



THE THREATS AND BENEFITS OF **SOCIAL NETWORKING** IN THE WORKPLACE

Social networking offers organisations a framework for innovation, argues Nigel Paine, but only if learning professionals are bold enough to grasp the nettle.

If you sit in the average conference room with say, forty executives from both the public and private sector and enthuse them about the power, speed and empowerment of social networking, you have all the heads nodding in seconds. There are few people out there who think this is all a flash in the pan, and fewer still who fail to recognise the real shift in communication patterns.

Take this same enthusiastic and smiling group, and ask them how many people work for companies that restrict access to social networking software, or ban it outright. Chances are that thirty-five hands shoot up and the smiling immediately stops. "Our IT department is paranoid about security," or "Our chief executive doesn't get it," or "Our marketing director says the company must control the brand messages internally and externally."

I do not have to point out the massive contradiction here. And it may be learning that unravels the tangle and helps resolve the 'to social network or not to social network' conundrum. Let me explain.

There are more and more pieces of software that let you build Facebook, Twitter, blogs and wikis inside your intranet. Microsoft's SharePoint has been spectacularly successful in delivering enterprise control with loose, flexible apps and freedom for individual employees to choose where to go, if they have permission. But it is quite tentative at the

moment and many organisations are just thinking about it.

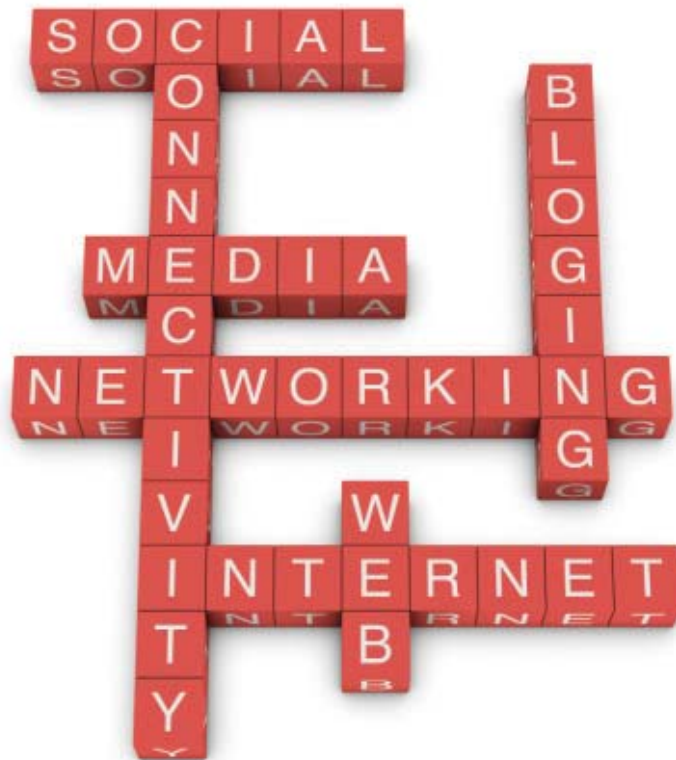
If you are a learning professional, then lead the way! Peter Drucker, in frustration at the over-complex definitions of innovation in companies, came up with his own straightforward rendering. And it works for me too: Change which creates a new dimension of performance

That is also the key output for learning in an organisation. Or it should be. Like it or not, if you are in the learning space you are a change agent. You change individuals who change other individuals, who change companies. And you organise change in order to build better individual, team and corporate performance. That is how you should see your role and how you can justify the investment in that role.

No place is standing still. Certainly not at the current time or in the current climate. And it does not matter if you are hunkering down to survive, reshaping for the upturn or embracing the new opportunities that have been thrown your way. You are in the process of change in order to add new dimensions of performance - to do what you do better, or to do radically new things.

All of this requires bright ideas from the top and a workforce that works with you, in being able to see the need, the benefit and the requirement for personal changes in behaviour. Prior to this though, individuals must be open and receptive to new ideas. None of this can be done by bullying or threats. Whole industries have disappeared because the way forward was blindingly obvious, only no one bothered to convince the workers. The spectacular collapse of the London docks in less than ten years in the 1960s is one of many examples. It happened because the dockers refused to touch containers. Show me a docks complex anywhere in the world now without containers.

I wonder if we will look back at a big, contemporary organisation and say 'no wonder they collapsed, they refused to



I have yet to meet a person who is a creative and innovative asset to his or her company, who is also miserable and unhappy in the job. Almost without exception, the most creative people are also the most enthusiastic about their jobs.

touch social networking!' That may be over-egging the cake and the reality is probably a little less dramatic. But the impetus to change the workplace will be as great - just wait and see. So there is a remarkable opportunity for the Learning Leader to take ownership at this critical juncture.

Developing a learning culture is not only about skills development, however critical. It is also about building a culture that embraces the new and opens people up to change. This is coupled with the speed of change and the willingness of staff to, essentially, develop themselves with a bit of support. If skills are clearly defined and hard, learning culture is soft and emotional. The culture creates the environment that allows learning to flourish and that means that change can be embraced and new dimensions of performance can be achieved quickly.

