Social Networking as a Business Tool

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Many businesses consider social networking tools frivolous and have banned their use in the workplace (or, at best, they have not supported them). Instant messaging (IM)—one of the earliest social networking tools—was widely blacklisted at the outset. Many companies still frown on the idea of employees spending any part of the workday on their Facebook pages, watching YouTube, or Tweeting.

In reality, banning social networking is pointless; employees will use these tools anyway. Most companies, for example, discovered that forbidding use of IM resulted in employees using a "grab bag" of IM tools, with no controls or security in place—a classic ICT nightmare. By embracing social networking tools and creating standards, policies, procedures, and security measures, corporations can ensure that these tools are used in a manner consistent with the corporation's wishes.

But wait—the goal is not simply to bow to employees' wishes. Social networks offer significant benefits to corporations if used properly. They can enrich and enhance business processes, and significantly increase employee productivity.

Personal Use Has a Productivity Upside

Will workers still employ these tools for personal purposes? Of course, but that may not be a negative. Human beings are social animals. Throughout our lives, we build communities through family, school, religious organizations, work, and personal interests. We create networks of people with whom we have personal contact, and we frequently turn to these contacts when looking for a job, asking for advice, or sourcing information.

It's no different in the work environment; when we make personal contact with someone, that association makes it infinitely easier to accomplish a business outcome. It makes sense for businesses to encourage employees to get to know one another, even though they might not encounter these individuals during the course of the typical workday. Providing a forum such as a company-only Facebook- or YouTube-style social networking tool will encourage employees to reach out to one other. They might be networking about work-related interests, or about golf or knitting. Such activity, whether work-related or not, builds relationships—and it is our relationships that enable us to find appropriate people and work with them more effectively than if we did not know them at all. Somewhere within that random series of connections lies genuine, dollars-and-cents value to the firm, as employees exchange information and make contacts outside their "normal" sphere of work acquaintances.

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Why Social Networking Is Good for Business

Given that the human species has survived quite well for many millennia without electronic social networking tools, why are these tools suddenly so important? The answer lies in the rapidly increasing complexity of modern life—especially the complexity of today's global business environment. People work in businesses where their coworkers, vendors, and customers may be located anywhere in the world. Business processes have become so complex that they must be automated because humans can no longer perform all the tasks required in the time available. None of us can work in a vacuum in today's world; we must work with one another to get things done. Mobility adds another layer of complexity because the person I need to contact right now may be working not just in another country, but in a car, at home, or in a coffee shop. We need to know how to contact our coworkers, customers, and vendors no matter where they are. Today, the way to do this is through tools such as IM or conferencing applications.

It has quickly become accepted practice to use Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and blogs to market products externally. But how are companies using social networking tools internally, and how are they being used to achieve business outcomes? Let's look at some brief examples of social networking in business:

- A recent study undertaken at the University of Western Ontario found that people familiar with social networking performed better in e-training than those who were unfamiliar. They also discovered that managers accustomed to online social networking reported greater job satisfaction and displayed better job performance than those who did not use these tools.[1]

- An award-winning public issues firm, Davies Public Affairs, suffered from employee disaffection during a significant period of growth. Employees felt they no longer knew who within the firm had specific areas of expertise, internal communications became difficult, and productivity declined. The firm launched an enterprise social networking platform that allowed employees to access and track others' projects, and the firm provided a wiki as a document repository. Within weeks, employees were calling the social networking platform the single most useful tool within the organization, using it as their first stop in the morning to check the company's activities. Davies was able to facilitate communication and knowledge-sharing among new and existing employees; connect employees to subject-matter experts to increase project efficiency and reduce costs for the company and its clients; reduce paperwork and streamline operations; and increase areas of known specialization by about 300 percent.[2]

- Hewitt Associates, a human resources outsourcing and consulting firm, uses Facebook-style social networking to stay in touch—not only with employees, but with former employees. This has resulted in high-quality recruitment based on the referrals of former employees who know the firm well—and provides the firm with opportunities to rehire former employees when they become available.[3]

- Cisco has embraced a host of social networking tools:
    - Cisco® WebEx™ provides IM, audio- and videoconferencing, wiki-like shared collaboration spaces, and more.
    - C-Vision is Cisco's YouTube-like tool.

