

FACEBOOK IN THE UNIVERSITY WORKPLACE

Abstract

Access to social network sites (SNS) in the workplace has been much debated. While some consider SNS a distraction, others consider them a tool for professional socialisation and that recreational access positively impacts satisfaction. This exploratory study reports results from an online survey of employees from one faculty of an Australian university, exploring how they used Facebook at work and how they would react to a hypothetical Facebook ban. Three-quarters of respondents used Facebook at work, primarily for personal socialisation during breaks. Many self-imposed a strict personal/professional separation, but opposed a hypothetical SNS ban, perceiving it as an infringement on their workplace autonomy. It is argued that university employees – academic and professional – can be trusted to self-regulate access.

Can university employees be trusted to self-regulate Facebook use at work?

A recent worldwide study of 4000 managers and employees found that more than 70 per cent of organisations around the world are now active on social media (KPMG 2011). Research on the productivity effects of SNS access at work is polarised around blocking versus allowing access. Studies that support blocking access have argued that SNS problematically blur the boundaries between personal and professional life (DiMicco et al., 2007; DiMicco et al., 2008; Skeels and Grudin, 2009). Brodtkin's (2008) survey of 200 human resources professionals in the United States found that around 25 per cent of businesses blocked employee access to social networking websites over concerns about time wasting, leaking of confidential information and becoming more vulnerable to computer viruses.

On the other hand, allowing access to SNS may increase employee productivity precisely because of the blurring of personal and professional boundaries (Coker, 2011). SNS are increasingly seen as an integral way for individuals to stay in contact, maintain awareness of colleagues and build relationships within an organisation (DiMicco and Millen, 2007; Wang and Kobsa, 2009). In a survey of 435 Microsoft employees in the United States, Skeels and Grudin (2009) found that the main reasons for using Facebook at work were reconnecting with past colleagues and friends, building rapport and stronger working relationships, maintaining awareness and keeping in touch, and building social capital.

Another US study conducted at IBM by DiMicco and colleagues (2008) found that employees used SNS to share photos, organise groups and participate in applications. Beyond the desire to share with colleagues on a personal level, DiMicco and colleagues (2009) identified two additional motivations for SNS at work: career advancement and the ability to convince others to support ideas and projects.

Oravec (2002: 63) argues that 'allowing for reasonable and humane amounts of online recreation (during work hours) can indeed have considerable advantages, both for the individuals involved and the organisation as whole'. KPMG's (2011) study found that employees with open access to SNS at work reported greater job satisfaction (63 per cent) compared with those who had restricted access (41 per cent). Employees

consider restricted access to SNS an infringement on their ability to self-regulate and an indication of a lack of trust. This negatively affects motivation to work and loyalty towards the organisation (Coker, 2011; Lim et al., 2002). The KPMG (2001) study also reports that organisations that block access might be fighting a losing battle. Gupta (2010) reports an informal experiment by Harrisburg University in blocking access to SNS for a week. The experiment did not work out as envisaged because faculty and students used their smartphones to access blocked SNS.

There appears to be a considerable body of evidence supporting the use of SNS at work, both for the professional benefits and because recreational access may have a positive impact on workplace satisfaction. That being said, the concern over time-wasting remains a lively one for most employers. Specifically, if employers want the benefits that appear to come with open access to SNS, can employees be trusted to self-regulate their access? This exploratory study represents an attempt to answer the question in one context and for one SNS: university faculty and professional staff using Facebook while physically at work.

SNS use at universities

Globally, Facebook has also become one of the most frequently visited SNS on university campuses (Sturgeon and Walker, 2009). University students' use of SNS has been well documented in many studies (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007; 2011; Madge et al., 2009), but there has been comparatively less research on the impact of SNS on university faculty and professional staff. That being said, SNS use does appear to be very common, at least by faculty members. Tinti-Kane and colleagues' (2010) survey of 939 US faculty members found that 80 per cent had at least one SNS account, with Facebook being the most widely used.