Social networking slots neatly into this model. It can't happen if you do not trust your people. There is too much traffic to 'check' everything. It cannot happen if you do not allow free communication right across the organisation. And it cannot happen unless you incentivise sharing. And

when it starts there will be an inverse ratio of information and chat to solid content and learning or, if you like, fluff to substance. As the process gets into second gear, that ratio will alter substantially in favour of substance. And if it really takes off and you create an explosion of media and messages wrapped around good practice, and in new directions, you will have made a significant impact in taking the whole organisation forward.

According to BT's head of learning, Peter Butler, what is on offer to staff embraces the whole spectrum of learning opportunity. It stretches from the highly formal and generic, like CBT and simulation, to the highly personalised and informal, like instant messages, staff blogs and podcasts. In other words, the appropriate learning delivered at the point of need, geared to the individual and the circumstances he or she finds him or herself in.

On the job, informal learning, is as valid as a course. A tag cloud can be as useful a resource as a complete CBT program. In BT, learning is available all the time, whatever the circumstances, to all staff,



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because the organisation has a massive change agenda on its hands as it moves from a telecommunications to a software services company.

The BBC has developed Moo, which is an internal Facebook-like application (but a lot more attractive), that encourages staff to share (any media, any time), blog and inspire. The culture that the BBC wants embodies those that aspire, emulate and stretch each other.

Moo is a significant part of that change process and a dramatic realisation of the journey ahead for employees. It is also full of insights, case studies and good practice that are accessible in one click. All of the material has been contributed, ordered and ranked by the users.

Moo is a framework that relies on participation and ownership elsewhere for its success. It functions rather like an internal Facebook application but with more media rich resources and with debates that are work based rather than social in nature. In itself it has value, but it also projects an image of the workplace that reflects creativity and openness.

The growing impact of social networking on business will manifest itself in a suite of tools aimed specifically at business users. For example it is now possible to post to various Twitter accounts simultaneously and get back an analysis of how many people are reading the information you post, and where they come from. This is of peripheral interest to a single Twitter account user, but vital to measure business impact.

More and more product focused user groupings are appearing on Facebook, and there are many blogging and wiki options available to those who do not want the information to be shared with anyone on an open and insecure internet.

But these tools are merely part of the process once you have made the commitment. The learning leader's role is somewhat different and a little in advance of this. He or she will perfect the culture, look at the people implications and perhaps manage a small 'proof-of-concept' trial. At the point of 'go live', the learning leader's role necessarily diminishes considerably. Preparation might also form part of the leadership development and general cultural development of the organisation. In an on line poll conducted by Business-Zone, Twitter and LinkedIn were run away winners in a contest about 'which social networking tools are most useful to your business'.

Why is social networking important when the technologies have downsides and the



rules have not yet been firmly established? Here are ten good reasons.

1. Share knowledge instantly
2. Create a buzz around a organisation
3. Share information
4. Build virtual expert groups at all levels of the organisation
5. Find out what customers think
6. Locate experts and temporary staff quickly who come with recommendations
7. Profile your company
8. Appear to be future facing in the eyes of the world
9. Isolate and deal with emerging issues and problems
10. Spot trends

Individual organisations need to work out for themselves how much it all adds up to. But I think the learning operation should be the part of the company that marshalls the information and organises the planned way forward. Then someone else can do the metrics!

Dan Martin writing in About.Com brings the benefits down to three critical areas. First, build trust; second, find employees or business partners, and third, turn negatives into positives. These particularly apply to small businesses who need networks to survive. But they equally apply to large companies attempting to keep in touch with their own more complex networks.

Dell announced, recently, that it had secured \$3m of business through its Twitter account, which cost virtually nothing to set up and run. Dell releases special sale items and special offers through Twitter and

directs readers to the website. The company has built up a huge following as a result, and monitors the tweets about the company and its products in return.

According to PR 2.0 amongst unique users in the US, internet traffic has increased 2% from May 08 to May 09, but social networking traffic increased by 13%. However, this masks the spectacular growth of Facebook: up by 97% to over 170m US users, and Twitter up by a staggering 2,681% to 17.5m US users. In August, there were 350m unique users visiting Facebook worldwide with the majority, middle income or better, and 58% were aged between 25 and 54. Twitter had 66m unique visitors worldwide in that same month, with 65% aged 25 - 54.

This is a considerable shift in the pattern of internet usage and demonstrates the read/write web in action. And just as businesses who were slow to embrace the internet in the 90s, lost out to more agile competitors, those that fail to embrace social networking will suffer similar losses of credibility, creativity and market intelligence.

Let us return to Peter Drucker and his definition of innovation: change which creates a new dimension of performance. Social networking offers a framework for innovation which could shift a business into a new dimension of performance. The guide in this difficult process should be the learning leader, if he or she is willing to grasp the nettle now.

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