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Social media in the workplace: Have practical policies in effect

In some social circles, if you aren't "tweeting," you're considered disconnected or entirely out of touch. Certainly, it seems that social networks like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other Web 2.0 environments have eclipsed corner bars, coffeehouses and country clubs as the common gathering places for some groups.

Take, for example, Generation Y. By 2010, Gen Y will outnumber their baby boomer predecessors, and 96 percent of them have joined a social network. What's more, if Facebook were a country, it would be the world's fourth-largest nation with 300 million "citizens."

But individuals aren't the only ones socializing online. Companies are finding a voice within social networks, too. Just a short decade ago companies were creating inviting Web sites to allow their constituents to visit them.

Now, many courageous companies are reaching outside their firewalls and enlisting social media forums, like Twitter and Facebook, to actively engage and directly communicate with their constituents. Others are generating original content and encouraging discussion about their products and services through blogs and chat rooms on their Web sites.

But despite the relatively widespread adoption of social media among companies for purposes of marketing and public relations, many businesses are still struggling with the "if" and "how to" of allowing access to social media within the workplace.

In fact, one recent study reported that 54 percent of companies prohibit any access to social media networks on the job, and another 19 percent of companies permit only limited access solely for business purposes. Why?

Businesses and their management teams have valid concerns about opening the door, or firewalls as the case may be, to social media, but proponents for employees' open access have equally compelling arguments to counter those concerns.

For example, business leaders worry that they'll see a decrease in productivity if employees are allowed to access their Twitter or Facebook accounts from their office, but others will argue that access to social media networks actu-



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ally promotes productivity because workers can conduct more thorough research, and interact with coworkers and customers more effectively.

Proponents also point out that workers who are able to tweet during work hours are more likely to respond to work e-mails or check voicemail during non-work hours.

Of course, many managers voice serious concerns about the potential for employees to leak confidential company information, spread negative comments about the company, or conduct illegal online activity from the workplace. Certainly these are real issues for company leaders to consider. Given the prevalence of social media today, however, it is beginning to feel a bit like plugging a dike with your finger.

How long can companies hope to persevere against such a large, ubiquitous presence on the other side? After all, it seems somewhat unfeasible for a company to circumvent any and all internet access during work hours. Just count the number of iPhones, Blackberries and personal laptops with wireless connectivity in use by employees today.

For some companies, it may be well-timed and more practical to consider how to police rather than prevent access to social media. Interestingly, the percentage of companies that do not permit any access to social media correlates directly with the percentage of companies that have not established policies to deal with the Web 2.0 groundswell.

However, a well-defined and actively enforced social media policy can help promote the productive use of social media at work and prevent most infractions. Below are a few tips for setting a social media policy for your company.

• **Establish parameters that fit your company, your business and your employees.** Some supporters of social media propose unrestricted access, but that seems a bit reckless. This isn't a "one size fits all" issue, so it is impractical to think that a universal policy will work. One company's business may dictate more rigid rules, while another's may be able to tolerate more liberal access.

Establish a policy that fits your business by setting parameters about which sites are and are not permitted and how you expect employees to use the sites during work hours.

Don't automatically block access to any site where customers may be talking about your products or services out of fear for what an employee might say. Very often employees can be your best promoters and defenders there.

• **Communicate your policy.** Make it clear

what is and is not permitted with regard to accessing social media from the workplace.

Also, because for some there is an addictive element to social media, help employees manage their time effectively by providing guidelines for the amount of time an employee might reasonably spend with Web 2.0 tools.

• **Train employees to use social media effectively and responsibly.** Many of your employees are probably already familiar with certain social media networks, but that doesn't mean they know how to use those networks for business purposes or that they fully appreciate the potential ramifications of misusing social media.

For their own benefit, and for the benefit of your business, train your employees to exploit the advantages and avoid the pitfalls of social media. Then trust that they'll do the right thing.

• **Actively enforce your policy.** While companies should always start from a position of trust, a social media policy, as is true with any employee policy, is meaningless if there are no consequences for infractions.

• **Measure performance beyond productivity.** A top concern for companies considering employees' access to social networks involves productivity. It is no surprise that managers worry that employees will be so distracted by tweets and My-Space messages throughout the day that they will get no real work accomplished.

It may surprise you, however, that studies suggest the opposite is true. Research results indicate that every hour an employee spends at work on non-work related activities is compensated for by an hour spent away from work on work-related activities.

At the end of the day, then, it makes more sense for companies to measure an employees' performance against pre-established goals and job criteria rather than a more arbitrary productivity quotient.

Whatever your personal position, LinkedIn or not, you have to acknowledge that social media is, at least for the moment, a phenomena in our society that is fundamentally transforming how people interact, and thus has the potential to significantly impact how we work as well.

Getting on top of this tsunami-strength wave with firm but fair policies can help ensure your company has a smooth ride rather than getting caught in its wake. ■

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