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Generational Differences in Use of Social Media in Today's Workplace[*]

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This study examined the use of social media at work. Undergraduate students and professors were surveyed to try to find a generational relationship between the younger generation's view of using sites such as Facebook while working and how some participants from an older generation perceived it. We also examined the effects of Facebook outside of work and whether or not postings made there could jeopardize a position at work. The results from our survey and research conclude that social media is an increasing problem because it serves as a distraction and predict that with increasing individual use of social media it will become more of a problem at work if it is not properly managed by the employer.

Keywords: social media, generational differences, internet trends

Introduction

Today, we cannot go about our everyday lives without encountering some form of social media. The popularity of social media has grown as a result of the rapid changes in technology as computers are now more mobile and can be used virtually anywhere. Companies are increasingly using social media as a new way to reach customers more effectively and to spread news of their activities more rapidly and use them more interactively. The ubiquitous use of social media has also brought new challenges to today's workplace. One of these is the apparent addiction that the Millennial generation has to Facebook and other social media applications like Twitter and Instagram. In this research project, we examined the trend of increasing social media use and its intersection with workplace activities, with a particular focus on the Millennial generation. The use of social media during work hours brings a new set of challenges to employers. A similar problem occurred with the introduction and growth of cell phone use in the workplace. This technology also generated questions for employers about whether limitations should be imposed at work. Today, businesses have adapted to the presence of cell phones and have policies and guidelines in place regarding cell phone usage. Just as there is etiquette for the use of cell phones, there must also be one for social media.

There are also advantages to be gained by using social media—for both prospective employees as well as employers. Lydia Ramsey (a Business Etiquette Professional) stated that, "The world of online networking is

new to most of us, but there is little difference in connecting with people online and offline. The same basic tenets hold true. Trust and authenticity remain high on the list" (Business etiquette tips for social media: 12 tips from Georgia business etiquette expert Lydia Ramsey, 2011). The benefits that online networking presents are many. As new college graduates searching for work increasingly use sites such as LinkedIn to find potential employers, employers are utilizing social media to open their hiring pool to new applicants in new regions. One of the benefits of LinkedIn is the improved ability to find jobs anywhere in the country and in the world. On the downside, it makes the application process more competitive and adds new hurdles to the hiring process.

There are also concerns that have been raised by the use of social media as an applicant screening tool as well as an employee monitoring tool. Even if an applicant is eventually hired, he/she must still be careful about what he/she is posting on social media sites. For example, there have been cases where an employee posts a comment that may misrepresent the company and/or make the company look bad. At all times, once employed, employees still represent the company.

Social Media Use by Organizations

Social media can be considered a tremendous resource to the business world. For example, it has been credited with helping employees think outside the box (Winkler, 2009). Research has shown that employees who utilize social media are nine percent more productive in the workplace (Fahmy, 2009). Sites such as Pintrest (a site where the user can "pin" the things he/she likes in a particular category to create a "board" to group them all together, for example, future wedding ideas) and Instagram (a site dedicated to taking pictures and allowing them to tell an entire story) allow members to instantly see the creative works of a friend and can help the user to brainstorm new ideas. These sites are a valuable resource that can really help spark new and exciting ideas for work. By allowing sites such as Facebook to be used in the workplace, employees will be able to connect with their coworkers who may have their offices in a different location. The ability to connect offices across the world, but have the means for employees to feel they actually know a bit more about with whom they are collaborating is a valuable asset, and one that can create a more dynamic work environment. In addition, researchers' credit social networking sites with giving workers needed brain breathers. When you take a couple of minutes to check up on the people and organizations you follow on Twitter, your mind gets a break from writing that tedious annual report. Additionally, it seems that people who are more social by nature and are connected to a variety of people through social networking sites are better people-persons in the workplace, which means they are skilled at interacting with others and solving problems (Winkler, 2009).

Social media is not only helping employees become more productive; it is allowing them to stay current with market trends and issues important to consumers as well as the general public. By staying informed in these areas, employees are also better prepared to troubleshoot potential setbacks and are more likely to create good public relations through the work they are doing. By identifying the trends, employees can then tailor their own work to incorporate them, providing consumers with the sense that they are buying from a company who is diligent about staying current.

