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Social network sites: Can they enhance employee productivity in an organization?

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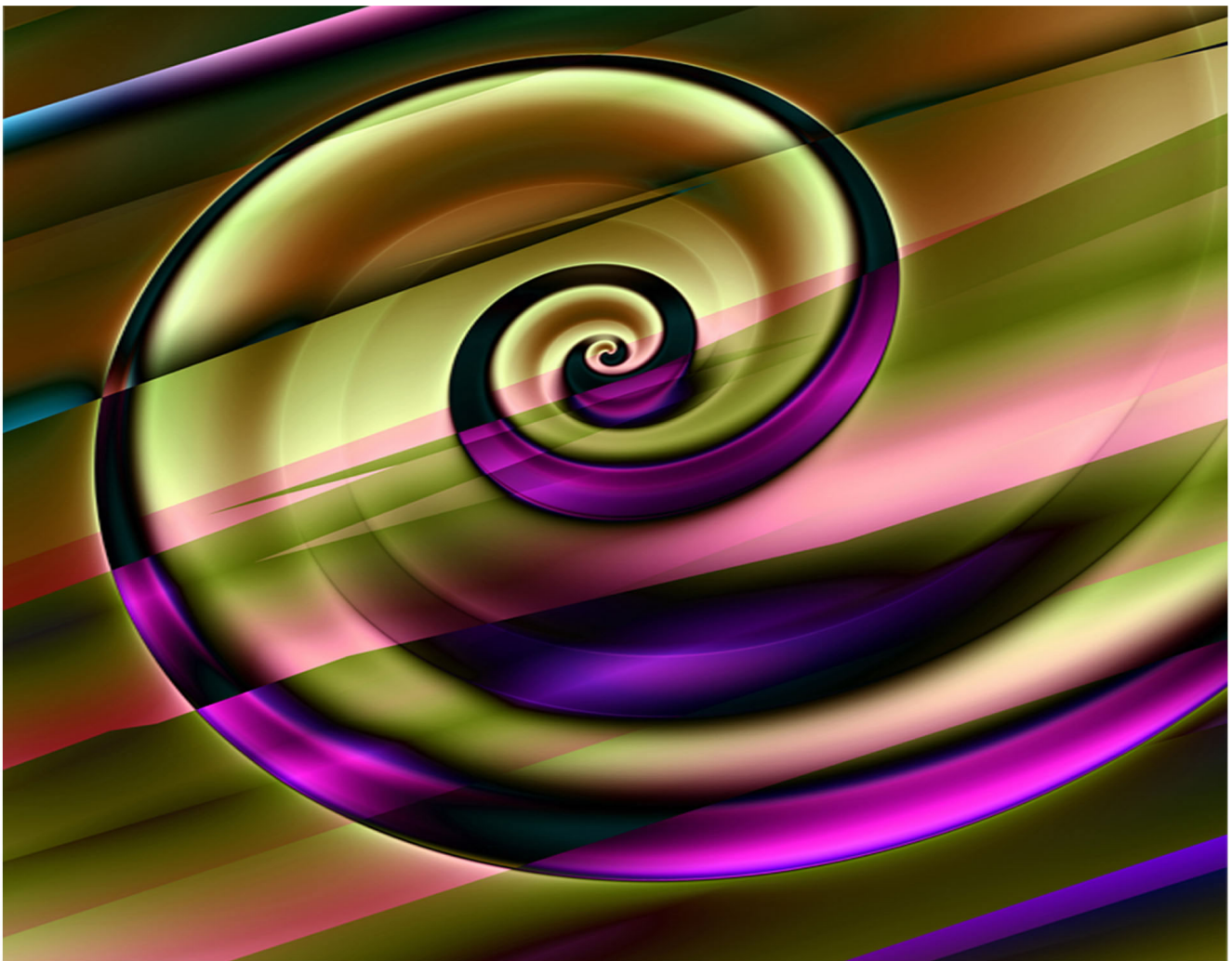
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Social Network Sites: Can they enhance Employee Productivity in an organization?

