



# Should Facebook be banned during Working Hours?

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Do your people spend a lot of time and waste a lot of the company's communications budget participating in "social networking" (Facebook, LinkedIn etc) during office hours? If you are concerned, then you are not alone. It is tempting to act swiftly to stop this seemingly counterproductive trend but before you act to limit or ban the use of social networking sites, you should consider the wider perspective.

A recent article in a UK publication (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1210564/THEO-PAPHITIS-Why-ALL-bosses-I-did-ban-staff-Facebook.html> 2<sup>nd</sup> Sep 2009) highlighted that the Portsmouth City Council found that their staff were logging into Facebook 270,000 times a month and that on average they had spent 413 hours a month on the site. As a result, management banned access to Facebook. The author of the article, Theo Paphitis is adamant that social networking is detrimental to business and he has likewise limited access to such sites at his company, Ryman, a UK stationary business.

On first glance, one has to agree with Theo. Council staff spending the rate payers' money at the rate of 413 hours per month on what would appear to be non business use of Facebook is a gross waste of the constituents' hard earned cash!

But let's do the numbers. If you divide the 413 hours by the number of log-ins, it is an average of 5.5 seconds per log in. A report on the Portsmouth site shows that in 2006, 4460 Employee Opinion surveys were sent out of which 1402 (31%) responded. [Ref: <http://www.portsmouth.gov.uk/media/emp20061211r04app1.pdf> ] so one presumes there are approximately 4460 employees. If the numbers provided are correct, then the employees spent an average of approximately 5½ minutes (413 hours divided by 4460 employees) looking at Facebook per month or **less than 1½ minutes a week**.

What this analysis shows is that the perception of 'wasting the rate-payers' money' is not in line with the facts. Yes employees spend company time and resources looking at Facebook and other "social" sites but at the rate of 1½ minutes a week per employee, it could hardly be called a significant problem. Taking another perspective, are the results of this time spent on Facebook and such sites all negative or is there positive gain to the organisation for their 1½ minutes a week per employee?

Upon deeper consideration, there are real benefits for organisations that enable their people to access social networking sites. These include:

## **Management discipline**

The duty of management is to ensure that there is an effective balance for their staff between work load and available resource to achieve the required business objectives. This correct balance provides appropriate return to the stakeholders. If the right balance of resource and workload is achieved, people do not have time to indulge in pursuits that distract them from achieving their objectives.

Where an individual is falling behind in their expected results, it is the managers' role to investigate the reasons behind the disparity and to address the issues with the person. If the individual is spending time on personal matters (whether it be social networking sites, elongated cigarette breaks, loitering around water coolers etc), then they should be counselled and if they do not address the issue, then the appropriate steps must be taken to improve their performance. If an individual is not able to address their focus to achieve the required results then it is irrelevant what the distraction is. It is a performance issue and hence requires management discipline. Simply removing the distraction, whether it be Facebook, personal telephone calls, talking to other staff, spending too long on breaks or simply "day-dreaming" will not adjust the person's will to achieve the results. It is up to the manager to address the root cause of the performance issue with the person. Blaming the distraction is merely a method of diverting attention away from the requirement for management skill and discipline.

## **Trust**

The modern employee welcomes responsibility and empowerment to achieve their results based on trust from their employer. Mutual trust leads to loyalty which provides an environment where an individual will strive to achieve results to the best of their ability. Removing access to on line applications such as Facebook is a clear signal that there is no trust by management that the people will focus on achieving their results and that without close supervision they will spend their time actively avoiding their duty.

Provided there is regular review and feedback on the results that people are achieving there is no need for a manager to be concerned that staff are spending their time in pursuits other than work. In the event that a person's results are below standard and it is evident that they are spending valuable time on personal pursuits, it can be pointed out that they have breached that trust and therefore there is a performance issue. If the performance does not improve, then they can be dealt with appropriately. If the person is not able to be trusted, it will manifest itself in any number of ways that may or may not relate to social networking sites.