Currently, about seventy percent of organizations around the world use social media (*KPMG Study: Emerging Markets Lead Social Media Adoption*, n.d.). Studies have found that firms that incorporate social media as a part of their business operations are most likely to grow faster than the companies who have not yet used it (*KPMG Study: Emerging Markets Lead Social Media Adoption*, n.d.). The key benefit to social media is that it is free. There is no cost to using these sites, other than the cost of the employee's time to update the

company's site.

Social media is also an amazing and beneficial marketing tool and, if used properly, can boost a company's image and popularity. There are more than 140 million users of Twitter and more than one billion users of Facebook (600 million of them accessing the site through smart phones) (Smith, 2012). These sites are high traffic areas of information flowing on the web. Twitter alone has been sending out over 200 million Tweets per day (Smith, 2012). It has been shown that consumers are more willing to buy when they have received consumer reviews and/or recommendations from friends/family; social media helps companies to take advantage of this phenomenon (Social retail: Finding, engaging and cultivating today's connected consumer, 2012). Another way social media can keep the company up to date is by simply having a page on the different social media outlets, thus reaching their consumers on a familiar forum. Posting to sites such as Twitter and Facebook cannot only keep consumers in the loop of what a company is doing, but allow employees to gauge their reaction, and receive feedback. It also allows for these employees to answer questions and keep a constant dialogue open with the consumers. Social media sites are also equipped with ways to link a business website directly to a social media page, which allows happy customers to quickly re-post some new ideas that the firm has just released.

Employers can capitalize on this new market by having employees create company-related events and make positive statements on social media sites about the company's activities. By encouraging employees to utilize social media, an organization is not only marketing to a larger audience, but doing it in a way that is trusted and valued more than any other sort of advertisement (Global advertising: Consumers trust real friends and virtual strangers the most, 2009). These sites are not to be taken lightly; there has been a significant power shift in favor of the consumer, as stated by Jonny Spindler, Innovations Director at Abbott Meade Vickers BBDO (Spindler, 2011).

As illustrated above, social media has accelerated the ability and rate at which consumers can interact with brands. Consumers now have a much louder voice with far bigger crowds listening due to the available social platforms. Therefore, brands need to pay more attention to their consumers than ever before. It is no longer a bloke in a pub talking to four mates about a brand, but a Tweet that reaches 4,000 ready to spread the word further (Spindler, 2011).

Social Media Use by Employees at Work

As more new and existing employees join social media networks, it is apparent that, in general, organizations are still adjusting to and evaluating what they perceive to be the positive and negative aspects of social media. Some industries are further along in their understanding of the place of social media at work. For example, in the construction trades, there are concerns for safety (Orlando, n.d.). During a personal interview with a local union pipe fitter, he explained that the union has already taken a stance against social media use during work hours because it introduces variables that put workers' safety in jeopardy. He also stated that this new policy is an extension of the policy they have for cell phones on the job site.

Other industries are encountering different issues with social media use and have implemented policies that affect employee morale, rather than safety. KPMG international found that companies have become more open to the idea of allowing social media at the office and that there are greater costs to the organization for not adapting (*KPMG Study: Emerging Markets Lead Social Media Adoption*, n.d.). For example, a study found that employees are much happier with their employers when social media usage is allowed at work (*KPMG Study: Emerging Markets Lead Social Media Adoption*, n.d.). Approximately 63% of employees stated they were

happy with their jobs at companies with open policies about social media use, compared to, only 41% at firms that blocked their access (*KPMG Study: Emerging Markets Lead Social Media Adoption*, n.d.).

Social media can also help to establish strong bonds among workers by providing them the ability to better understand those with whom they are working. Following co-workers or even one's boss on social media will ultimately provide valuable insight into their personal lives, and will enhance the ability to make connections with them on a social level. This social connection could then help improve the working relationship. The improvement could include gaining a better understanding of what motivates the people around them, as well as allowing them to share what motivates them (Griffin, 2011). Having a better understanding of other employees is also important to create a comfortable social environment at the workplace. Employees need to feel that the office can also be a social and fun environment (Quish, 2010). The global engagement study company, TNS Employee Insights, conducted a study whose results indicated that relationships with co-workers are an essential element to the kind of productivity-driving engagement smart companies aim to achieve (Quish, 2010). TNS's studies (numbering in the millions of employee surveys per year) have shown that in the hierarchy of employee needs, collaboration and other relationship measures rank just after the basics of job satisfaction and relationship with manager/boss (Quish, 2010). Social media can also create new and unique opportunities in the workplace. The theory that supports this phenomenon is called reverse mentoring, which was brought to General Electric by former CEO Jack Welch.