- We Are Cisco, Ciscopedia, and the Cisco Directory allow sharing of experience, expertise, and personal interests.
- Wikis, blogs, and videos on demand (VoDs) have become everyday tools for communication and collaboration.
- Cisco TelePresence™ is a videoconferencing technology on one level—and a collaboration and social networking tool on another.
- Cisco has discovered that these tools enable the company to truly operate on a global basis, boosting efficiency and productivity, and cutting costs.

Key Elements of Social Networking

Enterprise usage of social networking tools is as varied as the businesses themselves. And we probably have seen only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the variety of tools we will be using the coming months.

Selecting social media depends on many factors, including corporate culture. There are a few basic functions that enterprises find widely useful, including:

Presence: The ability to locate a coworker, determine whether the person is available, and find out the best way to contact him or her. This can be accomplished through IM and certain collaboration tools, such as Cisco WebEx.

Collaboration: Tools that allow people to meet and share documents, give presentations, and so forth. This can include text, video, audio, and other combinations of functions.

Information access: Wikis and other types of interactive document repositories provide workgroups with access to project information and documents. Access can be limited to authorized individuals. These serve as more than static reference tools or archives; they are updated by users, making them fresh and relevant to current events within the company.

Communications: Intramural blogging has become a favored way for many executives to communicate with employees, as have YouTube-style video on demand platforms. IM serves a more immediate, person-to-person communications role, useful for on-the-fly communications.

Access to expertise: Facebook-style platforms allow (and encourage) employees to post information about themselves, their experience, and their skills. Because these are highly interactive, content can be pushed to people who have indicated specific interests. We Are Cisco is a recently instituted social networking platform that allows Cisco employees to discuss personal interests as well as business, enabling employees to connect on multiple levels.

Monitoring: In this case, monitoring means keeping an eye on the pulse of the enterprise and following "the buzz." Tag clouds can be used to monitor keywords that come up in email, IM, and other social media to better understand people's interests. A sudden buzz about a given topic may not lead to a brilliant insight or a hot new product—but then again, it might. Or the buzz might provide management with early warning on a sensitive subject. The intention is *not* to monitor individual communications, but instead to follow trends.

As many have learned from the legend of King Canute (who unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the tide from coming in), it is foolhardy to try to stop the inevitable. It is far wiser to embrace social networking, sponsoring corporate social media platforms and instituting policies, procedures, and security to control how these tools are used in the workplace. Ignoring the issue not only deprives the business of the vital collaboration, innovation, and communication that such tools provide, but also leaves the door open to workers employing extramural social media for company-specific postings that are inappropriate to public discussion. In short, uncontrolled and unmonitored social networking is a security risk; controlled and monitored social networking will enrich the organization's business processes, boost collaboration, and ultimately enhance productivity. McKinsey[4] cites the following benefits of increased collaboration and communications to the enterprise:

- **Generating revenue** by uncovering the "hidden" people who have contributed to cross-selling or closing deals
- **Improving cross-selling** by identifying others' expertise and drawing upon it during the selling process
- **Enhancing career paths** by more accurately identifying top performers
- **Boosting productivity** by sharing best practices and facilitating the transfer of advice and information from colleagues
- **Improving the allocation of resources** through analysis of various networking and collaboration tools
- **Eliminating inefficiencies** by reducing redundant efforts and sharing information

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Endnotes

1. "Can Facebook Train Better Workers?" BizEd, September/October 2009.
2. "*Social* from the Inside Out," Jessica Tsai, CRM Magazine, June 2009.
3. "Social Networking Gets Down to Business," KM World, June 2009.
4 "Mapping the Value of Employee Collaboration," Robert L. Cross, Roger D. Martin, and Leigh M. Weiss, McKinsey Quarterly, August 2006.