

Facing up to new opportunities

Forward-thinking employers are taking the best from social networking tools to drive engagement and boost capability

By Julie Nightingale

SOCIAL NETWORKING sites such as Facebook were once regarded as a distraction in the workplace, but now the technology is proving to have other, more valuable uses which have made bosses think again about its role.

Some 79 per cent of organisations are already exploring social networking technology, according to a survey by Buck Consultants and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

More than a platform for company communication, the blogs, discussion groups, comment postings and other tools are a way to gather and to share intelligence and insight up, down and across an organisation in a way which is potentially immensely powerful.

"When social media is used, the barriers between different levels of hierarchy come down," says Vlatka Hlupic, professor of business and management at Westminster Business School at London's University of Westminster. "There is more co-operation and more informal exchange of ideas, and more innovation emerges in organisations."

It is particularly evident in knowledge economy organisations – among the management consultants, software developers, architects or people working in creative industries, media, advertising and PR, Hlupic says. "Such people need to be challenged but they need to feel passion for their work, too, because passion is a very important driver for engagement. Social media can help to unleash it because it enables people to exchange ideas, feel empowered and have their voice heard."

A company about to embark on the social networking path might think the cheap and easy way to do it is to set up their own Facebook page and invite staff to participate. In fact, says Robin Hoyle, head of learning at consultancy Infinity



Learning, using the established technology is a bit old hat.

"Using the tools that are publicly available, such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace, has not borne lots of fruit," he says. "People who are serious about this understand that your employees are not going to like their employer and 'friend' them because it all feels a bit like mixing two worlds. Companies are now starting to think how can they take some of the components of what is happening within social networking and apply that in their own intranet. And that's a different idea altogether."

Even so, employees won't automatically engage and those that do are often the technologically obsessed. Research for Infinity indicates that only about 2 per cent of staff will be active users of a network – blogging, discussing and commenting on other discussions – with another 8 per cent participating less actively, perhaps posting a rating on a blog or discussion. But the remaining 90 per cent, while not actively contributing, are using the network.

Hoyle says: "It is actually much more similar to the way people shop online. People like to look, browse, maybe find a piece of info and go away again. They don't comment or leave a mark but they are using the material."

One mistake to avoid is for the powers that be to use the technology to deliver corporate messages in top-down fashion with little real insight or intelligence on offer, he adds.

"There are some examples where the internal communications team writes the chief exec's blog but everybody knows they do it and nobody pays a blind bit of notice."

One of the intangibles around social media technology is the return on investment: how do you demonstrate not only that the network is successfully engaging staff but that, as a result, it is increasing their productivity and boosting the bottom line?

Hlupic points to the example of HCL

Technology, a software consultancy in India which developed its own Facebook-style application and used it to create a new business strategy.

"Originally, 300 managers would put their strategy ideas to the CEO but with the social media application, they could put their ideas for new strategies to everyone in the global business, so 8,000 people could potentially comment. Everyone could contribute to the planning and everyone could really align themselves with the strategy and live and breathe it," she says.

This all happened mid-recession and in the four years since, 70 per cent of all major deals closed by HCL were won against the big four global

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IT players, the number of customers has grown five-fold and employee attrition is down 50 per cent. Revenues have also tripled over four-year period and operating income has also tripled.

But whether there is a measurable benefit or not, the fact is that no company can afford now to ignore the potential of social networking technology as a medium for communicating with staff, says Hoyle.

"In the old days we used to put a newsletter on the wall in the canteen, then we put something on the intranet. We can't avoid the fact that social networking now exists and is being widely used by people. And an organisation has to ensure that it is using all of the media available to ensure that the message gets across to everyone. Keeping people in the dark is really not an option."

A learning experience

When BT set up its own internal version of Wikipedia, the communications giant found it was a big topic of conversation

"In our daily lives we pick up stuff which is really interesting and useful, but often don't share the information," according to Richard Dennison, BT intranet channel strategy manager. "What we thought was that if we had a tool to which anyone can publish and edit, it might free up this informal layer of learning."

As a result, BTpedia was created in 2007. It is a Wikipedia-style platform where any member of BT's 100,000 staff worldwide can publish material – whether it's about explaining acronyms, how to manage your email or soliciting project ideas.

"One of the rules we had from the beginning was the front page [of a topic] should only contain information and the discussion tab behind it can contain opinion – we didn't want people publishing their opinion on the info pages," Dennison says.

And as hoped, it has generated some key practical insights. "For example, we used to have about five or six different recognition tools for different bits of the business, so if you wanted to message somebody, you could send them an e-card or if you were a manager, a kind of gift token," he adds.

"Someone created a page on BTpedia that linked out to all of them which became incredibly popular. It made clear that it was blatantly silly to have all of these different tools, so we now have one for everything."

www.btplc.com

In good health

Collaboration and support are key to the success of Bupa's own social network

Bupa Live, Bupa's social network, lets people be heard "at any level of the business", according to Danielle Spencer, director of internal communications. "It has the full range of media tools – discussions, blogs, videos, document sharing, micro-blogging – so if people have a good idea or a question to be asked, they've got the mechanism to do it in a very visible way."

Created two years ago and currently used by about 12,000 of the 52,000 employees worldwide, Bupa Live is a collaboration platform, too – Bupa's first health and fitness app was conceived and developed entirely by a global group via the network.

But it's not just for techies. One of the most active online groups is the Dementia Group, made up of people caring for dementia sufferers in care homes and people who are interested in pioneering ways of looking after those with the condition. Facilitated by Dr Graham Stokes, Bupa's director of dementia care, it has about 90 members.

Spencer says: "It's a combination of Graham putting out internal thought leadership in this area, people sharing experiences and it acts as a bit of a support group, too, as people log in at weekends. It's like lighting hundreds of little fires to building the capability of people who work in that area."

www.bupa.co.uk

Spencer: talking works

View from the top

"We recruit for attitude and train for skill which means all of our 175,000 colleagues have a passion for delivering great service to our customers. Every day, colleagues are updated on how their store is performing and have the opportunity to put forward their ideas on how things could be improved. Forty six per cent of our colleagues have been with us for more than five years. That creates a committed team."



Andy Clarke
president and CEO of Asda