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Abstract:

Social Network Sites has allowed people to communicate, share, collaborate and publish information. Over the past few years, the availability and usage of social network sites has emerged substantially and has led to a shift in cultural, allowing people to connect and collaborate in ways that were not possible otherwise. To embrace social network sites seamlessly in the organizations can be a real challenge for human resource management professionals as it affects the productivity of employee in the workplace. This research paper discusses the impact of social media sites on employee productivity and examines positive and negative perceptions of social networking sites.

Keywords: Social network sites, Employee productivity, Employee satisfaction

1. Introduction:

Since their introduction, social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, My Space, and recently created website Google+ have attracted millions of users who have integrated these websites into their daily practices. Of late, social networking websites have become an indispensable part of our larger society and cannot be ignored in the workplace. It is a social and technological innovation and many businesses use them as tools to enhance a better relational experience with their employees and customers. Social networking, also referred to as social media, is a way in which many individuals come together and build a platform that focuses on facilitating the building of social networks or social relations. It allows user to share ideas, activities, events and interests. These groups may be big, small, formal, informal, intentional or unintentional. When it comes to online sharing of aforesaid ideas and activities, these networking websites are known as social networking sites. Social Networking Sites has not only led to radical changes in the way communication takes place between employees and the organization (Martensen et al., 2011) but new media of communication such as e-mail, forum and chat applications have altered the entire communication process chains (Picot and Neuburger, 2000). Social networking sites (SNS) in particular have a

profound effect by changing the nature of communication processes both in professional and personal life (Beck, 2007). If businesses need to work with social networking sites, then they have to make some policy on social networking in the workplace. There are various studies which proved that communication and networking practices through technology increases productivity.

2. The Major Social Networking Websites

There are four major social networking sites in common use. Facebook, introduced in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, is one of the world's most popular social networking websites today. Initially, the original website was opened only to students at Harvard University (Social Media Today, 2013). Now Facebook has reached a membership of over 1.15 billion active users (Yahoo News, 2013). LinkedIn, launched in May 2003 by Reid, is one of the sites which are less focused on social networking websites (Wilson, 2009). LinkedIn has a membership of about 225 million (Yeung, 2013). This tool is used to network within a desired professional atmosphere and allows individuals to build professional, career-oriented relationships. Twitter is a good platform for real time news updates. Initially, Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey in 2006 started Twitter as an SMS-based communications platform. It has become a self-promotional tool used by celebrities. Follower can get instant updates about where their favourite singer, star, sport person or politician. And of recent, Google+, initially known as Google Circle, has joined the crowd. It has managed to surpass Twitter in January 2013 with approximately 359 million active users. Google describes Google+ as a "social layer" which enhances many of its online properties, unlike conventional social networks that are generally accessed through a single website.

3. Social Networking and its Relationship with Employee Productivity

Faced with increasing complexity of global business ranging from financial crisis, ever increasing competition, dwindling resources, revitalizing and reinventing the culture of organizations and the way business is done is key to achieving increased levels of workplace productivity and employee satisfaction (Pitt and Bennett, 2008). Productivity of an employee is measured in terms of labor hours spent by him/her on the given task. According to Bernolak (1997) productivity is measured as how much and how well employee produces from the given resources. In December 2010, ISTAT conducted a survey to 19,000 households and individuals. It was posited that 48% of blue-collar employees, who are the makers of the finished goods and the backbone of any organization, were not comfortable with computing sites, unlike 85% white-collar employees who found the opposite. Takeshi Numoto, Corporate Vice President of Office Product Management Group, submitted a post, "Productivity + social networking = goodness for the workplace" (Durant, 2010).

