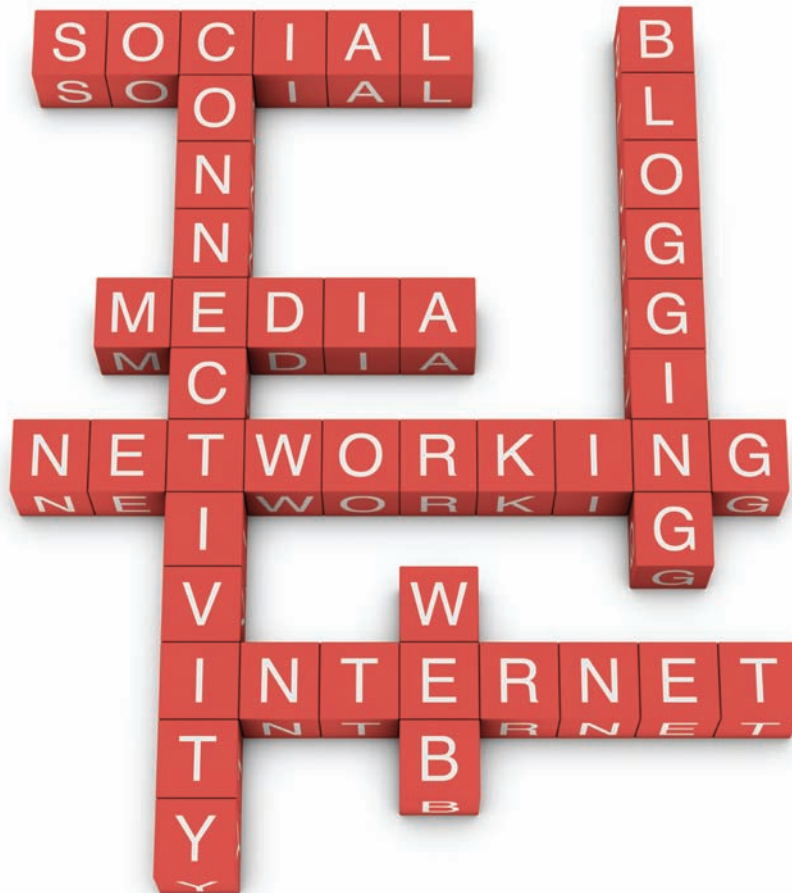


EQUIPPING YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR THE SOCIAL NETWORKING GAME

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Social networking sites are currently utilized by enterprises of all sizes, regardless of for-profit or not-for-profit status. Their acceptance is changing the way individuals and organizations relate within a business context. Records and information management (RIM) professionals cannot afford to ignore the impact of social networking upon their organizations' day-to-day activities. As information technology evolves, so too must the RIM professional's skill-sets. A better understanding of broader business management principles is essential. With awareness and knowledge, it is possible to become a more educated decision maker and a more effective collaborator within the organization.

Social networking sites are becoming ubiquitous in modern organizations' operational toolkits – with many organizations developing their own tools and sites. As policies and procedures are developed for these internally created sites, RIM professionals must reach out and embrace the opportunity to have a “seat at the table” with their cohorts in the marketing, human resources, legal, and information technology departments. Although RIM professionals may not bear sole responsibility for the development or maintenance of these sites within the organization, it is imperative for them to contribute to the discussion as informed, forward-looking stakeholders. This article will focus on how organizations can prepare

(internally) so these sites can be fully leveraged while maintaining a healthy respect for inherent risks.

Social Networking Defined

The advent of broadband, high-speed connectivity spawned a wide spectrum of synchronous and asynchronous communications technologies, allowing Web 2.0 services to grow and thrive. Synchronous technologies allow real-time communication and commonly take the form of wireless (mobile) or wireline telephonic platforms, as well as instant messaging and short message services (SMS or texting) types of applications.

Asynchronous technologies include e-mail and other web-based communications, including blogs and wikis. Social networking, a component of the Web 2.0 environment, may encompass both synchronous and asynchronous modalities. That is to say, social networking sites can offer a unified communications platform where users have the capability of interacting with others on a simultaneous basis. In addition to the communication capabilities, collective information gathering and project collaboration can occur within the context of a virtual (and searchable) content repository. Certainly, spontaneity and timeliness are distinct benefits in a global setting where speed-to-market remains a penultimate objective. However, it is precisely the mercurial, lightning-fast nature of cyberspace that demands a watchful and precautionary perspective.

Why Organizations Should 'Get in the Game'

As organizations consider the development of an internal social networking site, it is important to recognize that individuals from across the lifespan are becoming more attuned to the benefits of this technology. A growing and diverse user base is in place. From a business perspective, it is unwise to remain disconnected and on the sidelines.