Hand (2011) has found that faculty report using social media to communicate with students and to promote transparency, although they also note that excessive informality can compromise mentoring and teaching capacity. Sturgeon and Walker (2009) found that faculty started using Facebook primarily to keep an eye on their children or other family members, but then saw its academic benefits. In fact, 90 per cent of faculty who participated in Moran and colleagues' (2011) study reported using SNS in the courses they taught, while 75 per cent of faculty had visited a SNS at work for personal use. This study also found that while older faculty were aware of SNS, they found them less useful and posted less often than younger faculty.

Most universities allow access to SNS. In general, policies for SNS use support employee access to SNS for public and private use, encouraging use for teaching and research processes while also stipulating that the onus of appropriate usage of SNS is on the user staying within the university's general code of conduct (e.g. University of Melbourne, 2012). Most university SNS policies do not stipulate personal versus professional content or time-based conditions of usage. The relatively permissive university workplace context provides a unique case in terms of whether and how employees might self-regulate their SNS use.

Methods

In October 2010, employees of a large Australian university were surveyed on the manner and timing of Facebook use at work, and their opinions about allowing or blocking access. The research design and data collection for this exploratory study were undertaken as part of an undergraduate communication research project course.

Respondents

Participation was solicited from academic and professional staff of one faculty with approximately 900 employees at the university. This particular faculty was chosen because: (1) the faculty did not rely on Facebook to function, nor did it ban Facebook use; (2) all employees had unrestricted access to Facebook during their work day, and therefore Facebook use was left to the individual's discretion; and (3) there was an almost equal number of male and female employees within a diverse range of age groups.

Just under 10 per cent (83) of the faculty population completed the survey. Eighteen males and 65 females completed the online survey. Of the 83 respondents, 37.3 per cent were between 21 and 30 years, 26.5 per cent were between 31 and 40 years, 24.1 per cent were between 41 and 50 years, 8.4 per cent were between 51 and 60 years, and 3.6 per cent were aged over 60 years. Given that this was an exploratory study, participants were able to self-select, and were not asked to specify the nature of employment so as to encourage responses from the widest variety of participants and prevent identification. As preliminary findings, the primary value of these results points to a strong preference to self-manage. That being said, future research should differentiate between academic and professional staff to tease out the details of self-management for each role.

Data collection

Questions in the survey were adapted predominantly from Skeels and Grudin's (2009) study, and to a lesser extent the survey used by Ellison et al. (2008). The Skeels and Grudin (2009) questions of most relevance were those relating to behaviour and attitudes toward SNS. The Ellison et al. (2007) questions of most relevance were those relating to motivation and reasons for SNS (Facebook) in the university context. Five of the quantitative questions were followed up with open-ended 'why/why not?' response fields to tease out the nuances of detail and reasoning.

Data analysis

The quantitative data are reported primarily as simple frequencies. However, for two variables – age group and gender – data were coded ordinally and analysed using rank-based non-parametric testing in the *Mathematica* application. No significant gender differences were found, but given the gender imbalance and small sample, these results were too inconclusive to report. A Kruskal Wallis test was performed on data for the question regarding Facebook use frequency across age groups. Some age group patterns are reported.

The open-ended qualitative responses following five of the quantitative questions were analysed using a simple iterative open coding process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Respondents' open-ended responses are provided after relevant quantitative results as illustrations of employees' behaviour and reasoning around Facebook use.

Results

Form of Facebook use at work

Almost three-quarters of respondents (74.7 per cent) claimed to use Facebook while at work. When asked to choose one or more of thirteen possible uses for Facebook, respondents overwhelmingly chose the personal-sounding choices of socialising with friends (Facebook chat, sending private messages or making wall posts, replying to events) (48.2 per cent) and/or checking out what people they know are doing (45.8 per cent) (Figure 1).

Most other personal-sounding social activities were much less frequently chosen, such as joining groups or 'liking' pages (12 per cent), uploading photos (8.4 per cent),

checking out someone they met socially (4.8 per cent), playing games (3.6 per cent), meeting new people (1.2 per cent) and unspecified ‘other’ activities (12 per cent).

