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Adapting to Social Media by Martin Goodyear

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Social Networking (SN) has been a popular phenomenon since the 1990s, with websites like AOL offering chat and free web-profile building. It has, however, become a hugely commonplace service through the introduction of mobile devices with SN support. Part of its popularity is that it provides both a platform and an audience to anyone; individual or group, by which to voice an opinion. Recent history has shown the successful use of Social Media by organisations. Corporations now actively use websites like Facebook to gather feedback on products, or promote deals, and charities spread the world through mass SN campaigns. The attraction for groups is that Social Networks are almost exclusively free to use and simple to run: they do not require an entire marketing team to operate, as other outlets might.

SN comes with its downsides, however. Aside from the obvious distraction that it offers employees, it can also be misused, either deliberately or accidentally threatening the integrity and professional image of the organisation that they represent. Sometimes, these actions can even damage the way the company does business. In 2009, at Tocquigny advertising agency, a large deal was nearly called-off due to careless SN use. The partner company had discovered, through a Tocquigny employee's Twitter account, that Tocquigny was in-negotiations with a rival company.

As the above example shows, SN can prove a security risk. While Tocquigny's leak was purely business based, there are companies to whom such leaks could pose a legitimate risk to the safety and security of individuals (examples being law-firms, internet security providers and close-protection agencies). Even in situations where this is not the case, clients affected could file lawsuits against the company as a whole, even if the blame lies with individual employees.

It is not generally feasible to simply ban employees from SN technology, given its prominence in modern society. Instead, it is recommended that a specific code of practice is drawn up, regarding the use of SN (both in and outside of business), and making clear the boundaries of what can and cannot be divulged online.

Multinational software giant IBM has a specific 'Social Media' segment of their employee code-of-conduct, which refers to any site which accepts user-generated content as a type of SN. It also warns employees against sharing any information which might breach their privacy guidelines, and refers to other rules. In a way, this is not a new set of guidelines, but a simple adaptation of existing ones.

The manner of adaptation need not be complex, time-consuming or expensive, and it can help to prevent a potential loss of profit. Given the availability of access to SN, the implementation of such a system is a logical necessity. It could be as simple as adding an extra bullet-point to your list of internal regulations, and it could cover your assets in the future.

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