IDC's "2008 U.S. Consumer Online Behavior Survey Report: Social Networking Behaviors" supports the idea that the online community is diverse from a demographic standpoint. Individuals of all ages are discovering the benefits of the sites, as demonstrated by the fact that 60% of online, U.S. consumers aged 13 or older used the services in 2008. Specifically, as of the end of 2008, the statistics show 47% of all individuals in the United States with Internet access in the 45 to 54 age range used social networking sites. Percentages rise to 65% for adults aged 35 to 44; 78% for adults aged 25 to 34; and 90% for adults aged 18 to 24. Adults aged 35 to 44 are expected to represent the new growth segment for all social networking sites.

However, another set of statistics demonstrates a low level of preparedness within the ranks of RIM professionals regarding social networks. The results of a recent

Social Networking's Major Players

In addition to more specialized sites like Sermo (for physicians) or INmobile (for senior wireless industry executives), there are at least four major players in the social networking genre: LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter.

All four companies were founded in California within the past 10 years and offer free basic services. LinkedIn, at www.linkedin.com, markets itself as a business-focused site that caters to the needs of professionals. Funded by a select group of investors and venture capitalists and supporting over 41 million users in more than 200 countries, it is one of the most well-known business-facing services.

Facebook, located at www.facebook.com, claims a unique history, harkening back to its early days as a college-related, online campus community. As a privately held company, it relies on a business model based on the sale of advertising space and premium subscriptions. According to the *Wall Street Journal* article "Taking Helm at MySpace, New CEO Sets Out on Mission to Revive Growth, Buzz" published on April 27, 2009, Facebook's more than 60 million unique visitors puts it in close competition with MySpace, and both companies continue to vie for the top spot.

At www.myspace.com, MySpace declares itself a "place for friends" and primarily offers social interaction and communication on a global level. Advertising sales are a major source of revenues. Unlike LinkedIn and Facebook, MySpace is a division of a publicly traded media conglomerate (News Corp.).

Twitter, on the other hand, accessible at www.twitter.com, readily admits on its site that, "While our business model is in a research phase, we spend more money than we make." Despite its still-to-be-determined revenue strategy, Twitter offers both business and social users an online or wireless device-based communications experience. Called a microblogging service, Twitter offers short text messages, called tweets, of up to 140 characters in length. Unless Twitter is used online, users are responsible for the payment of text message services as determined by the individual's wireless carrier.

survey of more than 400 enterprises, conducted by AIIM and published in “Internet Evolution. The Web 2.0 Balancing Act” in the February 16, 2009, issue of *Information Week* magazine, show that only 13% of respondents utilize a records management plan for social networking sites. A majority of those individuals surveyed (53%) responded that a plan was not yet in place, while at least one-third of the survey participants were unsure about their organization’s use of a plan.

Notes from the Field

Social networking technology continues to evolve and it is only a matter of time until the next generation of functionalities arrives. New features may likely include video conferencing and Internet phone services, further enlarging the communications capabilities of these platforms. The impact upon businesses will grow, and a greater number of social networking sites may be created for purposes such as customer relations and e-commerce.

Presently, the range of organizations inhabiting these online venues reflects the ubiquitousness of the platforms – from airlines to the U.S. military – all types of enterprises are recognizing the power of social networking sites. Lessons learned from others’ experiences can provide valuable insights for entrants planning future deployments for their organizations.

- A major U.S. airline uses Twitter to conduct grassroots marketing activities. Customers can provide real-time feedback to the company. And, the airline can search message postings (“tweets”) to determine customer satisfaction at any given point in time. The airline has incorporated Twitter into its overall corporate communications plan.
- At two major, multinational corporations within the *Fortune* 100, social networking sites are firmly entrenched in the companies’ day-to-day business cultures. Employees are trained on usage of the sites; they sign code of conduct policy documents and security-related or information use agreements.
- In the U.S. military services, social networking has been embraced by the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard. The public relations benefits provided by speedy communication (online chat) and new web-based venues for recruiters (blogs and video games) are being creatively leveraged. Both Twitter and Facebook are currently utilized.

Risks to Be Avoided

Although this article will not provide legal advice and is not intended to offer professional legal counsel, it describes the types of concerns organizations should be exploring. For organizations considering social networking, fundamental concerns abound.



Legal Risks

As examples, copyright and trademark or logo-related issues cannot be ignored, while proprietary information captured on these sites must be monitored to guard against loss of an organization’s competitive advantage. In accordance with U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) directives, the disclosure of financial information must be closely watched so inappropriate data are not released. And, in an era rife with identify theft concerns, confidential data of a personal nature continues to require careful handling.

Case law related to cyberspace matters is a nascent and developing body of knowledge. Two online sources of information about these types of legal actions are The Internet Library of Law and Court Decisions at www.internetlibrary.com and the Northwestern Journal of Technology and Intellectual Property at www.law.northwestern.edu/journals/njtip.