It is a common belief that social networking sites such as Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc. wastes time and is a huge hidden cost to business. However, a number of studies have found that using social networking sites may actually increase employee productivity. Employees who use social networking sites are nine per cent more

productive than those who do not (Fahmy, 2009). Employee who are connected to other people through social networking sites are more social by nature and are better persons in the workplace. They are skilled at interacting with others and solving problems. Fahmy (2009) also found that employee who surfed internet for personal work resulted in sharpened employee's concentration. It is assumed that by taking short breaks, the brain get refreshed and renewed.

If influenced in a different way, social networking can help organizations and its employees be more productive and facilitates organizations with the incredible knowledge and information that need to stay on top of business industry. A survey conducted by AT&T on 2,500 employees in five European countries found that 65% SNS users proved to be more efficient workers, 46% SNS users shared more creative and ideas, 38% SNSs helped them gain knowledge and come up with solutions to problems, 36% SNSs allowed them collect knowledge about employees and customers, and 32% SNSs created team building opportunities. Employees also reported that social networking has become part of workplace culture (AT&T, 2008).

4. Benefits of Social Networks

With the advent of social media, its use has gone beyond updating pictures and posting status updates. Social networks empower the flow of information by disseminating information to employees or target consumers efficiently. Many corporations employ blogs, wikis, Twitter and other social media within organizations' communication as an alternative to e-mail, for disseminating information, ideas, briefs, and best practices to employees (Cardon&Okoro, 2010).

Many organizations are increasingly experimenting with the use of social networks to improve business operations (Swartz, 2008). Social networking websites provide support for informal networks that are crucial to collaboration (Coleman and Levine 2008; McAfee 2009) 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, and Parker, 2002).

Many companies advertise their products and services via Facebook, Twitter, My space and similar sites (Li and Bernoff 2008). Companies like Coca-Cola and Toyota Scion are using Twitter not only to advertise products, provide customers with information on product specifications, availability, and its usage, but also make connections, and identify sales leads and business partners (King 2008; Roberts 2008). Recently, Ford Motor Company also employed social media to promote the release of their new model Ford Focus (Levin, 2011). The main objectives of such activities are advertising, information sharing, brand and vendor recognition (Drury 2008), and improved customers-vendors trust.

Social networks cut down on unnecessary e-mail and instant message among co-workers and cut down the amount of time it takes for employees and management to contact each other (Swartz, 2008). Janssen-Cilag has replaced its

old Intranet-based collaboration system with wikis by allowing its employees to maintain the content of these wikis collaboratively and collectively (Turban et.al. 2011). Hoover Inc. has established a social network that makes use of Visible Path's relationship management technology to identify target business users to build relationships and discover ways to reach specific users (Hopkins 2008).

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. Social media has 'provided individuals with a voice in public space' (Smith et. al., 2011). One of the direct benefits of increased collaboration among workers, due to social networking sites, is the management of knowledge organizational-wide.

Social networking has helped Procter and Gamble facilitates innovation by providing new ways to communicate and collaborate (Dodgson et. al. 2006). *Business Insider* recently reported that "Procter & Gamble said it would lay off 1,600 staffers, including marketers, as part of a cost-cutting exercise". Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Robert McDonald also planned "to 'moderate' his ad budget because Facebook and Google can be 'more efficient' than the traditional media that usually eats the lion's share of P&G's ad budget" (Edwards, 2012). 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).

Social networking is also used for training purposes in many companies. IBM train its field service teams by offering them exercises through the simulation of project management and customer interaction in virtual worlds. Cisco uses Second Life on its virtual campus for product training and executive briefings (Cisco Blogs, 2007). Learners can collaborate on class projects using discussion groups and blogs (Fichman and Kane 2009).

Li and Bernoff (2008) has segregated social networking applications on the basis of business functions, such as human resource management , marketing and sales, operations, customer support and research and development. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu established its social network -D Street to assist the company's human resource management team in downsizing and regrouping, building networks of experts, and retaining talents. It is a classic example of functional application. Not more than a year, D Street had extended to cover all 46,000 Deloitte employees (Brandel 2008).

