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The hidden problem of Facebook and social media at work: What if employees start searching for other jobs?

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Abstract   Companies are increasingly encouraging employees to use Facebook and other social media to interact with coworkers in order to empower collaboration and knowledge sharing. Yet, there is a hidden problem that has been neglected by managers. The more employees interact with coworkers through social media to facilitate their work in the organization, the more likely they are to learn about and become interested in other companies via social media, form new work connections outside the organization, and engage in job search behaviors. The use of social media to facilitate work and benefit organizations could paradoxically risk fostering withdrawal intentions and turnover, which damage organizations. This article provides evidence of this paradox from an empirical study. After having identified the problem, the article proposes both the solutions to avoid and the solutions to adopt, illustrating best practices from successful companies, comparing their benefits and costs, and indicating the situations in which each solution is best implemented. To conclude, I offer 10 recommendations to turn the problem into an opportunity and use social media as an innovative recruitment tool.

1. Facebook and other social media at work: The current direction of organizations

In October 2016, Facebook launched one of its major innovations: Facebook at Work. Facebook at Work offers a new platform to facilitate communication and collaboration among employees in the organization. Instead of using long and inefficient chains of emails, employees can efficiently communicate through the website, exchange messages and files, and engage in video conferences and meetings. The interface is similar to that of the traditional website, leveraging the familiarity of employees with Facebook. The service offers a vast array of functionalities that outcompete traditional

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intranet services, and hundreds of companies have already been successfully using its test version.

The idea of Facebook at Work was developed based on a very recent organizational trend, which is distinct from the traditional marketing approach to social media. Organizations have originally considered social media to be beneficial in promoting brands, reaching out to new customers, acquiring information about purchasing behaviors, and building a reputation of trustworthiness, with overall positive effects on financial performance (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Companies advertise their products through sponsored posts on Facebook, get free brand exposure and awareness through their corporate pages, can stimulate active dialogue with customers, and can observe their social media behaviors to inform their market research at minimal cost (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015).

However, organizations have recently started considering the benefits of social media not only for customers but also for their workers. O'Connor, Schmidt, and Drouin (2016) found that 86% of employees have coworker friends on social media, that 77% of them use social media while working, and that in 44% of cases they talk about their jobs. Tiago and Veríssimo (2014) found in their study that 82% of employees believe that a digital presence in social media promotes internal and external relationships, and 60% believe social media usage supports their decision-making processes. In its social media policy, Cisco recognizes the value of social media as a collaboration tool among coworkers and as an opportunity to better listen to employees. Ford acknowledges the importance of employees sharing information through social media. IBM promotes the social media activity of its employees, recognizing how it can help improve IBM products, diffuse knowledge, and create value.

Current arguments suggest that social media can be beneficial to facilitate the work of employees. Social media offers the opportunity to reinforce networks among employees in the organization, the possibility to build friendships, to share information necessary to execute task activities, to gain access to resources, and to get support or advice (Liu, Brass, Lu, & Chen, 2015). McKinsey forecasts that social media and social technologies could increase work productivity of employees by 20%—25% because they augment the speed of communication, the scale of communication, and the engagement in collaborative behaviors while cutting down communication costs and inefficiencies (Chui et al., 2012).

Following these premises, the recommendation would be to encourage the use of Facebook and social media to facilitate work. Indeed, employees must be sensitized toward the nondisclosure of private information and the risk of reputational damage (O'Connor et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is the necessity to avoid the abuse of social media at work, which may distract employees (Rosen & Samuel, 2015). The ideal recommendation would be to develop social media policies that minimize the risks of reputational damage or the leaking of sensitive information and inhibit the abuse of social media, but which overall encourage employees' social media use under the perception that it can benefit their work.

2. An unexplored problem: Risk of employee flight

Yet, there is a hidden problem that organizations may have overlooked and could require adjusting our recommendations for businesses. The use of social media to facilitate work may not only enrich the relationships an employee develops inside the organization but also the relationships that an employee develops outside of the organization, eventually increasing the risk that employees will engage in job search behaviors and develop new work connections to find an alternative occupation. There is a fundamental trade-off that creates a dilemma for organizations. Strong social media interactions to facilitate work mean creating more opportunities to acquire resources and perform better. However, strong social media interactions to facilitate work also mean creating more opportunities to find alternative jobs and to either leave the organization or increase the negotiating power vis-à-vis the organization.

Companies are beginning realizing that social media can show the attractiveness of the company to job candidates and be used to recruit new hires, especially when it comes to millennials (Cho, Park, & Ordonez, 2013). Consulting companies like Deloitte have developed attractive Facebook pages that publish content that is interesting to potential hires, such as successful career tips, and offer an opportunity to directly contact HR and send job applications. A recent survey of 800 employers found that 94% of them were using or planning to use social media for recruiting purposes, 78% of them already hired employees through social media, and 42% viewed and considered content in a candidate's social media profile during the hiring process (Jobvite, 2013).