

Facebook @ Work: Tool or Timewaster?

When does social networking become social 'not-working'?

By Michael McQueen



In a recent study by Nucleus Research, it was found that almost two-thirds of employees who have a Facebook account admit to accessing it during work hours and a staggering 87% of these employees recognized that there was no work related reason for doing so!

These results pose a tremendous challenge for today's managers and employers. While some businesses suggest there are significant commercial benefits to having a globally connected and actively networked workforce, most managers I speak to express frustration at lost productivity due to employees spending work time on social media sites.

So what is the best response to Facebook in the workplace?

In recent conversations with employers and business owners, I have found that typically there are three management responses that work **least** effectively:

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1. Dictator: This is the manager who recognizes that productivity is being lost and reacts by coming down on it hard. Often the response comes in the form of site blocks, micromanagement of staff and internal web traffic monitoring. While the dictatorial response may give the manager some sense of power and control, the outcome is often a workplace driven by distrust, fear, clever subversion and an adversarial environment where it is staff vs boss.

2. Denial: This second response sees the manager adopt the position of “don't tell me and I won't ask”. The boss knows that time is being wasted but prioritizes being popular and peace-loving over productivity and professionalism.

3. Despondency: This third response sees the manager become resigned to the 'fact' that times have changed and that there is no way of holding back the tidal wave of social media gaining a foothold in the workplace. As such, this response sees the manager adopt a passive and even permissive stance on Facebook use and can often become the first step onto a slippery slope of relaxed professional expectations.

So if the above represent some of the less effective managerial responses to social media use at work, what positive and proactive steps can managers take?

3 keys to managing the use of social media use in the workplace:

1. Set clear expectations at the outset: The best opportunity to make sure that employees understand the boundaries around the use of social media sites is at the commencement of their employment. Be clear on your expectations in job interviews and induction training so that there is no doubt. Having a clause in your employment agreements to this effect is a great approach. Some organizations ban the use of social media during work hours entirely while others allow for use on work computers during lunch breaks only.

2. Apply the hypothetical test. A friend of mine who works for a large financial institution reported that her employer has decided to allow for a certain number of social networking minutes per hour. The management of her company applied the hypothetical test and realized that allowing staff a time margin for Facebook use should be viewed as no different to allowing staff to make themselves a coffee, go downstairs for a cigarette or receive a personal phone call.

3. Calculate the intangible cost. It may be tempting to calculate the financial cost of lost productivity and work hours due to online social networking sites. However, it is important to calculate the intangible cost of barring such sites in terms of employee morale and organizational culture.

It is clear that being connected to friends and the world at large is of prime importance to younger generations. As such, expressly forbidding them from staying in touch throughout the day on social networking sites may lead to increased staff turnover and decreased employee satisfaction over time. This is not to say that a free-for-all is the best course of action but rather that treating your younger staff like responsible adults may be the best way to ensure that this is what they become.

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The evidence is clear: social networking is not a fad... it is here to stay. The challenge for managers and organizations is to balance the commercial imperative for productivity with the needs, morale and freedom of their employees. With a little bit of perspective, open communication and clear expectations, this is certainly an achievable balance.



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