Researching for work purposes accounted for a surprising 27.7 per cent of responses, but other work-sounding choices were chosen much less frequently. Learning more about people with whom they worked with (13.3 per cent) was far more frequent than finding out what was going on in their workplace (10.8 per cent) or monitoring competing organisations (4.8 per cent), whereas 20.5 per cent claimed that they did not use Facebook at work at all for any purpose. The open-ended responses showed the biggest difference in accounts about using Facebook *at* work versus using Facebook *for* work. Those who accounted for themselves as using Facebook *at* work overwhelmingly claimed

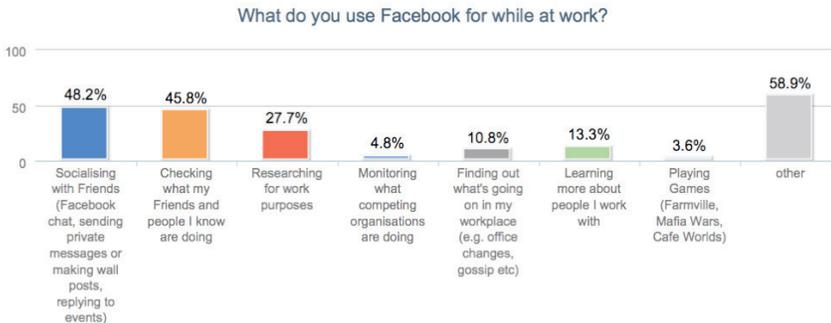


Figure 1: Uses of Facebook at work

that their Facebook usage was a personal but legitimate alternative from work. Some claimed to use Facebook only during the official lunch period. Many more, however, claimed to use it for unofficial breaks from work:

For social purposes. During my lunch break.

Gives me something lightweight to do while code is running.

When too heavy day, I use it to calm down.

Active contact was a common claim, and often included reference to Facebook as both a personal and professional tool. Responses that specifically claimed Facebook was a work tool usually also involved indications of the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional use as well as references to Facebook as a legitimate communication medium. Most of these respondents referred to research and teaching, indicating that faculty members are probably more likely to find Facebook relevant to their work:

Facebook is part of my online life. The boundaries between work and home and online are very blurred for me: I do work from home on the weekend and in the evening and do social stuff from the office. Learning about social net[working] also impacts on my teaching.

Useful way to occupy myself while I'm processing an idea. Sharing info with colleagues and keeping in touch with personal and work contacts. Contacts feeds are often a useful source of information. Also, quick instant messaging with peers in other offices means I can sort out work stuff quickly without sending an email or going to visit.

A few respondents did admit to using Facebook to escape from boredom and as procrastination, but even this apparent admission of wasting time was often combined with notions of taking a break or active contact:

For interest's sake, for something to do if bored or if I need a break from what I am working on.

If I'm bored or need to contact someone or get a message from someone I will log in.

The negative responses to the use of Facebook at work cohered around separation of personal and professional life. Direct versions tended to invoke a work-ethic dimension, while indirect versions invoked a functional or time-based rationale:

Facebook is personal and for fun. Unethical to access at work.

It is not required for my job.

These negative responses tended to be brief, and treated the workplace as a regimented context – even though regimentation was not (reported as) directly imposed by a workplace authority. Judging by the lack of references to teaching, research and other faculty positions/tasks, these are likely to be responses from professional staff.

Frequency of Facebook use at work

When asked whether Facebook was a part of their everyday activity at work, far more respondents strongly disagreed (34.9 per cent) or disagreed (22.9 per cent) than strongly agreed (4.8 per cent) or agreed (22.9 per cent). When asked about frequency of Facebook usage at work, over a quarter (28.9 per cent) of respondents claimed to access Facebook at least once a day, followed by once a week (21.7 per cent), once a month (16.9 per cent) and multiple times a day (14.5 per cent), while 18.1 per cent claimed to never access Facebook from work (Figure 2). When responses were separated into age groups, respondents aged 21–30 reported checking their Facebook pages significantly more frequently while at work than all other respondents.

