Social Media in the Workplace: Minimize Risk, Maximize Opportunity

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................... vi
About the Authors ............................................................ vii
Overview .............................................................................. viii

Chapter 1—Trends and Developments in Social Media
Overview .............................................................................. 3
A Plethora of Platforms: Social Media Sites and Applications .......... 4
comScore, Inc. Examines Social Networking Trends, Future .......... 7
Pew Surveys Document Social Media Explosion ......................... 10
Forrester Research Examines Social Website Use ......................... 13

Chapter 2—Employers and Social Media: Adapt or Die?
Overview .............................................................................. 21
Social Media Adoption: An Employment Attorney’s Perspective ........ 22
Towers Watson on Social Media’s Impact on Communication .......... 24
Businesses Are Using Social Media, but Many Lack Policies ............ 31
SHRM on Social Media Initiatives and Policies, HR’s Role ............... 33
Booz & Co., Buddy Media Examine Social Media Strategies ............ 35
Companies Cite Facebook as Most Effective Social Media Tool ........ 45

Chapter 3—Issues, Cases, and Implications
Overview .............................................................................. 49
Social Media Fail: Customer Posts and Comments ....................... 50
Too Friendly? Social Media and the Supervisor-Employee Relationship 55
Facebook and Productivity: Help or Hindrance? ......................... 62
Legal and NLRB .................................................................. 66
NLRB Takes Active Role in Social Media Cases ......................... 73
FTC Regulations and Social Networks ........................................ 74
FTC Targets Twitter, Google, Facebook on Privacy and Security ........ 81
Business Email Communications and the Law (CAN-SPAM Act) ....... 88
Who Owns a Company’s Social Media Connections? .................... 89
Social Media Gaffes to Cover in Training ......................................................... 186

**Chapter 6—Social Media and Talent Management**

Overview ........................................................................................................... 191
Enhancing Employee Engagement through Social Media .............................. 192
Engaging Employees through Workplace Social Media Tools ..................... 201
Games and Social Media in Training and Engagement ................................. 208
Social Recruiting Takes Off ............................................................................. 210
  Recruiting on the Social Web. ...................................................................... 213

**Chapter 7—Bloomberg BNA Survey on Social Media Policies and Practices**

Overview ........................................................................................................... 217
Social Media Policies: Zero to 60 ................................................................. 218
Policy Coverage: From Scant to Extensive .................................................. 219
Informing Employees of Social Media Rules and Guidelines ...................... 221
Discipline for Social Media Policy Violations ............................................. 223
Blocks and Restrictions on Social Media Access ........................................... 225

**Appendix—Resources**

Individuals ....................................................................................................... 231
Surveys and Studies ........................................................................................ 234
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Introduction

The media frenzy surrounding Facebook’s initial public offering spoke volumes about social media’s place in the universe. Interest, speculation, and criticism were rampant, both within and beyond financial markets. And while Mark Zuckerberg’s “social utility” is the most recognizable face (pun intended) of the social media revolution, social networking sites and applications continue to appear with astounding frequency and speed, both here and abroad. Indeed, less than a decade ago, terms like “tweet,” “post,” and “like” held entirely different meanings for the vast majority of Americans, and one’s “relationship status” was rarely a matter of public record.

Soon, foreign social networking sites such as Orkut, Sina Weibo, and VK might enter the general lexicon in the U.S., while once-dominant social utilities and technologies could be headed the way of MySpace and landline telephones. Before you finish this paragraph, it is entirely likely that a new social media “app” will be launched, thousands if not millions of people will be “friended” and “defriended” (simultaneously, in some cases), and numerous financial pundits will offer their perspective on “monetizing” social networks and applications. You can (and should) try to keep up, but chasing the sun might seem a less daunting task.
A Plethora of Platforms: Social Media Sites and Applications

Like the cosmos, the social media universe is expanding at an accelerating pace. An overview of social networking sites on Wikipedia tallies roughly 200 sites, despite a cautionary note that “the list is not exhaustive, and is limited to notable, well-known sites.” Beyond the usual suspects of Facebook and Twitter is a dizzying array of social media options, both within and outside the U.S., some with millions or even hundreds of millions registered users. BlackPlanet, an African-American community site, has more than 20 million users. deviantARt, a platform for artists to exhibit and discuss works, receives more than 140,000 submissions a day. In China, where Facebook is blocked, Sina Weibo (a Twitter-like social microblogging site) boasts more than 300 million users, despite being launched less than three years ago. Orkut counts more than 100 million registered users, as does Russia’s VK (or VKontakte).

