

## Social Media and Productivity in the Workplace: Challenges and Constraints

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### ABSTRACT

*The rise of social media is rapidly changing how organizations operate and communicate. Organizations of all kinds are looking for ways to seize advantage in this emerging era marked by greater immediacy, interactivity and transparency. The new media is growing so fast that it makes it imperative for employees to embrace the medium in the workplace. The aim of this conceptual paper is to examine the relevance of collaborative technology such as social media to employee productivity and discuss the significance, challenges and constraints of social media in the workplace. Based on previous studies, it was found that the use of social media has a positive impact on employee productivity, two-way communication and effective collaboration. Nonetheless, several other studies found the opposite as it was somewhat difficult to make direct correlation between productivity and social media. Thus, organizations should establish appropriate policies at workplace and determine how much use will be made of social media sites for job purposes. In general, organizations should work with, not against social media because organizations that fight the advancing technology are combating a losing battle.*

**Keywords:** *employee productivity, social media, workplace.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Broadly, social media sites design a special computer-generated platform through which social relations are characterized and enacted from a user approach. It can be defined as web-based services that allow employee to: (i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Give the explosion in social media and social networking and both their unlimited potential benefits and risks, employers are dealt with tough decision of whether to embrace this new technology or recoil (Delikat *et al.*, 2011). The answer will surely depend on the particular employer, the organizational needs and priorities and their risk tolerance.

In today's world, work processes have become so complex that no one can work in a vacuum. One must work with one another to get things done, and mobility adds another layer of complexity because the person to work with may not be in physical proximity. Thus, it has quickly become an accepted practice for employees to use social media internally and externally as well as to achieve organizational outcomes. It was commonly agreed that social media sites in particular have had a profound effect by changing the nature of efficiency of communication processes in both business and private life (Beck, 2007).

To consider some context of the ubiquitous nature of social media, Nielsen (2010) argues that social media accounts for nearly one-quarter of all internet activity, and LinkedIn has over 80 million professionals in over 200 countries. Other platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube are available for everyone; it was traditionally created to connect with individuals from all over the world to include employees, friends and families. However, as the number of users increase to millions, organizations are also trying to connect with

employees more so than ever. Facebook, for instance, has 845 million active users in 2012 globally, with Europe recorded the highest users (223 million users) followed by Asia (184 million). The distributions of users by gender were 57% females and 43% males, 425 million users were connected through mobiles, and each user spent 20 minutes per visit, according to Fach (2012). These indicate the increasingly popularity of social networking sites among users and are still attracting thousands of new users daily.

Despite evidence of numerous positive impacts of social media on employee productivity, various other studies found the opposite as it was somewhat difficult to make direct correlation between productivity and social media. The aim of this conceptual paper is to examine the relevance of collaborative technology such as social media to employee productivity and discuss the significance, challenges and constraints of social media in the workplace. This paper also examines positive and negative perceptions of social media sites, provides the relationship between social media sites and employee productivity, and examines whether social media sites are capable of increasing the levels of employee performance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past, human species have survived quite well for many millennia without electronic social media sites. Long before social networking site became the commercialized mass information and entertainment juggernaut it is today, it was accessible to the general public, and certainly many years before Al Gore claimed he “took the initiative of creating it”, the internet and its predecessor were a focal point for social interactivity (Snopes.com, 2005). Any activities where humans share stories and influence others can be considered social networking (Nicholson, 2011). Social networking or media is a great forum for discussing mutual topics of interest, and perhaps even meeting or renewing acquaintances with other humans virtually. According to Greenwald (2009) and Deloitte (2009), 55% of employees visit a social media site at least once a week. Given these percentages of using social media without considering what implications might be for the employer, organizations should also take a look some insights of telecommunication medium at present.

