

“The Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Workplace”

International Baccalaureate
Extended Essay

Abstract

The aim of this Extended Essay is to, using IT terminology, uncover an efficient solution to the research question: How to maximize the benefits and eliminate the setbacks of social networking sites within a workplace environment? To reach a conclusive solution I explain the social and ethical issues, as well as analyze the positive and negative impacts involved in this research question. The positive impacts analyzed are meeting workmates, creating a friendly work environment and enhancing cooperation. Meanwhile, the negative impacts are decreased productivity, excessive use of bandwidth, loss of privacy, and increased exposure to viruses and malware. Background information on social networking sites, such as their evolution and operation, is used to emphasize and evaluate the analysis of the impacts mentioned in the research question. The investigation was carried out by consulting people's opinions on the impact, benefits, use and solutions to utilizing social networking sites in the workplace, through secondary research such as articles and internet sources, and primary research such as interviews and polls. The conclusion reached is that in order to maximize benefits and eradicate setbacks, a company should create its own internal Social Networking site. This private network should include a monitoring and filtering system, as well as being governed by strict terms and conditions. In addition, the company should implement a complete training and education program for all its employees, in order to raise awareness of the possible risks of such IT system. Secondary solutions were also evaluated, and although the conclusion reached above was the best solution, it raised a few concerns.

Word Count: 259

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Question

How is it possible to maximize the benefits of utilizing social networking sites in the workplace such as meeting workmates, creating a friendly work environment and working cooperatively, while eliminating the setbacks of decreased productivity, bandwidth consumption, privacy, viruses and malware?

Due to globalization and the vast use of IT systems in the business quotidian, social networking sites have been assimilated into the work place. Hence, it is of vital importance to know how to manage issues which arise while embracing the benefits.

1.2 What are Social Networking Sites?

Social Networking relates quite literally to its name. According to Collin's English Dictionary social means "living or preferring to live in a community rather than alone"¹ and Network means "an interconnected group or system". A Social Network means a group which is interconnected to create a type of community. Although Social Networking was not an idea originated in the information technology world, it was rapidly incorporated into it, and began to grow uncontrollably. Nowadays Social Networking sites account for seven of the top 20 most visited websites in the world (Roos, Dave).

The Australian Government defines Social Networking sites as "websites that let people socialise online, send messages to one another, share interests and information, chat, meet people, and post information, photos and videos about themselves for others to look at."² These sites allow people to communicate without being in the presence of anyone, to publish and promote their profiles (a sort of identification where users list their information including but not limited to hobbies, religion and political views), to consult other people's information and look at their photos and videos thus getting to know new people without any physical contact, and to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances.

1.3 Social Networking in the Workplace

Social Networking Sites are used as a form of socialization as the name infers. Socializing is unavoidable in a business environment because working generally involves the efforts of multiple individuals sharing similar resources and goals. Socializing is helpful in creating a friendly work environment where coworkers are comfortable amongst each other. Social networking sites may help amplify this benefit, while generating others such as meeting workmates and working cooperatively, especially in large companies where it is difficult to get to know peers

¹ Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged © HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003

² <http://www.privacy.gov.au/faq/individuals/sn-q1>

in different areas. Conversely, several issues may arise when Social Networking sites are brought into the workplace. Productivity may be impacted if workers are spending too much time socializing online instead of doing their jobs, which is the main problem. Other issues relate to the cost of bandwidth and its capacity, dissemination of computer viruses and breaches of confidentiality. This Extended Essay will place some focus on the negative and positive impacts of incorporating social networking sites into the work place, and the social and ethical issues involved. However, the final aim of the essay is to find an effective solution to the raised issues.

2. Background Information and History

2.1 History of Social Networking Websites

Social Networking started before the internet. The technology of the time of course restricted the features of social networks but they were still present. It began with BBS or Bulletin Board System which remained the most common type of social networking through the 1980's and 90's. This type of social networking, which was available through telephone lines via a modem, consisted of codes which allowed users to communicate with a central system. From this central system they could download various files or games as well as post messages to other users.