The list below is U.S.-centric and barely scratches the surface of social media’s explosion, here and abroad. Given the technological climate and the mercurial nature of social media users and providers, it will come as no surprise if some of the most prominent sites today are mere memories and afterthoughts tomorrow.

- Delicious—A social bookmarking service that allows users to tag, share, save, and manage web pages from a centralized source. Users post links to articles, write descriptions, and “tag” them, helping other users find content on a particular subject.

- Digg—A social bookmarking website that allows users to share and view web content. Subject matter is submitted and voted on by users, and content ranking on the site is established based on those votes.

- Facebook—Describing Facebook seems as superfluous as explaining the features of a telephone or television. Millions of businesses and individuals are intimately familiar with Facebook’s profiles, walls, posts, and likes, not to mention “friending” and “unfriending.” Facebook’s initial public offering generated enormous buzz and speculation in financial markets and among the public at large.

- Flickr—An image and video hosting website and online community where users share and embed personal photographs, as well as host images embedded in blogs.

- Google+—A networking service that integrates Google Profiles and Google Buzz. In January 2012, Google+ reportedly surpassed a user base of 90 million.
LinkedIn—A professional-oriented site used by individuals and businesses, to create and post professional resumes and biographies, post articles and other information, and write recommendations for colleagues. LinkedIn counts more than 150,000 million users.

MySpace—A predominant social networking site not long ago, MySpace’s stock tumbled with the emergence of Facebook. Nevertheless, the site still has over 30 million users.

Ning—Allows users to create personalized social networks around specific interests and topics. Users can employ their own visual designs, features, and member data.

Pinterest—A pinboard-style social photo sharing site that allows users to create and manage theme-based image collections. According to its mission statement, Pinterest’s “goal is to connect everyone in the world through the ‘things’ they find interesting.”

Technorati—An Internet search engine for blogs—“web logs” often written in the first person that discuss particular topics and invite comment. Technorati indexes millions of blogs and has emerged as an important source of research information.

Tumblr—Users post and share content, including text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos, from their browsers, phones, desktops and email. The site offers a high degree of customization.

YouTube—Allows users to upload, view, share, and comment on video clips. Videos can be pasted to blogs and other social networking sites such as Facebook. YouTube has hundreds of millions of users and enjoys recognition that rivals Facebook.

Implications, Opportunities, and Risks

The advent and astounding growth of social media have myriad, far-reaching implications for employers. Organizations that wish to monitor what their employees are saying or revealing on social media face a gargantuan task given the number of outlets and users, not to mention the volume of chatter. And as subsequent chapters will discuss, knowing that employees are disparaging the company or airing its dirty laundry is one thing; doing something about it is entirely another.

On the other hand, social media services and vehicles offer tremendous opportunities for communication with current and prospective customers. “These tools offer your company whole new channels for interacting and building
relationships with clients and customers, according to Christine Pilch Mancini, a social media marketing strategist and partner with Grow My Company. “They provide new channels for introducing the public to your products and services.

“The conversations about your company’s products and services are happening on social media whether or not you’re listening. Smart companies are not only taking part in these conversations, they’re implementing tools to monitor ‘brand chatter’ on social media and being notified when someone out in cyberspace is talking about them. This gives you the chance to thank happy customers for their positive comments, as well as solve problems for unhappy customers, who will then turn around and post about what a good job you did for them.”

Social media tools also offer new means and strategies for building engagement, morale, productivity, and loyalty among employees, as well as fresh avenues for identifying and recruiting job candidates.
Surveys and Studies

2011-2012 Towers Watson Change and Communication ROI Study
Towers Watson

An Examination of How Social Media Is Embedded in Business Strategy and Operations
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www.shrm.org/surveys

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www.booz.com/global/home/what_we_think/multimedia/video/mm-video_display/50110149

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www.compendium.com

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It’s a Social World: Top 10 Need-to-Knows About Social Networking and Where It’s Headed
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Nielsen

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Forrester Research, Inc.
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