



When Execution Matters

Social Media in the Work Place

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Over the last few years, we have experienced tremendous growth in social media. Recent news reports suggest that many organizations that once shunned social media are now beginning to adopt its use as they attempt to get closer to their partners and customers. In an economically challenging environment, social media is helping companies find new ways to market themselves without spending significant dollars. As overall marketing budgets are slashed, social media has emerged as a tool for cost savings.

The new generation of social web technologies is clearly becoming popular and driving mainstream adoption. For example, Wikipedia, Twitter, blogs, and Facebook have all left their marks on popular culture. Companies, generally known to be more conservative than the public at large, have only recently begun to take advantage of these tools. Various web-based social media applications and technologies are easy to implement, encourage creativity and collaboration, inspire innovation, and increase productivity.

Social media is the engine that has transformed the web from being a one-way informational tool into a two-way collaboration mechanism. In the world of social media, customer preferences for products or services are influenced by ideas, perspectives, insights, and experiences provided by other users. This is achieved through peer reviews, referrals, blogs, tagging, social networks, online forums, and other forms of user-generated content.

In the workplace, social media emphasizes a bottom-up approach that can empower workers. This represents a major cultural shift for traditional organizations that are mostly hierarchical and top-down. Social media, which has been popularly termed as Enterprise 2.0, requires a shift in an organization's state of mind, emphasizing a more open and responsive way of interacting with both consumers and employees. Web-savvy employees are increasingly using free time at work to check social networks and chat with peers. This peer-to-peer interaction can be beneficial to organizations, though undisciplined access to social media in the workplace does have its risks

Some companies have adopted social media like Facebook to encourage employee participation. These tools help vendors, partners, and prospective employees to learn about the company easily. Businesses are fast realizing that customers are talking about them on social media websites and smarter enterprises are finding ways to collect those comments to provide immediate customer service.

Social media is just a tool, and tools can be beneficial or harmful to an organization's operations. Companies need to make a conscious effort to ensure that these tools are working to their advantage.

Rewards of using social media in your organization:

- Social media sites enable companies to host videos and other materials related to its marketing campaigns and to popularize corporate social responsibility efforts.
- Social networking sites can facilitate the publicizing of annual user events by encouraging employees to put links to the event in their "status updates", such as their LinkedIn profiles.
- Social networking sites can also increase the interest of potential employees who forward resumes to their contacts.
- Status updates communicate a member's current activities to interested parties and also allow members to be in touch with what their contacts are doing. This can reduce the time required to keep in touch with contacts and expand networks.
- Blogging enables organizations or employees to share knowledge, expertise and experience.
- Ardent supporters of products and services from businesses are becoming unofficial spokespeople for the company.
- Social media connect workers in different departments who may work on similar business problems but wouldn't typically cross paths, especially in large enterprises or companies with distributed workforces.
- As telecommuting becomes more common for knowledge workers, contributing to a wiki can complement traditional conference room brainstorming sessions.

Risks of using Social Media in your organization:

- Social media risk the exposure of confidential and personal information.
- It can create a 'record' of rants, flame-wars or inappropriate conduct.
- It can disclose too much information about employees, risk harassment or stalking, or put the company in awkward position with respect to personal conduct.
- Collecting interactions on social media platforms is a challenge.
- Certain social networking communications may be seen as creating hostile work environment and puts the company and employee(s) in jeopardy.
- Businesses need to invest in monitoring to see how their brands are being represented on social media platforms.
- Focusing on the technology may distract organizations from thinking about what they are trying to accomplish.
- Employees may over-invest their time in social media applications and become distracted from other elements of their roles.

Conclusion

Bringing social media platforms to the enterprise is more than just the latest technology; it is changing the traditional business model and tapping into the creativity, intellect, and passion of every single employee. The power and reach of social media tools has empowered individuals to have their voices heard around the world in an instant.

Still, these applications can be a cause of concern to organizations because of the concentration of power is in the hands of the individuals utilizing them. Organizations continue to struggle with whether to allow employees to participate in these networks, how to enforce policies, and how to adjust to all that the networks have to offer. Organizations must assess the risks and rewards expected from social media adoption, and more importantly they must monitor and evaluate those expectations after they set their course.

Social networking is a trend that empowers individuals to stretch, collaborate, and participate in ways that traditional organizational structures have not allowed. From this expanded freedom, companies may find great new ideas, routes to market, ad hoc groups formed to address certain issues, new ways to encourage customers or the public to participate in the organization's mission, or simply a boost in employee morale and participation.

Tools are emerging to make leveraging the information stored in our social networks beneficial to those participating in them. Social media can have meaningful business impacts in multiple areas of the organization:

- Sales teams can use social networking tools to prospect customers, since these sites offer all manner of information that is useful in relationship building. Sales representatives can stay in touch with their network of hundreds of contacts by regularly updating their status to report on events, promotions, and customer successes.
- HR can utilize networking tools to recruit new employees and market the organization to a larger audience.
- Marketing departments can use these tools to promote brand awareness, publicize news and events, and announce new product / service offerings.
- Organizations as a whole can use social media tools like Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and podcasting to share knowledge and expertise amongst employees, connect with employees in different departments, collaborate with employees in design discussions, train new employees, promote best practices, and network.

So what is the tangible Return on Investment (ROI) for using social media, and how does allowing employees to be part of this new networked world help enterprises increase sales or make employees more productive? The answer is that the benefits of social media are very difficult to measure given the unprecedented, unquantifiable way it works – it is true paradigm shift.

We cannot measure how many employees ask business-related questions or share ideas on Facebook or Twitter, but the organization will be aware that valuable knowledge transfer happening. The number of new customers as a result of brand outreach cannot be counted, but the organization may be seen as more 'human' and customer interactions will have more of a give-and-take, rather than just pushing messaging at them. The investment in social media will mostly be in employee time. Since many elements of these tools are absolutely free, organizations can expect to have knowledgeable employees as well as happy customers.

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