Talent acquisition make good use of social networking sites to search potential candidates from talent pool. HR managers often use social networking websites as reference checks for potential job candidates (Roberts & Roach, 2009). Organizations employ social networks, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other business focused sites to recruit new employees. Existing employees, retirees, friends and other connections help to facilitate recruitment (Turban et.al., 2011). Social networking sites not only help organizations in talent acquisition. To retain and increase its talent pool, it has become crucial for the organizations to stay connected with passive job seekers. Organizations often mine connections on social networking sites to see how their own talent is interacting online and whether they

maintaining organization's reputation online. Social networks have made 360-degree feedback a reality. Companies can gain immediate insight into employee's performance from their internal and external customers. Coca-Cola is engaging their customers in unique collaborative activities by collaborating with customers via Mycokereward.com (Hayes-Weier 2008).

5. Disadvantages of Social Networks

Though social network sites have significantly contributed to organizations as mentioned above, the widespread use of social network sites 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 management has in regard to social networking: "perceived loss in staff productivity, data leakage from staff gossiping freely in an open environment, damage to a company's reputation, scam practiced by cyber crooks, and the open access to company information due to outdated passwords".

Employees that develop addiction to the use of social media show disorders like depression, sexual disorders and loneliness that affect employee productivity and reputation of the organization (Chen, Chen, Yang, 2008). Social networking has also been linked with impatience, change of brain patterns and activity, making individuals more self-centered, and reduction of the average person's attention span from 12 minutes to five in the last decade (Vidarthi, 2011).

Managers recognize that social media sites have infiltrated modern culture and work life (Kerekes, 2012). Employees spend more time on social networking sites such as Facebook and this has resulted in many employers banning the use of the sites during work hours (Benzie, 2007). Employees waste time on websites during the work hours, weakening productivity and increasing security risks to the company by sharing data externally. A study conducted by Nucleus Research with 237 corporate employees shows that 77% of employees who work for those organizations that allows access to social networking sites in the workplace during work hours resulted in 1.5% decrease in employee productivity (Gaudin, 2009). The productivity of employees was dropped due to addictive, excessive and non-work related browsing such as uploading photos, posting status, checking on family and friends, creating personal networks, checking sports scores, streaming and downloading music and video, and following social bookmarks (Pitt & Bennett, 2008; Richards, 2012). The key to successful management of social media lies in proper supervision and development of clear, fair and implementable performance policies (Cornelius, 2009).

An IT technician may not know every social networking website used by the employees and successfully block access to all (Baker et.al., 2011) and this has driven employers to opt to monitor their employees' social media usage amidst an ethical debate on the right to do so. Monitoring is argued to be an effective move as the employer has the obligation of ensuring that productivity is enhanced and company time is not wasted or abused. As the owner of the technology equipment, organisations have a right to know how social networking site is being used and in what capacity (Binshan& Wen, 1998).

Social networking sites can give companies reasons to worry. "Cyber smearing" has become a key concern for employers. The attributes that make the Internet a valuable commercial medium - the ability to spread information to

the masses quickly and cheaply - also make it a menace to corporations. Posting on social networking sites is vulnerable to cyber criminal activities by disseminating wrong information causing defamation, harassment, threats and embarrassment to the organization concerned (Wise, 2009). For example, 13 cabin crew of Virgin Atlantic Airplane were fired after they posted disrepute about the safety standards of airplane, making jokes about faulty engines and insulting passengers using social networking (Quinn, 2008).

In another case, 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 statements 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). Figure 1, illustrates employee opinion on how easy it is to damage a company's reputation, using social networking. 74% of employees surveyed say it's easy to damage a company's reputation on social media.

In 2007, The Hampdens, an Australian band, sang true about Generation Y: "Meet me tonight on *MySpace*, I'll be there, waiting." With Social network sites having ubiquitous influence, it is easier for the Generation X and Generation Y to adapt to the use of social sites at workplace. However, Baby boomers (46years-65 years) may feel overwhelmed and frustrated by such a request.