BBSes were not the only method of social activity going around before the internet. Another option was CompuServe. It started in the 1970's as a business oriented service for mainframe computer communications which later extended into the public domain. CompuServe members shared files and could access news and events. However, CompuServe's features expanded further, as you could also send messages to friends through a technology which was relatively unused by the public back then, called e-mail. Additionally, users could choose to join thousands of CompuServe's forums to communicate with other members. These forums lead to the popularity of modern iterations of this feature.

Despite other social networks, the one which stood out the most before the internet, and is the most similar to today's social networking sites, came from AOL. America Online was for most the 'internet' before the internet. It had member-created communities which were its most important and innovative feature and "Member Profiles", which listed searchable user details. (Nickson, 2009)

2.2 How Social Networking Sites Work

The success of social networking sites comes not from each technology individually but rather from how different technologies are integrated to form a site which allows various types of activities amongst friends and acquaintances. The private messaging feature of social networking sites comes from traditional e-mail

Figure 1: The use and efficiency of CompuServe

LAST NIGHT WE EXCHANGED LETTERS WITH MOM, THEN HAD A PARTY FOR ELEVEN PEOPLE IN NINE DIFFERENT STATES AND ONLY HAD TO WASH ONE GLASS...

That's CompuServe, The Personal Communications Network For Every Computer Owner. And it doesn't matter what kind of computer you own. You'll use CompuServe's Electronic Mail system (we call it Email™) to compose, edit and send letters to friends or business associates. The system delivers any number of messages to other users anywhere in North America.

CompuServe's multi-channelled CE simulator brings distant friends together and gets new friendships started. You can even use a scanner! If you have a secret you don't want to share. Special interest groups meet regularly to trade information on hardware, software and hobbies from photography to cooking and you can sell, buy and post personal notices on the bulletin board.

There's all this and much more on the CompuServe Information Service. All you need is a computer, a modem, and CompuServe. CompuServe connects with almost any type or brand of personal computer or terminal and many communicating word processors. To receive an illustrated guide to CompuServe and learn how you can subscribe, contact or call:

CompuServe
 Information Service Bureau, P.O. Box 3992
 2025 Ainslie Court West, Columbus, OH 43220
800-848-8590
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An H&R Block Company