### 2.1 BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN WORKPLACE

The usage of social media is as varied as the organizations themselves. Most people think that social media sites are time-wasters; however, a number of studies have shown just the opposite. Using social media sites may actually increase employee productivity. A number of studies show that employees who use social media sites are 9% more productive than those who do not (Fahmy, 2009). Employees who are more social by nature and are connected to other people through social media sites are better persons in the workplace, which means they are skilled at interacting with others and solving problems. In a similar study by Fahmy (2009), he found that 70% who used internet for personal surfing resulted in sharpened employee’s concentration. It is assumed that by taking short breathers, the brain will be refreshed and renewed.

In a related development, AT&T, a company that sells internet connection services, conducted an independent survey of 2,500 employees in five European countries. Of employees using social media sites (SMSs): 65% SMSs made themselves more efficient workers, 46% SMSs gave them more creative and ideas, 38% SMSs helped them gain knowledge and come up with solutions to problems, 36 SMSs allowed them collect knowledge about employees and customers, and 32% SMSs created team building opportunities. Employees also reported that social media has become part of the culture of their workplace (AT&T, 2008).

From the organizational perspective, a social media site is the quickest way to collect information. “Organizations are actively leveraging the power of social media networks to find new business opportunities, new groups of like-minded individuals and organizations, and new sources of industry specific wisdom, advice and expertise” (Wilson, 2009). SMSs authorize organizations to store and transmit information of different marketing strategies and procedures. Organizational presence can be maintained through social media in the workplace. It also acts as a marketing tool to assist the organization to reach out potential employees. Wilson (2009) noted that “a logical extension of this is to employ people to spend their entire day maintaining the sanctioned organizational presence on various social media sites, acting as an organization’s voice”.

Some employers at present rely on social media sites for recruitment process to reduce recruiting costs, and bunch of curriculum vitae generated by job boards can be lessen. Social media tools can facilitate job applicants to their assessment procedures. A survey conducted for CareerBuilder.com found 45% of employers were utilizing social media to screen potential employees, more than double from the year earlier. Eisele (2006) asked 1,000 biggest organizations in Germany about their experiences with Internet and recruitment. He found out that 67% saw the use of web-based solutions as an improvement of their recruitment processes, 49% of them

practiced it and achieved lower recruitment costs. It also shows that the use of some form of e-recruitment methods reduced the hiring costs about 87% in comparison to common traditional recruitment tools like newspapers (Lee, 2005; Cober *et al.*, 2001). Thus, it is generally accepted that using social media sites for recruitment can make an outstanding impact to the reduction of the recruitment costs and employee productivity as well.

## 2.2 CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN WORKPLACE

Despite the benefits and contribution of SMS to organizations as mentioned above, the widespread use of SMS in the workplace poses many challenges as it changes the way people interact within the organization. According to Wilson (2009), there are five principal risks that organization has in regard to social networking: perceived loss in staff productivity, data leakage from staff gossiping freely in an open environment, damage to a business's reputation, scam practiced by cyber crooks, and the open access to organization's information due to outdated passwords.

Posting on social media sites is also vulnerable to cyber criminal activities by disseminating wrong information which can cause embarrassment to the organization concerned. For example, five years ago, Krasner (2007) posted an issue on Google's health advertising blog regarding her negative view of Michael Moore's healthcare movie "sicko". This issue imputes a lot of criticism and attention from Google users around the world. According to the blog, this issue is just a Google opinion because it was posted on company's blog. In the end, they admitted that the internal review of issue failed to distinguish before it was brought out of the site. This kind of employee's behavior could damage a company's reputation. "Employers have the right to hold employees responsible for such conduct if the postings are used to 'attack the company' or 'harass co-workers'" (Breslin, 2009). In another case, 13 cabin crew of Virgin Atlantic Airplane were fired after they posted disrepute messages about the safety standards of airplane and insulted passengers using social media (Quinn, 2008).

