

Social media policies slowly catching up

As social media have become more mainstream, companies are increasingly acknowledging social media's value-generating potential.

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Social media present challenges for organizations, but also phenomenal new opportunities. So far, however, organizations have tended to focus on the potential downsides of social media, and their policies surrounding them have often concentrated on risk mitigation.

This appears to be changing, according to the findings of [a study](#) by McGill University's Emmanuelle Vaast and IESE's [Evgeny Káganer](#), which was published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. As social media have become more ubiquitous, organizations have started to perceive their benefits, and this is reflected in subtle changes in their policies.

The authors studied how organizations perceive and respond to their employees' use of social media. To discover this, they examined 74 corporate policy documents concerning the use of public social media sites. These were analyzed using the theory of "affordances."

Social media affordances

The concept of affordances is the idea that when people perceive an object, they see it in terms of its "opportunities for action" -- put simply, what it can be used for.

What, then, do organizations think social media can be used for?

Prior research has identified four main "affordances" of social media:

- *Visibility* means that behavior, knowledge, preferences and connections that once

were invisible become visible.

- *Persistence* means that, once created, content exists for an indefinite period of time.
- *Editability* means that people can amend, add to, revise and change collaboratively content published on the Internet.
- *Association* refers to social ties, either between people, or between people and the content they create.

While manifestations of all four affordances were present in the social media policies analyzed, organizations tended to concentrate on certain affordances more than others.

Visibility and persistence dominated the policies. The idea that people who were not your intended audience might read what you post, and that content you create will continue to exist for an indefinite period of time, were of particular concern. The policies tended to regard these as potential risks, and focused on the possibility for reputational damage.

Editability was muted. Where social media's editability was acknowledged, it was seen primarily as "editability by others."

There was an interesting relationship between visibility and persistence, on the one hand, and editability, on the other, in that the former seemed to overshadow and, to some extent, displace the latter. This was exemplified by the fact that "What NOT to post" was a far more common theme than "What to post."

Association was interpreted through the lens of risks. The focus was on associations between employees and the organization, with employees often being warned to use disclaimers clarifying that their views were personal, and not those of the organization. The policies tended to ignore the potential for employees to use social media to collaborate or interact.

Three themes

In general, there were three overarching themes in organizations' attempts to shape employees' use of social media.

First, many borrowed from existing policies that had been developed in other contexts, such as general communications and HR guidelines. These borrowings were sometimes complex and lacked relevance, which undermined their effectiveness.

Second, some attempted to produce new policies tailored for social media that acknowledged special features such as the blurring of work and non-work roles, as well as providing advice

on "What to post/What not to post." These, however, often remained underdeveloped and lacked specifics.

A third theme was the attempt to hedge against or reduce social media risks that the organization was unable to anticipate. Often, this meant telling employees to check with someone in authority if they were unsure about their social media behavior. However, the issue of whether or how those in authority were qualified for the task was rarely addressed.

What all this implied was that the social media environment was a new and changing one, which could not be adequately governed by existing policies created for other purposes. To cope with this, organizations attempted to develop new governance mechanisms and establish some means to deal with problems on a case-by-case basis.

A changing landscape

Social media policies are changing, as evidenced by the fact that more recent examples referred to dedicated social media departments or teams, which suggests a professionalization of organizations' relationship with social media.

Also, while risk mitigation was still a prevalent theme in recent policies, they also tended to recognize the positive aspects of social media, such as their ability to foster transparency and build positive relationships with customers or partners.

Worries over the blurring of the personal/professional boundary seemed to have slightly decreased, while the theme of "fostering community" had increased.

It seems that organizations are cautiously starting to see the positives of social media.

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