue a disclaimer stating that opinions expressed in blogs, Twitter, Facebook etc are the employee's own opinions, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions held by the Company. This is now common practice, and serves to protect the brand and reputation of the organisation.

Performance management and review should not be discounted as a means of reducing risk. Social media codes of conduct can be built into employees' key performance indicators, and compliance with company policies is also a valid measure. Any inappropriate use of social media to the detriment of the organisation should immediately invoke a performance management meeting with the employee's manager, and disciplinary action taken, as outlined in the social media policy.

We need to make sure that managers understand that this level of performance management is required of them as part of their own performance measure, and they cannot be negligent in this area. I know of organisations that won't allow access to social media and adopt a 'parental style' approach to management, rather than have the hard conversation with the minority who may abuse the use of social media.

Finally, one clear risk is the organisation not acknowledging the inevitability of the role social media is playing in our lives, both at home and at work. If we as employers don't acknowledge and embrace social media, we are already on the back foot. The sooner we accept it, see the benefits, and put a social media Policy in place, the lower the risk to the organisation.

## **What Next?**

Allow your staff to learn as much as they can via social media. Don't just give one person the privilege; it limits the reach and the perspective.

When you allow your staff to use social media, understand that they will use it sometimes to take a break from whatever they are concentrating on. If you do not allow it, they will find other means of getting 'down time', they will not be more productive, and they will definitely not be more engaged! We all need to feel trusted to do our jobs.

Focus on the results, not on the activities. Remember, you employed adults - so let them take responsibility for their own means of delivering the end result (within company policies of course).

Let them tell others what a great place it is to work, and how they can be creative and resourceful with the latest means of communicating and information gathering at their fingertips. You will end up the winner.

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