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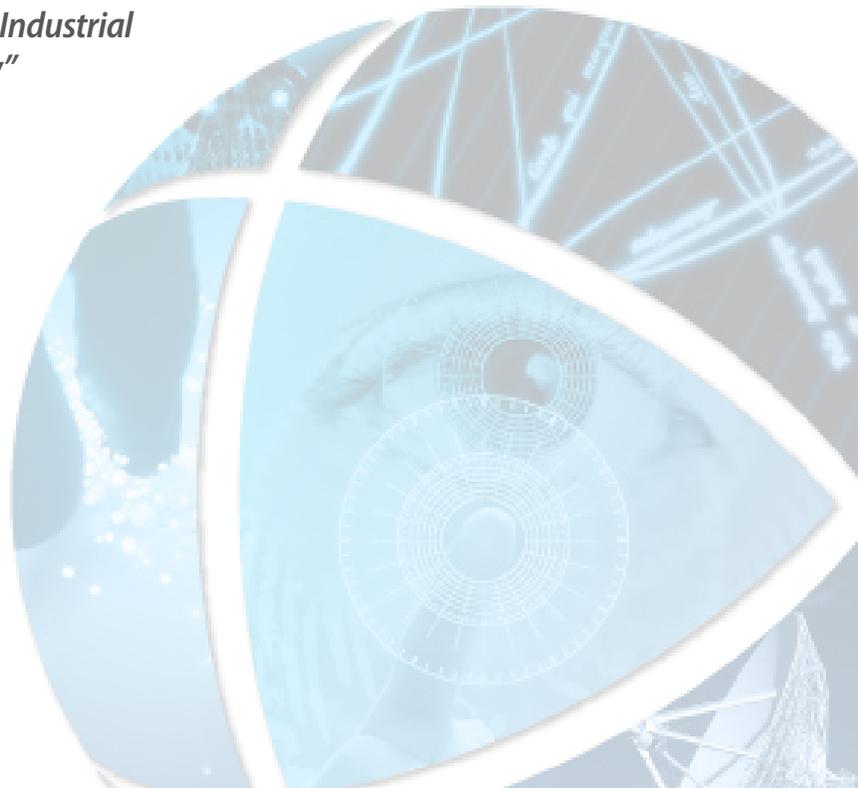
The Impacts of Social Networking Sites on Workplace Productivity

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The Impacts of Social Networking Sites on Workplace Productivity

By Mr. Femi Awolusi

ABSTRACT

Social networking websites are becoming an indispensable part of our larger society, with many businesses using them as tools to enhance a better relational experience with their employees and customers. A careful look at the various types of existing social networking sites suggests that businesses could choose to adopt either an enterprise social networking site or a consumer social networking site, or both, depending on the level of integration desired for matching organizational goals with marketing efforts, organizational learning, and public relations strategies. In this context, enterprise social networking sites are internal websites primarily developed to promote internal work collaborations while consumer social networking sites are available in the public domain and accessible to all. However, both types of social networking sites carry enormous benefits and some detriments that could hinder organizational productivity if not effectively managed. The impacts of social networking websites on workplace productivity and organizational functions, such as training, recruiting, communication, and brand management are examined in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking on websites is a social and technological innovation that cannot be ignored anymore in the workplace. The preponderance and ubiquity of online social networks in recent years has caused business leaders to think about their effect on business processes. More and more people are using social networking sites to connect to friends and family, search for business contacts, collaborate on work processes that cut across organizational hierarchies, and create databases of social interests, news links, and affiliations that may influence their buying decisions. Organizations that learn and adapt faster to social networking trends will have a clear advantage in the market place and ultimately increase their bottom lines (Caloisi, 2008). This paper highlights the types of social networking websites in use and how these could affect workplace productivity.

There are three basic types of social networking websites: 'free-for-all' social websites, including Facebook, MySpace, Ning, and Friendster; professional websites, including LinkedIn, FastPitch, and Plaxo; and industry-specific websites like I-Meet

and ResearchGate (McCorvey, 2010). These serve different purposes and meet specific individual and business needs. However, business organizations tend to categorize social networking websites on two general platforms – Enterprise Social Networks (ESN) for corporate collaborations and Consumer Social Networks (CSN) to manage relations with customers (Caloisi, 2008).

All social networking websites have one common feature: the user profile. The user profile sets the stage for a two-way interaction among people who share the same interests, activities, or personal contacts (McCorvey, 2010).

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE WORKPLACE

The social networking site, Facebook, gained over 100 million users in the United States from 2009 to 2010: a 145% growth rate within a year (as cited in McCorvey, 2010). Thus, many corporations are increasingly experimenting with the use of social networks to improve business operations (as cited in Swartz, 2008).