> The idea is that managers can learn a thing or two about life outside the corner office. But companies say another outcome is reduced turnover among younger employees, who not only gain a sense of purpose but also a rare glimpse into the world of management and access to top-level brass. (Kwoh, 2011)

These positive findings about the use of social media sites as ways for employees to improve their relationships have been challenged, however. Other studies have shown that, the swooning attention to social media may even be having a counter-revolutionary effect by giving executives a false sense of connectedness with employees. Drawn from a sample of 1,005 employees 18 and older and 303 corporate executives, the survey by Deloitte shows executives are using social media as a "crutch in building workplace culture and appearing accessible to employees", said Deloitte chairman Punit Renjen (Johnson, 2009).

If relationships are what drive a happy workplace, and increase job satisfaction, it is likely that companies may start to value the use of social media by employees. It is not out of the question that certain jobs may eventually require a certain number of "friends" as a prerequisite so that companies may see just how social and welcoming the potential employee may be (Quish, 2010). And it is not only employees who are beginning to benefit from the implementation of social media, studies have shown that the software needed to sustain these sites is growing into a booming business, and companies are more than willing to purchase the necessary software.

Lauralee Guthrie, Digital and Social Media Director, Randstad Canada, observed that employers are making an investment in social media channels.

> Social engagement is critical to business success and like it or not, business is embracing social media in a big way. Recent data from Forrester Research indicates that the sales of software used to run corporate social networks will grow 61% a year and will likely become a $6.4 billion business by the year 2016. (Fraser, 2012)

There is a major concern that has arisen with regard to the relationship between employees' social media presence and their employers and that is invasion of privacy. An employer may claim that what is posted online is

not private, but public information. As a result, employees' lives outside work are under scrutiny more than ever because of easy access to what they may post on the Internet. According to one source, the problem employers face when using social media as a screening method during the hiring process is that the applicant's profile may create inaccurate views of him/her. The profile may also present legal problems that they may not want to encounter (Victoria & Vaughn, 2011). The lack of privacy on social media sites also presents a threat to employees who use that forum to discuss their jobs. Employees who are careless about comments they make regarding the firms risk losing their jobs. For example, this past summer a designer at Nike was in trouble because he insulted Derrick Rose for not wearing Nike gear (NBA, 2012). This statement effectively ended future deals that Nike could have made with Derrick Rose that could have been valued in millions of dollars (NBA, 2012). From a company standpoint action must be taken to protect the integrity of the firm. Employer actions taken in response to a perceived breach in privacy could include forcing the employee to make a public apology or termination depending on the severity of the incident. Another incident in California started a social media buzz when a young college student Tweeted, "Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating the work" (Johnston, 2009). Coincidentally, another employee of Cisco who was on Twitter found the comment, and alerted his company. This employee responded to the Tweet by stating, "Who is the hiring manager? I'm sure they would love to know that you will hate the work. We here at Cisco are versed in the web" (Johnson, 2009).

Another downside to the use of social media use at work is its potential to become a distraction, resulting in a loss of productivity. Employees must have self-discipline with regard to its use and be willing to limit their access social media while at work.

In an interview with the director of housing at a small Northeast University, he discussed his view of the use of social media at work. With regard to the connection between employees' productivity and their use of social media at work, he stated, "I believe that it (productivity) has decreased because people respond to Facebook and Twitter instead of looking to the next task. They are not always at work because even when they are at work, they are always connected". He did also describe some positive outcomes of the use of this technology, "Creativity, however, has gone up due to the knowledge of these different multi-medias. It is a matter of the creativity increasing due to the knowledge, not because of the social connections (M. DiPlacido, personal communication, October 10, 2012).

