

The Social Networking Tug-of-War

All around the world, organizations are scrambling to formulate policies to deal with social networking. Should our employees be allowed to use Facebook at work? Can we check out someone's MySpace page before we hire them? Can we stop our sales manager from posting pictures of himself at a drinking festival wearing just a barrel and a cheeky grin?

There's an equal air of excitement within marketing: It's so hot right now, how can it help us sell more, find new customers, or stay closer in touch with the customers we have? It's having an impact. Companies who block Facebook or MySpace are finding themselves having to justify it. Many younger people have never been out of touch in their lives, and even eight-year-olds have mobile phones these days. It's a logical extension to be connected to all of your friends.

Facebook as Job Perk

If only one or two of a peer group are not permitted to use Facebook at work, then they feel out of touch with the group. A job comes up where a peer works, and suddenly an employer is wondering why they just lost a useful employee.

No one ever admits at an exit interview that lack of access to Facebook was a key factor!

Unlikely? Well, search a job site for "Facebook" and "MySpace" and you'll find companies are now starting to mention access to these sites as a perk of the job.

Talent acquisition professionals know the benefits of sites such as LinkedIn: personally, I have access to over five million people worldwide, along with plenty of information about them! I can search for people who went to university in South Australia but now live elsewhere. Or I can find people who have specific expertise. As a recruiter and an author, that's gold.

With recruiters plundering social networks and employees spending all day talking to their friends, no wonder management feels uncomfortable.

Management response is schizophrenic. Let's stop our people from accessing this stuff at work because we pay them to work and we don't want them poached! Then, let's use it to recruit for ourselves.

That's dumb. You're finding and recruiting people who enjoy free and easy access to social networking and offering an environment where it's frowned upon.

How can you help organizations embrace change without being swept along in the excitement?

Point out that mobile phone technology allows employees to circumvent any restrictions anyway, and allowing access from the PC at least offers some control.

Explain that an employee who feels trusted and respected is likely to waste less time than one who feels trapped by policy.

Argue that poaching is a process that starts with an employee not feeling that their current role is valued and respected.

There's still the fear that allowing access to social networking sites at work will lower productivity and make staff more visible to poaching. So take baby steps.

Make suggestions for improvements: "If we allow some online social networking at work, it will improve the reach, scope, and effectiveness of our already-beneficial ERP" seems quite innocuous.

Eventually suggest something along the lines of "Here's a way to make an already excellent system 10% more effective." As the old saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: make sure you have superb metrics in place to measure success and costs. IT departments can easily measure connection time on social sites.

A policy that limits rather than prohibits is likely to be more respected.

Many companies are actually making social networking activity a compulsory part of the job, as it tells your customers you're confident and connected. It also shows your competitors' staff a glimpse into your great work environment.

It ceases to be a great idea if you treat employees like eighteenth-century serfs. The key here is the employee's perception, and that's the only one that matters.