

Social Media and the Workplace— To Be or Not to Be?

By: Lauren Perry

Did you know Facebook has over 300 million users? Chances are many of the employees at your company contribute to this number. Right now we're living in a time of TwitterFaceSpace Pandemonium. No, this isn't a real word—but as the emphasis on social media sites and its impact on the workplace continue to grow, it may soon become one.

Let's break the term down. We've got Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace, three of the top social networking sites on the Internet right now. Individuals can sign up for free, create profiles, share videos, listen to music, receive live updates, and interact on a 24/7 basis with a community of millions. Social media is becoming the newest phenomenon, even people who aren't tech savvy, and of every age, are participating. How is this wave of social change impacting your workforce?

Your workforce is important to you. It's what keeps your company growing, your key to success. Every employer wants a happy workforce, because a happy, BALANCED workforce is a productive workforce. With that in mind, many businesses are having a hard time deciding how to handle social media use during work hours, and whether restricting access to these sites, or setting parameters is pushing too far, or not pushing enough.

Does your workforce have a social media policy established? According to a study commissioned by Robert Half Technology, an IT staffing company, "Fifty-four percent of U.S. companies say they've banned workers from using social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace, while on the job." The study also found 19 percent of companies allow social networking use only for business purposes, while 16 percent allow limited personal use.

"Using social networking sites may divert employees' attention away from more pressing priorities, so it's understandable that some companies limit access," said Dave Willmer, Executive Director of Robert Half Technology, in a statement. "For some professions, however, these sites can be leveraged as effective business tools, which may be why about one in five companies allow their use for work-related purposes."

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Let's look at the positive arguments in regards to allowing social media in the workplace. Some of the benefits of social media access at work are:

- **Boost morale–**

Mental breaks are important. Sending out a few tweets on Twitter can be just the break needed. Many business owners believe mental breaks throughout the day can boost morale and help employees focus better.

The University of Melbourne released a report in April 2009 that found social media use by employees leads to a nine percent productivity boost. The university's press release states, "Surfing the net at work for pleasure actually increases our concentration levels and helps make a more productive workforce."

The university's Department of Management and Marketing's Dr. Brent Cook says, "People need to zone out for a bit to get back their concentration. Think back to when you were in class listening to a lecture—after about 20 minutes your concentration probably went right down, yet after a break your concentration was restored. It's the same in the work place."

- **Solve work problems/questions–**

Social networking can potentially be a great tool for resolving questions or problems. With a large network at your fingertips, chances are someone out there has the answer or an idea.

- **Increase recruitment efforts–**

Social media can be a great way to interact with potential employees. By tweeting or posting a job description on an interactive site, you're opening your job market up to thousands based on different online connections.

- **Build knowledge of social media–**

Hands-on experience is a great way to encourage the use of social media. And right now, many companies are using social media to increase their bottom-line. By taking advantage of individuals who understand the value, and have the skills in social media, a company could create a whole new level of marketing strategy.

Some of the negatives to social media use are identified as:

- **Productivity loss–**

According to a July 2009, media study by Nucleus Research entitled, "Facebook: Measuring the Cost to Business of Social Networking," companies effectively lose an average of 1.5 percent of total office productivity when employees can access Facebook during the work day. Nucleus says, "Although for specific users this

may drive greater productivity, companies should carefully weigh the total business benefit of lead generation and qualification or responding to comments on social networking sites about their operations or products against potential broader productivity loss of all employees with access to those sites.”

- **Security and privacy concerns–**

A growing concern for allowing employees to use social media at work is the potential for confidential business information to be shared online. Most individuals are using these sites for personal reasons such as keeping in touch with friends or family; however, there is a risk of an employee sharing private company ideas and information. There is also a concern for hackers to identify company names and information, and then infiltrate a company network.

- **Recruitment decision risks–**

Companies using social media sites for recruitment purposes may risk adversely impacting minorities by inadvertently focusing on recruiting one class over another. According to Richard Vernon, Founder and Co-chair of the Employment and Labor Department at Lerch, Early & Brewer, Chtd., a full service Bethesda, MD, 48-member law firm, “Employers using social networking sites to find employees may be increasing their liability risks. If they are only recruiting on these sites, and trying to attract similar employees to those already present, they may be overlooking potential minority candidates. This could have an adverse impact on minorities and likely run afoul of EEO standards and requirements. It is similar to the long-discredited method of hiring only by word-of-mouth.”

Another issue employers using social media sites when hiring are facing is a backlash by individuals who feel they were not hired because of their social site profiles. At Lerch, Early and Brewer, Chtd., they recommend companies protect themselves from possible breach of privacy claims by having applicants acknowledge this aspect of hiring during the interview process. For example, a company may want to have an individual sign the following during the application process:

I expressly authorize the Company, for the purpose of investigating my background, to contact my prior employer(s), my current employer, references I have named in this Employment Application, and such other persons, entities, or sources, without limitation, as the Company and/or its agents may deem to have relevant information about me. I acknowledge that such an investigation may include a review of information publicly available on the Internet, and

How to get started on your social media policy ?

I further acknowledge that the Company may undertake a criminal background check of me... © Lerch, Early & Brewer, Chtd.

- **Inappropriate online behavior–**

What about work bullies? The use of social media may be another way for employees to harass, discriminate, or bully one another during work hours.

- **IT problems–**

Employees downloading/uploading video or photo content online while at work can affect computer network system performance.

When it comes to Web 2.0 and social media, there is no in-between. Every company must pick a side, and either ban social media, or allow it. No matter which side you choose, human resources will likely be taking an active role in creating an employee-friendly Web 2.0 policy. Many professionals are now adopting these policies, which are given to both existing employees, and new employees upon hire. These guides iron out the rules for social websites, and discuss the consequences so each employee can remain accountable. Your policy should have one primary goal—to set boundaries for what employees can and cannot do in order to protect your organization.

You may be wondering how to get started on your social media policy. As an HR professional, the first step is to talk to management, educate them on some of the pros and cons to social media in the workplace, and push for a policy to better communicate the rules to employees. Your workforce needs to remain BALANCED in order to thrive. Social media and Web 2.0 is now an added aspect to the general business culture. TwitterFaceSpace Pandemonium is here to stay, so it's important companies adapt to not only reduce risk, but create more cohesion within the office. According to Amy Chulk from careerbuilder.com,

The way I see it, it comes down to mutual respect. Give your employees the opportunity to blend their personal and work lives, and realize that although they may be shopping for that last-minute birthday gift at work, they are also likely responding to work email at home and take care of business matters on their off-hours. Accept and embrace the merging of these worlds—because with or without you, it is inevitable.