Business use of social media doubled from 11% to 22% between 2008 and 2009 (Sarrel, 2010). Many employees in the workforce now use social networks to attract clients, develop relationship with business partners, and display their expertise (Sarrel, 2010). When considering a social network for the workplace, common social networking strategies include assessing the needs of the business, the goal of the social network site, and the target audience (McCorvey, 2010). A social network has to deliver business value for it to be considered effective for any organization. It must also protect employee and company privacy and be a tool used to enable employees to work more efficiently (Caloisi, 2008).

ENTERPRISE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Enterprise social networks (ESN), also called corporate, private, or internal social networks, are those developed with the primary aim of promoting collaborations across hierarchical and geographical structures within an organization. These could be assets in times of a slumping economy and as the work force becomes geographically diverse with increasing travel costs (Swartz, 2008).

Benefits of Enterprise Social Networks

Enterprise social networking websites provide support for informal networks that are crucial to collaboration among employees with different skill sets in knowledge-intensive industries. This trend recognizes that effective collaboration mostly occurs through informal networks of relationships acquired by high-end knowledge workers rather than formal reporting hierarchy (Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2002). Enterprise social networking sites promote a worker's visibility and make it possible for an open discussion without the encumbrances of office processes and formal communication channels.

One of the direct benefits of increased collaboration among workers, due to enterprise social networking sites, is the management of knowledge organizational-wide. For a learning organization, the management of knowledge and effective transfer of skills through knowledge sharing is a very desirable attribute. Collaboration at work results in the development of organizational citizenship behaviors, which is described as behaviors that are not limited exclusively to performing what is required by the role, but promoting discretionary and spontaneous behaviors, which in turn allows a continuous exchange among acquisition, experimentation, and transfer of knowledge (Gravili, 2010).

Enterprise social networking sites could be used to access and evaluate the impact of opinion leaders in a communication or information network in order to effectively manage information that is essential to organizational effectiveness. Opinion leaders could control the flow of formal and informal information inside and outside the workplace and often provide solutions to complex issues that are deemed satisfactory to most people. Domain-specific opinion leaders have been positively correlated to general opinion leadership and management could support these individuals with proper training and mentor positioning when seeking cost-effective dissemination of knowledge to promote organizational effectiveness (van der Merwe & van Heerden, 2009).

The visibility enjoyed by workers collaborating on enterprise social networking sites could also reduce the need to assert supervisory, or job-focused, impression management behaviors. Studies have found that being categorized as an out-group member in a formal or informal social network could enhance one's motivation to manage impressions in order to compensate for the out-group classification (Barsness, Diekmann, & Seidel, 2005)

Enterprise social networking websites could be used as one of the tools to promote diversity and inclusion in an organization. It has been shown that the likelihood of communication and networking across informal groups increases with perceived similarities based on sex, race, or age (as cited in Cross, Borgatti,

& Parker, 2002). Social networking sites would serve well as a medium for universal linkage between individuals working for an organization without regards to homophilous relationships.

By default, enterprise social networks tend to have more rigorous requirements for security, authentication, and directory integration and could be paired with video conferencing, visual communications (Caloisi, 2008), and other productivity tools. Enterprise social networks could also provide a good alternative to corporate e-mails as an avenue to disseminate information and ideas.

Disadvantages of Enterprise Social Networks

Enterprise social networks could only be effective in organizations where a degree of trust exists between management and the work force. While guidelines would exist to guide behaviors and decorum on the networking website as an extension of the work environment, management could discourage people from using it to communicate and collaborate if its contents are used in any aspect of performance evaluation or the reward system.

There is also a risk that certain employees can use the enterprise social networking site excessively and waste time on things that are not related to work (Caloisi, 2008). In addition, an upgrade of corporate bandwidth resources could be needed for enterprise social networking sites with video conferencing and other media features. This may come at a cost that could significantly increase the annual budget needed to keep and maintain such website.

CONSUMER SOCIAL NETWORKS

Consumer social networks (CSN) are social networking websites that are open to the public. These include sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Digg and may serve different purposes for different people.

Benefits of Consumer Social Networks

Consumer social networking websites could be used to complement an organization's online presence and will benefit search optimization on search engines through a synergetic effect called the "geometric extension" (Klein, 2008). The geometric extension is the use of a single information asset to populate the various online networks operated by the company. An interview by a local TV company, for example, could be put on YouTube, shared on Twitter, posted on Facebook, and distributed across various micro-blogs operated by different departments of an organization. This will create free visibility on search engines about the news item and its contents,

an advantage that would have had to be paid with advertisements on internet search engines.