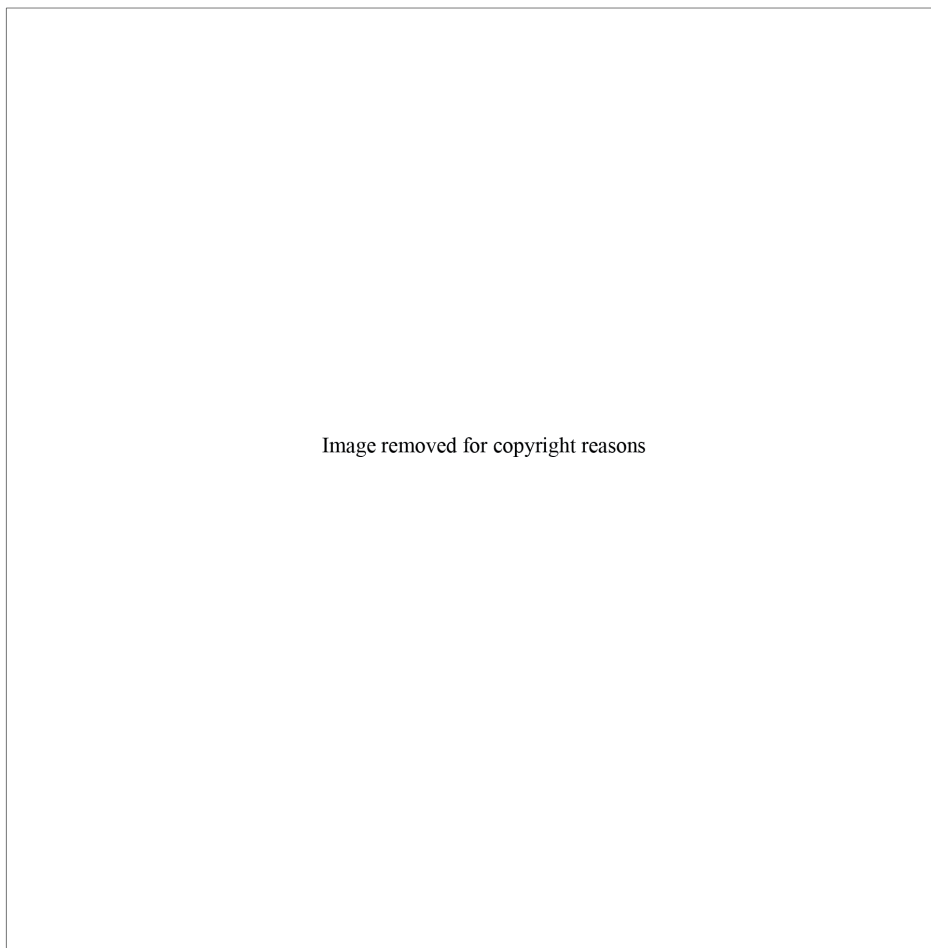
Circle 88 on inquiry card

Source:

<http://www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/>

service making possible sending private one-on-one messages to selected people. This is not a new technology, and neither is the instant messaging feature available on various social networking sites. These sites also have integrated the manner in which instant messaging programs concede adding new contacts to a contact list (the so called “Friends” of MySpace and Facebook or “Connections” of LinkedIn). They also incorporate the use of digital imaging technologies that grant users with the possibility of uploading, viewing, sharing and tagging photos and videos. Social Networking sites also contain games and entertainment promoting competition, help, or the simply fact of having fun with others. Farmville is a Facebook game in which users can go on other people’s virtual farms to comment on their progress and help them improve. Internal search engines are also an important aspect of these sites as they facilitate finding groups, events and people within the site. This is not an innovative idea, but its integration into these sites is practical and helpful. Moreover, they also apply strict security technology to avoid identity theft, stalking and, also explicit material (unless in the case of a pornographic social network site). These include passwords, privacy settings, e-mail confirmations, complaints and other features that aim at keeping the sites safe and somewhat private (although every user should know that privacy levels of social networking sites are minimal).

Figure 2: Different aspects of social networking sites highlighted on an example of a Facebook profile



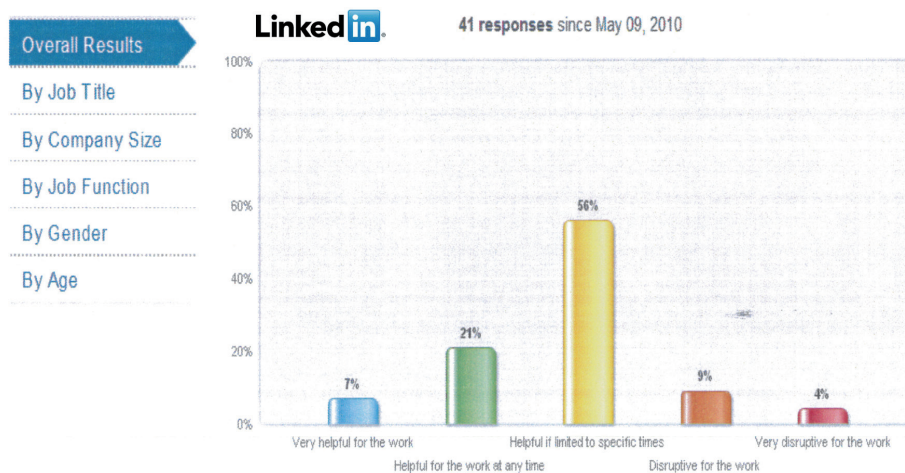
Source: <http://imod.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/new-facebook-profile-page.jpg>

3. Impacts of Social Networking Sites in the Workplace

A poll was conducted on LinkedIn to see the public's opinion on whether business related social networking sites are beneficial or not in the workplace, and forty one answers were obtained. *Figure 3* shows that a large majority of voters thought that social networking sites were helpful and only a small percentage felt that they were disruptive for the work.

Figure 3: LinkedIn Poll on whether business related social networking sites are helpful during work hours

The use of business-related social networking websites (LinkedIn, etc) during office hours is:



A series of interviews with candidates of different ages, backgrounds and companies were also carried out in order to discover various opinions and insights on social networking sites and whether they have positive or negative impacts on the workplace.

3.1 Positive Impacts

3.1.1 Meeting Workmates

In most large organizations it is impossible to know every colleague or employee. However, increasing the level of knowledge among peers can be beneficial for employees and companies. Social Networking is an efficient way to do this. In contrast, if employees are allowed to use any Social Networking site, they might end up socializing more with their outside friends than with their work peers.