In a related development, Peacock (2008) noted that "employers worry that staff are wasting time on websites during the work hours, weakening productivity and increasing security risks to the company by sharing data externally". In addition, employees who spend more time on social media sites such as Facebook has resulted in many employers banning the use of the sites during work hours (Benzie, 2007). Nevertheless, unproductive employees will find ways to be unproductive without using the internet. Proper supervision and performance policies are the real solution to this concern (Cornelius, 2009). A study conducted by Nucleus Research with 237 corporate employees shows that 77% of employees checking websites during work hours resulted in 1.5% decrease in employee productivity for those organizations allowing access to social media sites in the workplace (Gaudin, 2009). It was obvious that productivity of employees was dropped due to addictive and excessive browsing and uploading photos which were not related to the workplace.

With regards to personal privacy, employees who have uploaded their individual profiles cannot stop the distribution of them. According to the statistics of Facebook for 2012, there are 250 million "photos" uploaded daily, 2.7 billion "likes" every day, and 37 million "pages" with 10 plus likes (Fach, 2012). Given this immense number of personal information may eventually lend in the hand of criminals or culprit employers who may cause harm to the employees and family members. Presently, many employers try to hook up in the world of social media to see the other side of employee's personality before giving the job offer. An example of this, the president of consulting firm in Chicago decided to investigate one of the applicant's social media pages, and he found descriptions of marijuana, shooting people, and obsessive sex (Mooney, 2009).

## 2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY IN WORKPLACE

As the use of social media sites becomes even more prevalent, it is commonly understood that employers need to consider how social media sites is likely to impact their organizations. The widespread use of these sites by employees raises inevitable questions. For instance, how can these sites serve the interests of organizations by enhancing productivity and unleashing the potential of social media in the workplace? At the same time, employers must be able to embrace the technology and minimize risks associated with social media.

In general, productivity of an employee is measured in terms of labor hours spent by him/her on the given task. Bernolak (1997:204) defined productivity as how much and how well employee produces from the given resources. There are basically two types of employees which are the main taskforce of any organization: the blue-collar employee and the white-collar employee. Blue-collar employees are considered as the backbone of any organization because they are the maker of the finished good; they work in factories and workshop to manufacture the ultimate consumable goods. In December 2010, ISTAT conducted a survey to 19,000

households and individuals and found that 48% of blue-collar employees were uneasy when exposed to computing sites, unlike 85% white-collar employees who found the opposite (ISTAT, 2010). In a related development, Bridge Consulting (2009) acknowledged the generation gap among users, with younger employees embracing the technology while older employees (including leadership) were less comfortable with social media tools and less likely to perceive their value.

Bridge Consulting (2009) also claimed that the use of social media tools by organizations were to increase employee engagement, foster employee ideas and innovation, enhance customer relationships and employee productivity. Durant (2010) claimed that Takeshi Numoto, Corporate Vice President of Office Product Management Group, submitted a post, "Productivity + social networking = goodness for the workplace". In it, if influenced in a different way, social media can help organizations be more productive and employees in the workplace form a group that fosters a culture of diversity, respect, and openness. It facilitates organizations with the incredible knowledge and information that need to stay on top of business industry.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Social media generally stimulates collaboration and knowledge sharing between individuals, which can lead to increased or decreased productivity. But social media should be channelled in an effective way to get maximum results from the employees, as there are pitfalls that employees may succumb to it, if left unattended (Ferreira & du Plessis, 2009). The discussion clearly indicates that it is foolhardy to try to stop the inevitable. Instead of ignoring the need for responsible guidelines, organizations of all sizes should begin to define their strategy regarding social media, and most importantly, the rules for employee engagement. By doing so, management can take advantage of the benefits offered by these new communication channels while mitigating undue risk. Hutley (2009) claims that it is far wiser for organizations to embrace social media, sponsor social media platforms, and institute policies, procedures and security to control how these tools are used in the workplace. Uncontrolled and unmonitored social media is a security risk; however, controlled and monitored social media will enrich the organization's work processes, boost collaboration and ultimately enhance collaboration.

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