Businesses spend a large amount of their annual budgets on market surveys and product promotion. Social networking websites not only allow businesses to market their products but also to engage their followers. The goal of the community-themed environment of consumer social networking websites is to provide a platform for an open and honest discussion (McCorvey, 2010). Thus, companies are able to gather feedback response cheaply and at a faster rate than conventional means (Sarrel, 2010).

Corporations also like to participate in consumer social networking websites because it puts a human face on the business and allows people to get an impression of the business's relationships with its customers. In essence, it exposes a corporation to larger audiences (Klein, 2008). Moreover, there is growing evidence that opinion leaders on social networking sites affect the purchasing decisions of a significant number of social network enthusiasts. Social networking opinion leaders could be targeted with specific product advertisement or sample products where they gather online to maximize feedback response (van der Merwe & van Heerden, 2009).

Social recruiting is a trend that is newly associated with consumer social networking websites. According to Jobvite, an online social media service, up to 80% of companies used or planned to use social networking to find and attract candidates in 2009, with LinkedIn being used by 95% of the respondents and Facebook usage growing from 36% in 2008 to 59% in 2009 (as cited in McCorvey, 2010). The detailed personal information contained in consumer social networking sites will allow businesses to target the specific audience or skill sets they want for an open position.

Consumer social networking sites are now taking on the task of job training and re-training through the various academic and job-related educational videos promoted on their websites. YouTubeEDU is an arm of the popular YouTube social networking website, and it promises an environment in which any qualified teacher can contribute and absolutely anyone can learn (Gilroy, 2010). YouTubeEDU features lectures and materials from hundreds of colleges and universities, including Stanford, Harvard, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Similar social networking websites devoted to interactive learning include Academic Earth, Big Think, FORA.tv and iTunesU. Many employees have been known to make use of these educational social networking sites to refresh their skills and gain knowledge in areas they wouldn't normally be exposed to at work, thereby driving productivity and effective transfer of training.

Disadvantages of Consumer Social Networks

A huge disincentive for organizations wishing to grant access to consumer social networking websites at work is the need to guarantee communications network security. Consumer social networks provide a huge amount of information, along with a rich environment for those looking to breach an organization's communications security. Thus, intellectual property, inside secrets, and company procedures could be exposed to the public or competitors via consumer social networking websites or when employees download unapproved applications without recourse to the IT department (Sarrel, 2010). Some companies generally avoid this by banning access to consumer social networks on company time (Caloisi, 2008). This may not always be a productive measure. A three-pronged approach, namely policy, education, and technology could help to reduce or eliminate internal network breach through consumer social networking websites (Sarrel, 2010).

Research has also indicated that consumer social networks – particularly those that stream videos – use up a huge amount of corporate bandwidth, which is a real problem to businesses. A research conducted by Network Box, a managed security services firm, showed that streams from Facebook and YouTube alone accounted for more corporate web activity and used bandwidth than any other websites, with Facebook accounting for 6% of all web traffic from business networks while YouTube video downloads accounted for 8% of all corporate bandwidths (as cited in M2PressWIRE, 2010).

Consumer social networks could create an avenue for a current or former employee to damage the reputation of a business through inappropriate photo links, rumors, or unauthorized business strategy updates online. Simon Heron, an internet security analyst, suggested that the sheer volume of traffic from corporate networks to social networking sites proved social networking sites are being used exceedingly for personal reasons and not strictly for business purposes (as cited in M2PressWIRE, 2010). Furthermore, businesses allowing the use of consumer social networking sites would need to tread carefully on issues surrounding privacy, as well as legalities involving anti-discrimination laws covered by both federal and state statutes. These issues could require additional labor resources to sufficiently address the problems, and it could negate the positive attributes of participating in a consumer social networking environment when considered together.

CONCLUSION

Social networking websites could heavily influence organizational productivity outcomes in terms of effective collaboration across geographical and hierarchical work structures, the marketing of its products and collection of feedback responses from the market place, and its visibility in the increasingly crowded world of online commerce.

Both the enterprise and consumer social networking sites could be effectively used to an organiza-

tion's benefit, but issues like corporate network security, bandwidth capacity, privacy, and costs associated with maintaining a social network need to be managed to minimize the risk/reward trade-offs associated with the use of a social networking site.

An outright ban of the use of social network in the work place would not only limit an organization's visibility in the online world but could also deprive it of the benefits that social networking provides when used as a productivity tool in the work place.

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