When interviewed candidates were asked if they considered it necessary for employees to get to know each other, all interviewees answered positively. However, there was no consensus on whether Social Networking sites are the best way to do this. Some people considered them an inferior manner of interacting with workmates and certainly not a replacement for direct contact. Others stated that social networking websites are one of the best ways to foster interaction among employees. In summary, some people were strongly against Social Networking sites being used in the workplace as a way of meeting or interacting with peers, while others compared it to a telephone “You need self discipline to use them (SN sites) while you are at work. But this also applies to a simple telephone, for example someone could have been on the phone all day but only taking private calls.” (Ming Lee - Appendix 7.8)

3.1.2 Creating a Friendly Work Environment

Having a friendly environment at work can often make the difference between retaining and losing talented employees. It is no surprise therefore that most interviewees responded affirmatively when asked whether or not they think employees work better together if they know each other on a somewhat friendly basis. Evidence from the interviews indicates that a friendly work environment can significantly boost productivity and generate a more positive attitude towards the work.

3.1.3 Cooperative Work

Cooperation in the business world is essential to help employees complete their jobs more rapidly, efficiently and with better quality. Globalization has made long-distance cooperation a requirement for most companies. Cooperative work includes remote working, identification of experts, discovering other workers' knowledge scope and interests, and simply communicating and sharing information to increase the knowhow and productivity of various individuals. Social networking sites allow individuals to traverse geographical barriers. Either in multinationals or during simple business trips, workers are now able to communicate with others around the world, to transfer reliable information, data or feedback. These sites can also help companies to select the best team for a certain job. By analyzing workers' profiles, employers and employees can find information about their areas of expertise and interest. This could be crucial in identifying workers with the right background and experience to perform a certain task.

3.2 Negative Impacts

3.2.1 Productivity

Decreased productivity is the main problem when Social Networking Sites are brought into the workplace. These sites can become a major distraction to employees and eventually lead to a decrease in the business output. They also raise significant social and ethical issues which can generate legal actions. “Employees

spend at least 30 minutes a day visiting these (Social Networking) sites. In some cases, employees admitted spending up to three hours of their working day taking care of their online profile" (Kelleher, 2009). This type of behavior is an unacceptable waste of time. If all workers in a company spend at least 30 minutes of their working day socializing on a Social Networking site, assuming an eight hour daily shift, such company could be losing three weeks of production per year. "According to a study undertaken by information security consultancy Global Secure Systems and the organizers of the Infosecurity Europe 2008 exhibition, the use of such sites is costing UK business an estimated \$12.5bn per annum in terms of reduced output" (Kelleher, 2009). This is a massive amount of money wasted. Understandably, companies have always worried about employees surfing the net instead of working. This issue does not arise directly from social networking, but rather from the integrity and ethics of their employees, as one can always waste work time doing other things, with or without access to these sites (or the Internet). A line must be drawn here between people and machines, as this issue is not about the IT system itself, but rather how people behave during their work hours.

3.2.2 Bandwidth

Social Networking sites use a large amount of bandwidth. If a company has many employees online using Social Networking sites, it may suffer a significant increase in bandwidth cost. There are millions of photos and videos consuming bandwidth and circulating daily on Social Networking sites. Multiply that by the number of employers simultaneously online, and the result may be overwhelming. In addition to increasingly costly bills, the company may experience a slower transmission rate of data, since the data would be disputing busy channels.

3.2.3 Viruses and Malware

The internet has become infested with viruses and malware, and Social Networking sites have become a major target once they are trusted and vastly used worldwide. "According to security vendor Webroot, Web attacks are up 500 percent over the past two years, and 85 percent of malicious software is now distributed via the Web" (McMillan, 2009). Social Networking site users trust their contacts and therefore don't expect viruses, making them perfect targets for malware. "Initially, it was phishing scams—the user would click on a link, be taken to a site that looked just like Facebook's login page, and unwittingly give her login information to the bad guys" (Oppenheimer, 2009). The "Koobface" virus is just one of the many viruses on Social Networking sites. With this virus, users get messages from friends inviting them to view videos, before however, they are asked to update their flash player and when they click update they upload the virus onto their computer. The McAfee Security Labs Blog states that "during infection a proxy server is installed to %ProgramFiles%\tinyproxy\tinyproxy.exe and a service named *Security Accounts Manager (SamSs)* is created to load the server at startup. This component listens on TCP port 9090 and proxies all HTTP traffic, in particular looking for traffic to Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Live.com for the purpose of hijacking search results. Search terms are directed to find-www.net. This enables ad hijacking and click fraud" (Schmugar,