Operational Risks

Regardless of the level of exclusivity an organization assigns to a site (i.e., whether the site is internally or externally facing), proper planning is required and organizational implications should be considered. It is wiser to take precautions at the outset, rather than suffer operational, legal, or financial repercussions at a later time. To paraphrase a time-worn adage, it’s “better to lock the barn door before the horse is stolen,” even if the barn exists in a virtual “cloud” and the horse is an equine “avatar”!

Each organization must strategically examine its operational policies and procedures before implementing a social networking site. All too often, in the desire to arrive on the cutting edge and be an early adopter of a technology or an application, decisions are hastily made. The cutting edge rapidly becomes the bleeding edge, as management discovers (too late) that steps not taken have become costly missteps.

And, while the statistics demonstrate younger generations are more attuned to Web 2.0 technology, it is unwise to tacitly assume that social networking savvy equates to



adequate knowledge of inherent pitfalls. Organizations entering the planning stage should assemble a group of diverse, knowledgeable persons – do not rule-in or rule-out inclusion of individuals based on ageist notions.

Determine a business purpose for the social networking site. Resist the temptation to conduct this effort within the perceived safety of an organizational silo. Buy-in from the organization's stakeholder groups can maximize the return to the organization. And, cross-matrix collaboration can help create a site that is operationally sound from multiple vantage points. For instance, at a minimum, human resources, finance, marketing, legal, records management, RIM, and information technology should weigh-in and be involved. After the appropriate groups have been engaged, work to clearly define the organization's needs and objectives for the deployment.

Decide upon the type of site that will best meet the organization's requirements. Will it be used internally by employees and/or members only? This type of application could include sites used for purposes of team building, product development, or communication across widely dispersed workgroups.

Alternatively, will the site be used exclusively by external individuals and present a distinctly public orientation? Examples of this scenario include a community of product users, a forum for professionals in a specific occupation, or a medium for an organization's marketing and public relations activities. It is possible that a hybrid model may be chosen; the enterprise may design an application that manages access for both internally and externally based users.

Recommendations for Internally Designed Sites

These recommendations apply, in a general sense, to social networking sites designed internally for an organization's business use. As such, it is important for the

organization to seek and obtain approval from appropriate legal advisors prior to go-live.

1. Pay attention to policy pertaining to logo, (trademark or service mark) usage.

It is fairly simple to copy and paste an organizational logo onto a webpage. However, a logo signifies an organization's brand; the use of that image is usually guarded and protected given that it exemplifies, in a graphic format, a marketplace representation of that business or association. If a policy exists, then the use of the organization's logo on a social networking site should comply with the existing policy. If there is no policy, one should be created.

2. Use disclaimers.

State that the views of the individuals using the site are not the views of the organization.

3. Discourage or do not allow anonymity on the site.

Transparency fosters appropriate online behavior and helps deter abuse. Cultivate a community of creativity, shared knowledge, and expertise. Misuse of the site by the posting of inappropriate content should not be tolerated. If an organization wishes to use the site to receive feedback on sensitive subjects or to accommodate whistle-blower reports, then a separate, anonymous posting area can be created for those unique purposes.

4. Use a single sign-on directory infrastructure for employees' site access.

Passwords can be linked to employee identification numbers. This allows a unique profile to be created and offers a level of security that can be customized to an individual's position and role within an organization. For general security and firewall requirements, consult with your organization's IT professionals.

5. For publicly traded companies, become familiar with SEC regulations regarding the disclosure of financial data.

Organizations may wish to monitor their sites for compliance purposes.

6. Post terms and conditions for the use of the site.

For example, it can be stated that personal attacks (cyberbullying), falsehoods, and inaccuracies are disallowed. Within the terms and conditions, users can also be notified that content will be monitored and may be removed by the moderator.

7. Observe intellectual property and copyright laws.

8. Respect user privacy.

Create and post a privacy policy.

9. Create a guide that incorporates all aspects of use of the site.


The guide should include content-moderation policies and content management procedures, including tagging.

10. Create training materials and offer opportunities for individuals to educate themselves on appropriate use of the site.

This is especially important in the early days of a roll-out, when some users may be unfamiliar or inexperienced with the technology. When policies are succinctly defined and expectations are clearly set, cultural norms can be established and the technology can be effectively “socialized” within the organization.

The desire to belong to a group and the propensity to feel connected to others are basic human needs. These traits transcend geographic boundaries and bridge all social, cultural, and economic divides. Communities of like-minded persons, utilizing social networking sites, can realize tremendous benefits that will impact organizations and individuals alike.

Creative collaboration, knowledge sharing, information

storage, data access, problem solving, team building, and intra/inter-industry networking are facilitated with the immediacy of unified communications platforms. However, enterprises should resist the temptation to jump into the technological fray without performing the appropriate due diligence. Good business practices and good governance principles still apply; organizations should design a comprehensive social media policy and comply with it. Virtual communities, such as social networking sites, offer tangible rewards, but not without presenting real risks. 

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