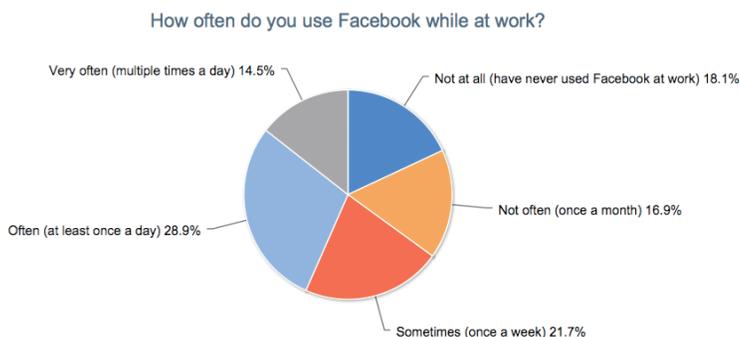


Figure 2: Frequency of Facebook access at work

Facebook and strength of collegial ties

Just under two-thirds of respondents (60.2 per cent) reported having at least some colleagues as friends on Facebook. However, far more respondents were ambivalent (28.9 per cent), disagreed (22.9 per cent) or strongly disagreed (9.6 per cent) that they would feel closer to colleagues who were also Facebook friends. Respondents who had colleagues as friends on Facebook reported discussing personal and social matters (65.1 per cent) almost twice as much as work-related topics (37.3 per cent).

Most interestingly, when asked whether they were more likely to support a work-related project proposed by a colleague who was a Facebook friend than one who was not (Figure 3), only 2.4 per cent of respondents strongly agreed, while 18.1 per cent agreed, 14.5 per cent strongly disagreed and 30.1 per cent disagreed they were more likely to support a work-related project proposed by a colleague who was a Facebook friend than one they was not, and 34.9 per cent were ambivalent.

Would you be more likely to support a work-related project made by someone you have added as a friend on Facebook than a colleague you don't?

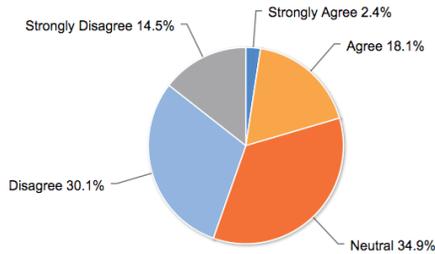


Figure 3: Relationship between Facebook collegiality and project support

The open-ended responses to this question show a clear pattern of demarcation between those who felt that the value of work projects must be kept separate from personal relationships and those who felt that collegiality did carry over between the personal and professional. Those who felt that there was a strong divide expressed their division in several nuanced ways. Some felt that personal relationships, on or off Facebook, were irrelevant and instead espoused academia's meritocratic position:

I don't think so – judge support for projects based on merit and capability.

No projects should be related to a social network as they should be judged on their merit.

Some accounts of division were more qualified, specifically in the sense that Facebook friendship would practically increase project awareness or a colleague who was a Facebook friend probably already had similar interests or strong ties, irrespective of Facebook:

Work-related projects are slightly independent of Facebook, and so it wouldn't really matter whether I was friends with a person on Facebook or not as to whether I would support this. However, I'd probably be more likely to be aware of this if the person was on Facebook than if they were not.

I don't think Facebook would make any difference. I may be more likely to support a project that a friend ran (which I would be more likely to be Facebook friends with), but it would not be about the Facebook status as such, but my social ties with the person.

Many positive responses used the same logic, claiming that if they had chosen to add a colleague on Facebook, then that tended to indicate a strong collegial relationship, which would in turn positively affect likely project support. Some went further, claiming Facebook itself helped to foster this kind of collegiality:

The personal relationships fostered by Facebook make you want to support their work in general. It fosters a sense of collegiality.

I would definitely have to judge the project on its merits, but one of those merits is the personality and character of the people involved. Those colleagues who are also Facebook friends are more ‘real’ to me as fully rounded human beings with families, hobbies, political and religious views and so on than those I only encounter in a work context.

Allowing or restricting Facebook access

The respondents were asked to respond to three propositions that addressed the issue of allowing or restricting Facebook access. Asked to respond to ‘I would not enjoy working for an organisation that banned Facebook’ (Figure 4), 47 per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed, but 32.5 per cent were ambivalent. The remaining 20.5 per cent strongly disagreed or disagreed. When data were separated into age groups, respondents aged 21–30 reported being slightly more against working for an organisation that banned Facebook access than older groups.