2008). These clearly present viruses have potential to become an enormous problem for companies. If a virus has the ability to spread through a company network, hundreds of computers could be affected which could jeopardize valuable company information raising issues of reliability and privacy. Even if only one computer is impacted, the company still has to pay to fix the computer or remove the virus.

3.2.4 Privacy

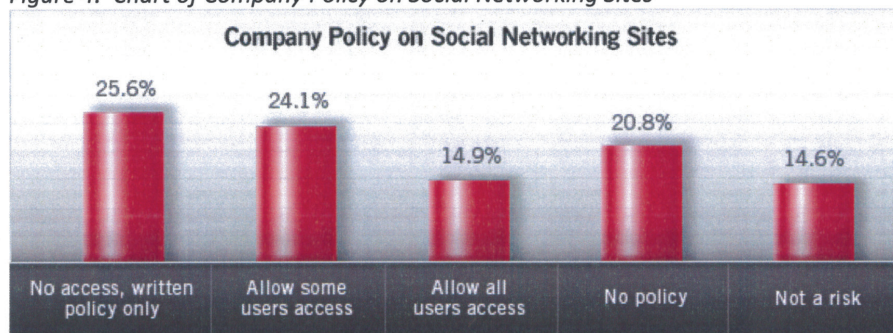
Privacy is an ethical issue relating to my research question. One of the setbacks of social networking sites is loss of privacy, as any information posted online can potentially be accessed by anyone. Most privacy breaches can be simply administered if users are aware of the risks, and thus are careful with what they post online. In the business perspective, there are posts which a staff member may not want his/her employer, peers, or job recruiters to see, and thus he/she should avoid posting it. Anything deemed racist, explicit or offensive on a profile can lead to legal problems at work. To avoid this type of scenario from happening, users must be aware of the fact that Social Networking sites are far from private and that any information posted online can impact one's business career.

4. Solutions

4.1 What is the Best Solution?

Bringing Social Networking sites into the workplace will certainly raise issues that cannot be ignored. Nevertheless companies should not ban all Social Networking sites. Instead they shall rather incorporate these sites into the business in an appropriate way. The best solution involves an integrated approach, incorporating software, rules, regulations and educational actions simultaneously.

Figure 4: Chart of Company Policy on Social Networking Sites



Source: <http://www.facetime.com/solutions/socialnetworks.aspx>

As the chart above shows, 25.6% of companies do not allow any access to Social Networking sites, although a close percentage do allow some access. Banning all access to any Social Networking site at all times, through blocking and monitoring software is a harsh solution to the raised issues, and also removes the benefits of these sites.

To avoid taking drastic measures, a company should adopt the following approach: Firstly write computer and internet use policies which apply to all employees, and have employees formally agree to their terms and conditions. This alone may not keep employees from using Social Networking sites, as some may not respect the policies if there is no chance of them getting caught and being penalized by breaking their agreement. Thus the need of a program installed to monitor all company computers identifying potential breaches and blocking inadequate websites. Finally the company shall develop or adopt a work-related Social Networking site to profit from the positive impacts described in item 3.1. To achieve this, the site has to be internal to the company.

If an internal Social Networking site is created for a company, it can limit the use of photos, and not allow videos, thus minimizing bandwidth use. An internal site also reduces significantly the risk of virus contaminations, especially if all company computers have a security program installed with virus protection and scanning.

Along with these administrative and software actions, the company shall also apply an educational program. Employees need to be aware about the conditions to use the internal site and the consequences of inappropriate or excessive use. Workers should also be educated about the lack of privacy in Social Networking and precautions to be taken regarding what they post online.

Costs of developing an internal social networking site, added to those of required software and programs, can make this an effective but expensive solution, unaffordable to many companies. This once again raises issues of equality of access.