## **"Electronic window"**

Many roles involve continual focus on applications or tasks that are demanding and impersonal. For those staff that are fortunate to have roles that enable them to "get some fresh air" or talk with people on a social basis, it is not necessary to look for any means of "looking out the window". There are many roles where it is not practical to leave a desk or physically take a rest by looking out the window or 'getting some fresh air'. For these people, a brief look at a social site provides them with an "electronic window" to the world that gives them a 'mind break'. Such a break is refreshing, cost effective for the company and enables them to re-focus on the task at hand in a similar way to their fellow worker that pauses, looks out the window and clears their mind.

## **Enhanced computer skills**

Social networking sites demand a certain level of computer and internet literacy. Ongoing use of these sites expands a person's view of what they can achieve with a computer, how the web can be used and enables the organisation to introduce them to more advanced applications because they are conversant with adopting new web methods. These sites are continually innovating and leading the users to understand the new innovations. Such leaning can be adopted in the company environment as a major competitive advantage against other organisations that have



staff who are kept isolated from such technologies and hence are averse to innovative information technology adoption.

### **Access to rapidly growing and up to date data bases**

Social databases are expanding at a rapid rate, with the majority of the data being self managed and hence current. Leading organisations embrace this fact and enable their people to leverage these databases for business advantage. For example, sales staff can look up customers on a social site and gain a view of them as people prior to contacting or visiting them, leading to a superior ability to provide meaningful offerings and value add relationships to them as customers. Another use is keeping in touch with individuals that are advocates of the company but that have moved on from the client company to join another organisation. It is often difficult to keep in touch with them or to find them once they move. If there is a link with the customer contact person as an individual via a social network contact is maintained and the relationship can be potentially developed with their new employer.

### **Social reinforcement**

Organisations that view their people as core to their success put a lot of effort into supporting social activities for their staff. Irrespective of the company's stance on availability of social sites, many of their personnel will connect with each other on these sites out of working hours. Providing access to social networking sites and using them to disseminate information about work related social events reinforces the organisation's support of the social aspects of the company which demonstrates that the company sees them as valuable, not a "production only resource".

These are merely some of the positive aspects of enabling access by staff to social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn etc. Certainly there are individuals who will abuse access, but these people will also abuse any opportunity to evade their duty. As demonstrated by the Portsmouth City Council example, over use of social networking sites is more perception than reality. If there is over-use, it is a management issue that must be addressed by improving management skills, not removing a potentially rich source of business enhancing technology. Removing access to the sites based on the behaviour of a minority who abuse a privilege places the organisation at risk of disenchanting their loyal people through demonstrating that they are not trusted and hence not valued.

The question should not be "Should we remove access to social networking?" but rather, "How do we enable our people to access social networking so that they and the organisation gain mutual benefit?"

With the right management perspective and skills, access to social networking provides far greater benefits than liabilities. Don't ban Facebook and social networking; instead, focus on management skill and how to use the technologies in innovative, value creating ways.



## About the Author

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Philip is the CEO and founder of LSE Consulting Pty Ltd. He has over 30 years experience in management and leadership of high technology companies and management consulting. He has held leadership, board and senior management positions with high profile IT&T companies where he has specialized in strategy definition; turn around, re-engineering, change leadership and execution to achieve excellent results. His previous positions have included, Managing Director, CEO, Board member, Director and General Manager with companies such as Cisco Systems, StorageTek, Datacraft Australia, Datacraft Ltd, Radware, PM-Partners group, and Acumen International. He has experience in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, and South East Asia.

Philip has a Masters Degree in Business Administration (MBA), Certificate in Electronics, various industry qualifications and is a Fellow Australian Institute of Company Directors (FAICD), Fellow Australian Institute of Management (FAIM) and is a Member of the Institute of Management Consultants (MIMC).

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