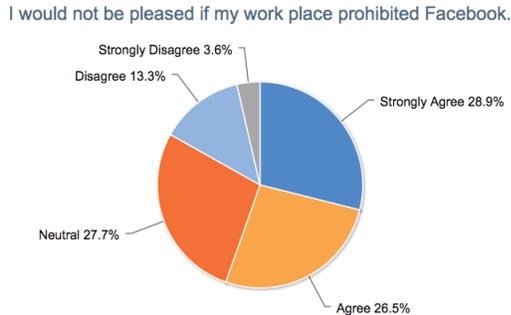


Figure 4: Responses to Facebook prohibition

The open responses to this question show that opposition to a ban took one of three forms. The first was a desire for workplace freedom, with a heavy emphasis on trust and personal responsibility:

Signifies a mistrust of employees, and that my employer doesn't trust me to manage my time and prioritise my work.

Because as long as an activity does not reduce productivity to a level below that which is expected of an employee, the employer should not be allowed to restrict activities. As long as the activity is not disruptive of others, it is fine. An organisation that bans work would probably also ban other benign things. The ban would indicate other nastiness.

The second argument against banning referred to accounts of Facebook as a ‘legitimate break’ option:

I don't see the harm in allowing access. Providing that the access does not interrupt the quality and quantity of work being conducted, there is no reason why it should be banned. It allows a brief exit from the stress of the place that allows employees to take a break, refocus on the task at hand and get on with it.

The time it takes is not significant compared to other water cooler talk. Banning sites seems a bit extreme.

The third argument for opposing the ban stressed its utility as a communication medium and the value of access to both personal and professional contacts:

Sometimes I NEED to access Facebook during the day to sort out/organise something that is happening in my social life – it makes it highly inconvenient if I can't. Since it is more obtrusive to others to be on the phone in an office, Facebook is a quiet, easy way to organise myself (not all requirements are purely social).

I am able to get advice from colleagues very quickly regarding potential journals to submit my work to, conferences to attend, how to respond to feedback after rejection from journals, etc. I have also learned quite a bit about my colleagues from Facebook. We have more of a sense of who we work with (and possibly a sense of community) because of this tool in my opinion.

Those who were ambivalent or would support a ban on Facebook repeated the arguments about separation of the personal and the professional, and many reported that they would simply use Facebook from home:

I believe in keeping my social life and work life separate.

Doesn't really bother me whether I access Facebook at work. It is just convenient to check my messages now and again – usually outside of work time.

While the prior question asked about workplaces in general, the next statement proposing a ban at the university engendered a slightly stronger response, with 28.9 per cent strongly agreeing and 26.5 per cent agreeing that they would not be pleased. Again, though, a similarly large proportion of responses (27.5 per cent) were ambivalent.

The open-ended responses to this question mirrored those of the more general version. The most notable difference was that those who were opposed to prohibition made many more references to academic functionality or presumed liberty of the university context:

Social media is part of academic life and therefore shouldn't be denied to academics.

We have increased expectations of community engagement from researchers, and Facebook is one useful tool ... why would they want to ban it? It would just demonstrate in yet another way that we are not engaged with the community in ways that they prefer and create distance between university and community.

Finally, the proposal 'I'm happy that I am able to access to Facebook in my workplace' (Figure 5) received the strongest result of the survey: 54.2 per cent agreed and 14.5 per cent strongly agreed, compared with 2.4 per cent disagreeing and another 2.4 per cent strongly disagreeing. Given that previous questions garnered more negative responses to the value of Facebook, it would seem that even those who did not use Facebook at work formed part of the 26.5 per cent of ambivalent responses.

Again, as with the prior two proposals about banning Facebook at work, the open-ended responses stressed the values of Facebook as a break from work, as a manageable and useful tool of freedom (including the freedom to not use it) and convenience:

I'm happy that I am able to access Facebook in my workplace.