The manner in which productivity is negatively impacted by social media is explained by Steve Pavlina (*What is productivity?*, 2005) who calculates productivity using the equation: productivity = value/time. Productivity can be increased by increasing the value created and decreasing the time required to create that value. Social media however, adds to the time required and takes away from productivity. The time increases because employees are taking time away from accomplishing tasks at work to fulfill their personal need to use social media, therefore, it is taking them more time to do their work. In 2009, a study was done to determine the amount of money employees cost their firm while they were using social media. The study found that in the UK employees spend an average of 40 minutes per day on social media sites, or the equivalent of one whole week a year on social media (Study: Facebook, Twitter use at work costs big bucks, 2009). The study also found 57% of employees surveyed at 1,460 offices used the sites for personal use while at work. The total time used cost the firms more than $2.25 billion. A similar survey conducted in the US by IT security and control firm SOPHOS in 2007 asked 500 Facebook users how often they accessed Facebook while at work (SOPHOS: One in seven brings their FaceBook addiction to work, SOPHOS research reveals; 14.8% of Facebook users admit to all-day

loafing, 2007). The responses were as follows:

(1) Once or twice a day—37.2%;

(2) Up to 10 times a day—8%;

(3) Virtually all the time—14.8%;

(4) Only access at home—40%.

Another survey done in New Zealand asked employees whether or not it was okay to use social media at work (One in five New Zealanders "like" Facebook use at work, 2012): Those who agreed were grouped by generational membership as follows:

(1) Generation Y (Millenial)—23%;

(2) Generation X (GenX)—22%;

(3) Generation Z (Baby Boomer)—15%.

Participants in this study were also asked their primary use of social media at work. A 22-year-old secretary said she would check social media once an hour for personal information and a 42-year-old manager used Facebook at work to market new products. These two responses indicate that the uses of social media vary by generation.

Social Media and the "New" Generation

Newton North High School in Massachusetts has been ranked consistently as one of the top public schools in Massachusetts, and they do not allow social media sites to be accessed through school computers during school hours (Hennick, 2012). However, there is an alternate view that limiting students' time on Facebook could in fact be detrimental to their education, and reduce their opportunities to work on assignments (Hennick, 2012). It seems that students are determined to work by using social media, and because it is so readily accessible through smart phones, school administrators recognize that only students unable to purchase smart phones would lose access (Hennick, 2012).

In this same article, there was an interview with a Newton North Senior student, who discussed how the loss of the ability to access her Facebook or any other social media was affecting the student body. She stated,

> The computers have not had social media sites since I have been here, so it does not make much of a difference. Not a lot of people complain either because we can easily use our phones if we wanted to get online and the computers at school are used mainly to write papers and do schoolwork on during free periods.

When asked whether she felt the students at Newton North were being micromanaged by the school to do work without being able to take breaks she stated,

> Other sites, like games and YouTube and plenty of other distractions are still available on the computers, so it really does not make a big difference. Again, the computers are usually packed with students during free blocks, so if someone notices a kid messing around on a computer most students will have no qualms for saying something to kick them off if they have work that needs to be done.

Research Questions

From reviewing the recent information regarding the use of social media by employees, we have developed the following research questions:

Research Question 1—Do more individuals consider the use of social media at work to be a distraction or provide a boost to productivity?

Research Question 2—Should employers discipline employees for material they post on their social media profiles?

Methodology

This study used a survey distributed via email and paper. It was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of the organization. Respondents were solicited through snowball sampling.

Results

There were a total of 115 responses, virtually all students. The gender breakdown was roughly equal with 52 percent male and 48% female. The vast majority, 94%, use social media. Total weekly use of social media was reported as total hours per week. Responses were broken down as follows:

(1) 1 to 3 hours—39%;

(2) 4 to 7 hours—36%;

(3) 8 or more hours—25%.

For Research Question 1, we asked a series of questions regarding use of social media behaviors and their impact on work. Responses are shown in Figure 1.
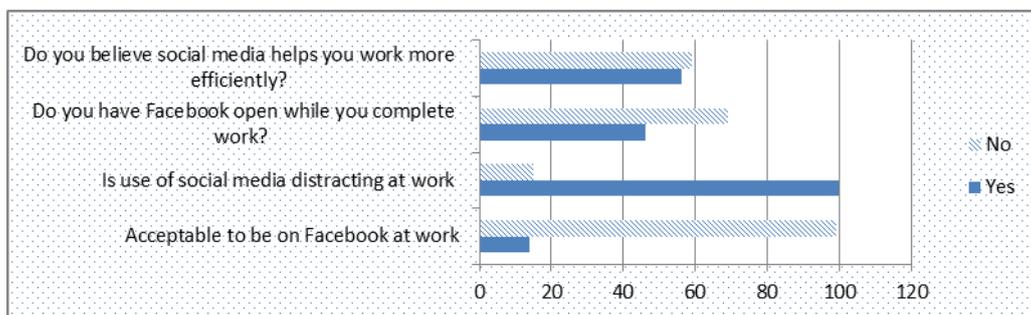

Figure 1. Responses to use of social media at work.