4.2 Is the Solution Effective?

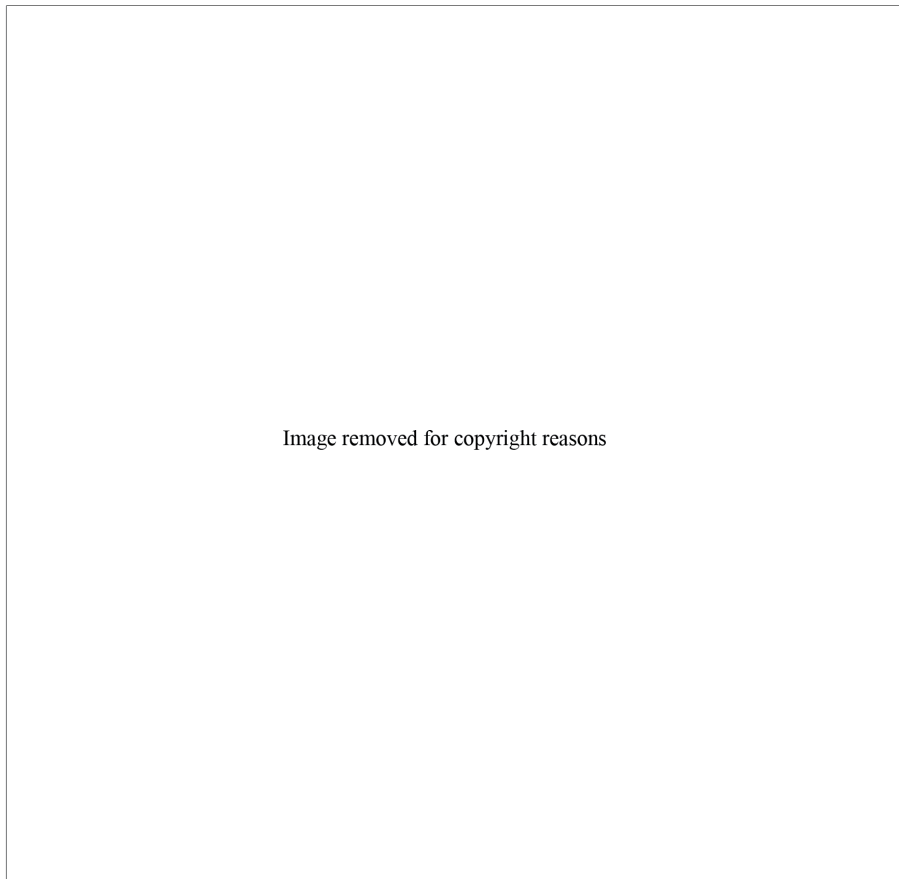
Creating an internal Social Networking site for the company can resolve the issues of productivity, bandwidth, privacy, as well as viruses and malware. Especially if enhanced with monitoring and site-blocking systems, an education and awareness program and a set of usage policies, an internal site can maximize the benefits and eradicate the hindrances of social networking sites. The solution is effective as it treats all raised issues: It reduces the risks of decreased productivity, since it limits the opportunity for employees to communicate with friends from outside work, without reducing their ability to communicate with workmates; It allows employees to socialize at work, thus creating a healthy work environment, while maintaining a professional focus; By limiting the exchange of personal photos and videos, the solution helps minimize the issue of bandwidth, as the internal site would consume less than public social networking sites; An internal site can also help contain viruses and malware as there would be no risk of infection from public site users, and moreover through the combined use of reinforced anti-viruses and scanning programs; The issue of privacy could also be eliminated once the employees were trained to understand the risks, both to the company and to the individual.

In addition, an internal site would maximize the positive aspects of social networking in the workplace. Cooperation and teamwork amongst workmates would proliferate, through facilitated communication within the site. It would also create a friendly work environment, as the site would encourage employees to communicate with each other in a sociable yet business focused manner. An internal site would also augment synergy, as profiles would let others know about the specific areas of expertise and interest of each employee, and thus optimize the task organization within the company.