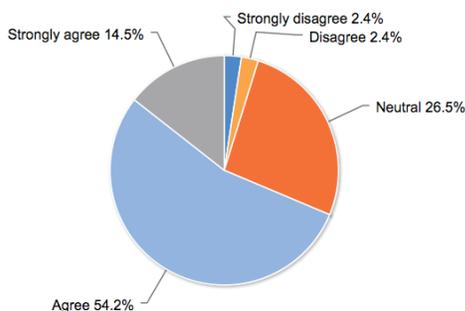


Figure 5: Happiness about being able to access Facebook at work

Working full time and having a family to take care of, it's easier to keep up with what's happening with my friends if I can access Facebook in my breaks at work because I don't have a lot of time for that at home.

Convenience, the feeling that I'm trusted rather than micro-managed, helps build a community of support with ex-students and industry peers.

Part of academic freedom (even though I choose not to).

Ambivalent responses largely came from non-users or those who self-imposed Facebook use at home only:

I'm not in the habit of accessing Facebook so don't really feel strongly about this.

I don't access it from work, so being able to access it or not is immaterial to me.

Some of the most negative responses, regardless of whether respondents agreed or disagreed with being happy to access SNS, indicated self-awareness that time could be wasted on Facebook:

I am happy that I can access it, because the Centre I work for uses it as a promotional tool, but personally it is probably not a good thing that I can access it because it tends to be a bit of a time-waster for me when I should really be doing work which is why I don't access it that much and am only on there for a couple of minutes at a time.

Because I have a short attention span and Facebook enables my procrastination habit.

Discussion

The aim of this exploratory study was to explore how faculty employees at a particular university used Facebook at work, and how they would react to a hypothetical ban. Given the exploratory nature of the study, we are not claiming that these are highly generalisable trends – rather that they are indicative of potential issues to be further explored in future work.

Our study uncovered five key findings from the data:

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- Almost three-quarters of respondents reported using Facebook while at work.
 - The main uses were socialising with both friends and colleagues – more for personal reasons than work-related purposes.
 - Friending colleagues on Facebook neither particularly impacted collegiality in real life nor affected whether they would take on work projects with them.
 - Respondents claimed to self-regulate Facebook access, whether they agreed with using it at work or not.
 - Accounts for Facebook use were ambivalently linked to personal satisfaction, but there was a strong emphasis on linking freedom of access to Facebook to a broader rhetoric of workplace autonomy.

Uses, attitudes and age

The overall findings of this study suggest that respondents were either Facebook enthusiasts or Facebook opponents. These differences became more pronounced when respondents were separated into age groups. Although respondents of all ages acknowledged Facebook as either a distraction or socialising tool, older respondents reported avoiding Facebook because they viewed it as wasting time, while younger employees reported both more Facebook use and an ability to self-regulate. This extends on previous findings about the greater significance to the maintenance of young employees' work and social lives than their older counterparts (e.g. Moran et al., 2011; Sturgeon and Walker, 2009; Dong et al., 2008; Lampe et al., 2008). Dye (2007) suggests that SNS have created a new generation of individuals whose identities are defined by their connections and content they produce online. Younger people might access Facebook more frequently while at work because they have a greater obligation to maintain online connections, which are also predominantly social connections.

Uses for Facebook at work

Our overall findings suggest that there were three major uses for Facebook at work: (1) to check what their Facebook friends were doing; (2) socialising with friends; and (3) to conduct research for work purposes. These results support the findings of DiMicco and Millen (2007) that SNS provide an integral way for individuals to stay in contact with one another, and to a lesser extent to maintain awareness of colleagues and build relationships within an organisation (see also Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 1998).

Previous studies have reported that increased use of SNS blurs boundaries between personal and professional lives (e.g. DiMicco and Millen, 2007; DiMicco et al., 2008). Although respondents reported using Facebook at work for both personal and work-related purposes, our results indicate that Facebook was used predominantly for personal purposes. Respondents who reported using Facebook at work for personal purposes argued that it allowed greater focus upon their work during work times, by fulfilling social obligations at their own pace and as unofficial 'break time'. Such managed usage may not be visible to employers, however, so depending on when employees are seen to be using Facebook, it is understandable that many employers perceive it as a distraction.

