

Facebook, to ban or not to ban, that is the question

Simon Walker– March 2010

In a recent survey of over 1400 Chief information Officers from blue chip organisations, only around 10% allowed full access to social networking sites such as Facebook to staff.

Lots has been written about how this frustrates workers (particularly, younger ones, the so-called Generation Y). This is true and can have a destructive impact on trust and engagement. Perhaps of more interest to some CEOs, banning Facebook can cost the and result in lost opportunity.

The most common reason given for not allowing access is 'lost productivity'.

"They (largely their Gen Y staff) would spend too much time on Facebook, when they should be working" is what we hear from managers. But when we ask the same managers about their performance management approach, and whether they focus on outcomes, rather than time spent on inputs they tend to get a little defensive. Personally I don't care what people do all day, as long as they deliver the outcomes I'm paying them to achieve. I think most enlightened organisation and managers would agree.

But surely being 'connected' has value? I was working with a bunch of senior, forty something, directors in a large global bank recently.

We were talking about what constitutes the 'capital value' of their firm. Being bankers they jumped straight to balance-sheet items like cash and asset - financial capital.

With a little more pushing they talked about Human Capital - the smarter, more talented and skilled your people, the more valuable your business. Finally we talked about net work capital - they were really keen on this, they could see that the better connected they were to business partners, customers and contacts, through their little black books, social circuit or who they played golf with, the more 'value' they added.

I pointed out that the preferred method of maintaining this network capital with their younger staff, may well involve social networking. The penny dropped, " so social networking sites build network capital, and we ban them at work..? " They went away to urgently review their policy.

Banning Facebook or other sites is also counter-productive in a simple practical sense. If people want to keep in touch (and many do) and are not allowed to use work systems, they will simply do it under their desks on their phone, slower and more inefficiently. All you are doing by banning it is encouraging them to hide their networking activities and risking giving them a repetitive strain injury!

Some organisations ban access on the ground of security - again this is naive.

Email is largely uncontrolled. Ok there are IT systems to filter out rude words, but they are pretty unsophisticated when it comes to company secrets. Security is more a feature of culture and trust and less about technology and regulation

Look at Apple recently and the launch of the iPad. Despite huge hype and pressure virtually no real detail escaped from Cupertino. Can you Facebook to your heart's content at Apple? You can, just as long as you deliver your goals.

Finally there is the huge online consumer conversation opportunity to be missed.

Enlightened marketing teams are embracing social media with gusto - how ironic then the other day, when a client told me how successful their Facebook group was with consumers, but couldn't actually show me on the PC on his desk! They had attracted, and now were engaged in a conversation with, literally tens of thousands of 'fans', but employees (other than the marketing team) could be part of that until they got home.

So the message is clear- Social networks are neither good, nor bad, they are just another way to keep in touch. Banning them at work makes no business sense and can actually limit your organisations potential.

Is it time to review your policy?

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