Converting old policies into new value

The authors categorize the social media governance documents from 40 organizations and offer advice on creating strategic policies that will generate value for employees and customers in the long term.

April 1, 2011

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In 2005, a self-described bunch of bloggers and social software evangelists at IBM got together around a wiki and took their first stab at defining a set of social media guidelines to provide practical advice for employees regarding the use of blogs, wikis and social networks. Their Social Computing Guidelines were subsequently ratified by IBM management and over the years have been revised and updated in line with each new form of social media that has emerged.

IBM takes a "no policing" approach to social media, but instead encourages its 400,000 employees in 170 countries to be a powerful voice for the company: "Emerging online collaboration platforms are fundamentally changing the way IBMers work and engage with each other, clients and partners. IBM is increasingly exploring how online discourse through social computing can empower IBMers as global professionals, innovators and citizens. These individual interactions represent a new model: not mass communications, but masses of communicators. Therefore, it is very much in IBM's interest – and, we believe, in each IBMer's own – to be aware of and participate in this sphere of information, interaction and idea exchange."

IBM's generous approach contrasts sharply with that of many other companies, which tend to regard the ever-expanding list of social media tools and platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as challenges to be overcome rather than opportunities to be leveraged.

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How can organizations allow employees full access while keeping the associated risks at bay? How can firms manage the loss of control inherent in letting anyone voice his or her opinion on potentially sensitive issues? What should be done about the blurred boundaries between personal and professional interactions? These are just a few of the questions that have many managers scratching their heads.

The lack of clear answers is not helped by the gathering speed at which these social media forms are emerging and seemingly taking over. When in doubt, the first, most obvious recourse is simply to fall back on what you know. And indeed, that is what many companies have done, turning to tried-and-trusted policies formalized in company handbooks as a means of guiding employees in the use of these new communication tools.

Others have not even started to address the issue. In January 2011, IESE, together with Future Workplace, conducted a survey of North American companies. The results revealed that half had no social media policies in place at all.

Of those organizations that do, it would seem that the majority focus on mitigating risks, or are nothing more than extensions of existing communications and human resources policies. Very few focus on empowering employees and reaping the full benefits that social media can bring to the value chain.

This article takes a detailed look at the types of social media policies that companies have in place today. We argue that organizations need to look beyond policies that focus primarily on risk aversion, and we offer some practical advice for how company policies should evolve to bring sustainable value in the future.

This article is published in IESE Insight Issue 9 (Q2 2011).

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