Our results showed that career advancement had little to do with SNS usage, and SNS invitations were no guarantee of increased support of ideas, contrary to findings by DiMicco et al. (2009), who found that SNS were used for career advancement and the ability to convince others to support ideas and projects. In fact, many respondents reported that they would choose work-related projects based on merit, values or interests, and not because they came from Facebook friends.

Across all age groups, we consistently found that employees who were friends with their colleagues on Facebook discussed personal matters more than work matters. These findings suggest that Facebook allows colleagues to extend their social relationships outside of the work environment, which may in turn lead to an increase in social capital among colleagues (Lin, 1999). However, our study did not focus on social capital generation, and thus it is recommended that future studies could examine this issue within the university context.

Impact on personal satisfaction

Unlike previous research, respondents in our study reported that Facebook use at work had little impact on their personal satisfaction. Flanagin and Metzger (2001) claim internet use for personal communication is strongly correlated to personal satisfaction. Similarly, DiMicco and Millen (2007) found that employees' use of SNS while at work positively impacts an individual's personal satisfaction. Although respondents did not feel that Facebook use at work improved personal satisfaction in our study, their opposition to prohibiting it at work suggests that SNS removal could at least damage levels of personal satisfaction while at work.

Self-regulation

Respondents in our study were quite opposed to the thought of an organisation blocking access to SNS, reporting that such an action would indicate the university's lack of trust. Instead, they were more supportive of employees taking personal responsibility for regulating time on Facebook, as long as it did not affect their productivity. Most respondents saw nothing wrong with accessing Facebook while at work – in fact, many saw it as beneficial to their mental well-being and personal satisfaction while at work. Hence these results are consistent with findings from the KPMG (2011) and Coker (2011) studies, which found that taking breaks to access Facebook did not hinder employees' productivity, that they were a factor affecting perceptions of personal satisfaction, and that having access to SNS increases organisational trust.

Conclusion

Our findings showed that a majority of employees from a particular university faculty accessed Facebook at work, but claimed to self-regulate their SNS behaviour. While admitting that Facebook was used more for personal than work purposes, Facebook's capacity to manage both personal and professional contacts across social, geographic and temporal boundaries was treated as especially valuable because it could be used as down-time at the employee's discretion. These findings differ somewhat from other studies, which have largely found networking and career-building to be the primary reasons for accessing Facebook at work (see Brodtkin, 2008; DiMicco et al., 2009; Wang and Kobsa, 2009). Our findings also do not support the premises upon which universities allow access to SNS for academic purposes: to improve teaching and learning and to improve communication with students (e.g. Hand, 2011). Nevertheless, it would seem that relatively liberal policies that allow employees to access SNS are suitable for the university workplace, as long as use does not interfere with work or productivity.

Overall, this research is best categorised as a preliminary study of employee Facebook usage patterns in a university. However, it is also clearly limited in scope. Only a comparatively small number of self-selected employees from one faculty in one university were surveyed; academic and professional roles were not separated out; and respondents were predominantly female and aged under 40. It would be beneficial

to continue this line of inquiry on a much broader scale – at least across an entire university or preferably several – in order to gain a more complete picture of Facebook use in the university workplace. Future studies should also distinguish between academic and professional staff, since these two groups have different roles and responsibilities.

This study did not focus exclusively on social capital generation or maintenance among colleagues using Facebook, so future research should explore how SNS create a complex nexus between personal versus professional social capital. Our results suggest that SNS may have an increasing, albeit indirect, impact on the link between collegiality and project support, but that this link may be at least rhetorically fraught when justifying project support to others.

Ultimately, the results of this study suggest that university employees value being trusted to self-regulate SNS use. The issue of whether access to SNS should be allowed in the workplace is broader than the scope of SNS access alone. Neither our research, nor much of the research that supports the social value of SNS at work, deals with the legitimate legal concerns of harmonising SNS terms and conditions with university IP conditions, or security concerns such as confidentiality breaches and technical vulnerability. From both a policy and a management perspective, these other issues cannot be treated as entirely separate from the time-management issue, and are worthy of further research.

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