When the three working generations were asked about their perception regarding use of social network sites in workplace, they had different opinions. Table 1 shows the responses. While baby boomers feel that face to face conversation is necessary for any business and it leads to development of strong rapport, Generation X and Generation Y stay contacted with the people around them through social sites and do not feel the need to meet peers in person. While similarly, baby boomers may be more resistant to initially accept social network sites and its policy, Generation X and Y positively grow frustrated if an organization ban the use social network sites or fails to recognize its use in workplace. Baby boomers feels that social sites at workplace distract the attention of employees and lowers the productivity. They feel that whenever the young generation gets time in office, they open the sites and stay glued to it instead of utilizing the time in some productive things. Whereas Generation X and Generation Y feels that social sites are of great help in their day to day chores ranging from recruitment to sharing and gaining knowledge and recreation activities. They feel that age difference is not the factor for the issue; it is the acceptance and readiness to adapt to change.

Conclusions

Social network sites have evolved into a mix of socializing and working, and lead to a degree of sacrificing privacy. It heavily influences organizational productivity in terms of effective collaboration across geographical and hierarchical work structures, communicating and marketing of its products and collecting feedback from the market. However, if not channelled effectively, social networking sites may lead to the risk of corporate network security,

network performance issues, bandwidth capacity, business information leaks, and privacy. To maximise the potential of social networking within the organization a social networking policy should be created. Apart from this, a company should determine how much use will be made of social networking sites for marketing purposes. A company should work with, not against, social networking websites. It is always good for a company to know what websites are available to its employees, willingly allow access to certain websites to keep employees productive, and monitor usage of social networking websites.

An effective use of social network sites in organizations is feasible only when a degree of trust exists between management and the work force and can increase productivity levels of employee performance and satisfaction when used wisely and efficiently.

The future academic researchers may use the present study as a stepping stone for further exploratory research toward defining social media websites and its affect.

Figure 1. Can Employees Damage a Company Using Social Networks?

Source: Deloitte, 2009.

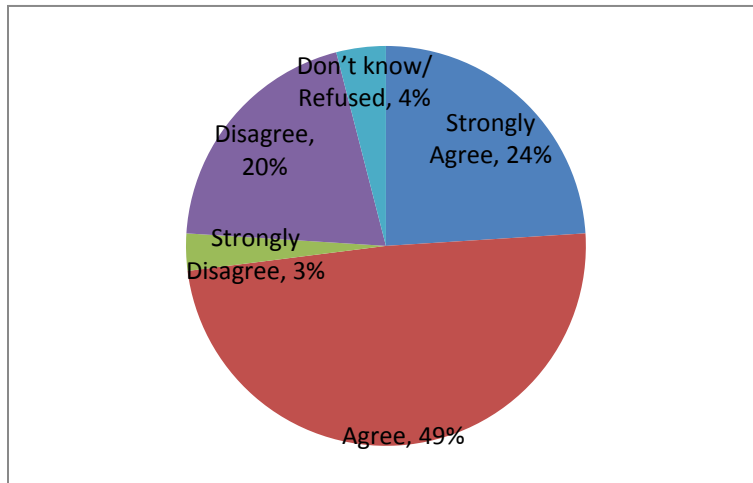


Table 1. Response of different generations regarding their perceptions about Social Networking Sites

BABY BOOMERS (46YEARS-65 YEARS)	GENERATION X (30YEARS-45 YEARS)	GENERATION Y (22YEARS-29 YEARS)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business works best when conducted in face-to-face meetings or over the phone. It helps build stronger relationships. My children use Facebook and Twitter but I personally feel it wastes time. Social network sites as a workplace tool lower productivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Face-to-face meetings are effective but things can be done through e-mail also. E-mail is more effective. I do have accounts in different social sites and is a great help in my day to day business activities. I use it in my spare time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., help foster collaboration and innovation in workplace. A social network site is all about efficiency and speed. It is not necessary to meet peers in person to build a strong relationship with them.

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