An example of a company which is soon to launch an internal Social Networking site is the global car manufacturer, Nissan. The site "N-Square" will connect up to 50,000 of the company's 180,000 employees globally. Simon Sproule, the Nissan USA executive overseeing N-Square, said in an interview with BusinessWeek that "the site will provide employees with a way to avoid bureaucratic channels and create new partnerships" (Hall, 2007). The cost is not a problem for Sproule as "he's convinced that social networking will pay off by making it easier for employees to tap into the expertise they need to do a better job" (Hall, 2007). Nissan is cleverly attempting to utilize a Social Networking site to bypass company problems of bureaucracy. Through this site, employees will be able to easily communicate and find information about each other, allowing harmonious work throughout Nissan, regardless their physical location.

IBM conducted a company experiment where they integrated an internal social networking site into the company which they called 'Beehive'. After extensive data analysis and interviews with various employees, IBM discovered that the using of an internal social networking site within their company had positive impacts. "They (employees) have closer bonds to their network, they have a greater willingness to contribute to the company, they have a greater interest in connecting globally, have greater access to new people, and a greater ability to access expertise." (DiMicco, Millen, Geyer, Dugan)

Figure 5: Example of an IBM Beehive profile



Source: <http://www.headshift.com/blog/2009/01/14/IBM%20Social%20Networking%20Research.pdf>

Nevertheless, there are issues of equality of access, reliability and control which arise by creating an internal social network internal. Since the creation and maintaining an internal site can be costly, not all business can afford it, thus raising

the issue of equality of access. Luckily, there are solutions to this problem, as there are sites which offer the creation of affordable professional based internal social networks (E.g. Ning, Xing, Yammer). The downside is that these sites have a ready-made template, so the company cannot shape the site according to their specific needs. Also, even though the company could easily surpass the absence of the internal site for a period of time, reliability is a concern. If the site continuously malfunctions, then perhaps it is not worth the cost it takes to set up and maintain it. Although the initial issue of productivity is resolved by this solution, it is not completely eradicated, as the company still has to control the content being posted and the amount of time employees spend on the site. Thus, control is an issue that arises from the solution.

4.3 Secondary Solutions

A secondary solution is to ban all access to any social networking site during work hours, except for lunch breaks. During their lunch hour, employees would be free to use any form of public social networking sites. This is not the optimum solution because, although it reduces issues of productivity and bandwidth, as workers wouldn't be distracted and would not over-consume company bandwidth, it does not solve the issues of viruses and privacy. Hence, this solution would require extensive virus protection, site-blocking systems and constant monitoring thus making it an expensive solution. Nevertheless, this secondary solution is cheaper than the primary solution found because an internal social networking site is more costly to create and maintain. Also, this solution does not maximize the positive aspects of social networking in the workplace such as increase synergy, because employees would not associate social networking to business. Thus they would spend their lunch break chatting and interacting with friends and family from outside of work rather than with fellow workmates.

Another possible solution is to only allow the use of a work related, yet public, social networking site, such as LinkedIn, as it also enhances communication, advises about business opportunities and emphasizes cooperation. LinkedIn is a great personal business instrument as it has become a major recruiting tool in the business world - "recruiters rely on the site to find even the highest-caliber executives" (Hempbel, 2010). LinkedIn has become a must amongst executives in the business world. However, LinkedIn seems to benefit the individual user more than the company, thus it may not be the best Social Networking site to use within a work environment. Although employees would use it for business related purposes, it still allows for communications with individuals from outside the company, which leads to issues of privacy and productivity. Therefore, the best way for a business to eliminate the issue and maximize the benefits of IT system is to create and manage its own internal social networking site.

5. Conclusion

With the increasing operation of technology within the business world, the use of Social Networking sites has become indispensable. Businesses that do not take advantage of the enhancements of social technology do not get the same benefits as the ones that do. These benefits include meeting workmates, creating a friendly work environment and working cooperatively. However, those that do embrace Social Networking sites must know how to control the use of these sites, otherwise they will fall victim to some of the negative aspects of Social Networking sites in the workplace, such as decreased productivity, the cost of bandwidth, loss of privacy, and the risks of viruses and malware. To amplify the benefits and inhibit setbacks, in regards to social networking in the workplace, a company should create its own internal Social Networking site, while maintaining a monitoring program, a site blocking system, a social networking education and awareness program, as well as company policies with terms and conditions. Although this is the best solution, it raises issues of equality of access, reliability and control.

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