Other questions addressed use of social media on phones and opinions about its use at work. Ninety-one of the 115 use social media on their cell phone. Most of the respondents, 87.5% who use social media more than eight hours a week fell into this category. Only five people, however, agreed that it is okay to use social media at work; although 90 said it could sometimes be used for emergencies only. As to whether they would accept a job that bans the use of social media at work, 89 of the participants said yes. Another 96 said that they could work nine hours a day without using social media.

Responses to questions related to Research Question 2 indicated support for employer monitoring of social media use. The first asked whether an employee should be fired for excess use of social media. The majority, 73% agreed that they should. The second asked whether employees should be judged by their employers on the basis of their social media activities. Again, the majority, 70%, found this acceptable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the data, indications are that the more a person uses social media, the less they feel it is a distraction and the reverse is also true. Some of the results are conflicting, especially as they relate to whether social media is a distraction at work. The great majority of respondents who are students in the Millennial generation, the heaviest users of social media, felt that its use was distracting at work, and that it is unacceptable to have Facebook open at work. Equal numbers indicated that they felt social media helped them to work more

efficiently, but a little more than half said they did not have Facebook open while they worked. It is difficult to determine whether some answers were driven by social response bias, for example, especially regarding the acceptability of being on Facebook at work. This dichotomy may also reveal awareness that the workplace is not yet a welcome venue for the use of social media, particularly for personal tasks, while acknowledging their inability to resist its use for a long time period during the day. The results with regard to employer monitoring of employees' social media use are surprising when one considers the often used claim by younger employees that their Facebook account, for example, is private. These individuals may maintain this belief, but seem to have realized that the notion of privacy on a social media site is, in reality, non-existent. There is also an acknowledgment that employers have the ability to exercise some control over employee behaviors, even those that take place outside of office hours. It is difficult to determine whether this realization will translate into a change in the ways in which younger employees use social media.

In conclusion, there can be too much of a good thing, and the use of social media is no exception. Although using social media at the workplace offers a convenient means to brainstorm new and creative ideas, it can also be overused, resulting in employee distractions and wasted time.

Social media use, however, should be regarded as a privilege, that can be taken away, by one's employer. An open dialogue should take place with employees, to discuss appropriate use of social media in the workplace. One possible solution would be for the organization to install software that does not block social media, but rather monitor the amount of time it is used. In this way, employers can keep employees accountable, but give them some freedom as well. Employees who are on these sites for an excessive amount of time would be subject to potential disciplinary action.

Businesses should begin to embrace social media in the workplace, rather than ban it. Like it or not, social media is here to stay and is available on many devices prevalent in the workplace, whether the device belongs to the employer or the employee. Employers can exercise some control over the use of social media at an organization by developing policies regarding its use and informing employees about these policies. This action is especially important as younger generations of workers join the employee ranks because they do not recognize social media use as problematic, so they will continue to use it until otherwise informed. Employee communications on social media are not yet legally protected; therefore, providing information about the company's views on its use/abuse is especially important.

Looking ahead, a new problem that the workforce will encounter as a result of increasing social media use is a decline in interpersonal skills. The impact is already seen in the younger generation of workers, who prefer to email colleagues instead of talking with them face-to-face. More individuals spend meeting times texting instead of contributing to the conversation in the room. The workforce continues to require people who have the interpersonal skills that enable them to communicate effectively with clients and coworkers. Whether employers will be able to develop these skills by default through restricting social media use remains to be seen. The reality is that while at work, access to social media is nearly always available. The Millennial generation has grown up using computers and smart phones. Facebook has turned into the central hub to keep up with friends. The desire to check friends' latest posts is a major distraction and creates the temptation to check for updates, which was a common comment made by our respondents. Some firms attempt to stop access to social media by blocking the sites, but there are ways around this action. Sites that illustrate how to breach firewalls have started to appear on the Internet. Blocking sites can also actually add to the problem because the social media addict will spend time at work trying to get around the system. This is where the implementation of guidelines on social media etiquette in

the work place would be beneficial (Dangers of social media in workplace, 2009). By addressing the problem and clearly illustrating what is and is not appropriate in the workplace, it will be easier for employees to understand what is expected of them and adjust their social media use accordingly.

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