



Social Networking: Brave New World or Revolution from Hell?

A look at the phenomenon of Social Networking and the implications for Businesses

Social Networking

They say it's good to talk. But in business, it depends what you're saying – and who you're saying it to. Right now this simple truth is a hot topic in the business community, thanks to the lightning-fast rise of social networking.

It's a real phenomenon. Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, Orkut, Perfspot, Friendster, Neighborhood – the list of social networking websites goes on and on. Masses of users are signing up to their services at an astonishing rate; MySpace alone currently has over 200 million accounts.

But even as social networking makes it easier than ever to communicate online in real time, democratizing the Web and deluging cyberspace with information and opinions posted by millions of people eager for "virtual" conversation, poses many challenges for the business world.

The Web's New Frontier

Results of an exclusive MessageLabs survey conducted in September 2007, reveal that approximately 75% of companies said the number of visits their employees were making to social networking sites had increased over the previous six months. About 60% thought this had damaged productivity; while over 75% believed corporate reputation could be seriously threatened if staff posted negative comments about their organization online. No wonder over 70% of respondents said they were thinking of restricting employee access to social networking sites.

"There's a lot of anxiety around at the moment", comments Paul Wood, Senior Analyst with MessageLabs. "A lot of companies are really struggling to get to grips with the full implications of social networking and what it all might mean for their business."

For many organizations, this free flowing, unregulated environment seems a truly intimidating place, the Internet's answer to a lawless Wild West (or should that be Wild Web?) town where anarchy rules and unwary visitors court disaster. Or at least risk seeing their identities stolen and their corporate networks infected with unwanted malware as cyber-criminals hijack social networking for their own malevolent purposes.

So it's not surprising that a number of big-hitting organizations, such as Lloyds TSB and Credit Suisse, are reported to have slapped outright bans on employees' use of social networking sites. But not every business has followed suit. Some see the craze as a gilt-edged opportunity to expand networks of contacts, accelerate business processes, engage with (and listen to) customers more closely, and even identify and recruit high-caliber staff more cost-effectively than previously possible. Others are adopting a "wait and see" policy or looking to follow an intermediary path between unfettered access and blanket ban.

So who's right?

The Good, the Bad and the Lazy

It's only taken three or four years for this innovative electronic medium to grow from nothing, evolving beyond its original social applications, to creep irresistibly into the business domain. In part this is because in an age of laptops, working from home and increasing erosion of traditional concepts of office hours, more people are finding their work and home lives blurring and blending into each other.

Recent research by Emedia revealed that over 10% of social networkers visit social networking sites for business reasons. This growing trend is reflected in the appearance of an increasing number of business-oriented sites, such as LinkedIn, Viadeo, Huddle and BT Tradespace, designed to help companies initiate and strengthen relationships with colleagues, clients, suppliers and partners, wherever they are in the world. Moreover, this is a medium that not only promotes exchange of knowledge, ideas and information, but can also make it an unusually energizing and rewarding experience.

Supporters point out, too, the role that social networking can play in forging team spirit among staff and improving morale, motivation and job satisfaction. Big brands are also getting in on the act as they recognize the benefits of building a presence in the social networking environment – research by Microsoft has shown that almost three-quarters of UK social networkers have already visited profiles set up by companies specifically to promote particular brands.

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So much for the good points. But those skeptical about social networking's value to business argue that "networking" can easily turn into "not-working" and may even become highly addictive. In a recent poll by silicon.com, 8% of workers owned up to spending between one and five hours a week – and 2% admitted to spending between five and 10 hours a week – on social networking sites while in the office.

Then there are the bandwidth implications, plus the risk of indiscreetly broadcasting confidential commercial information and valuable intellectual property in what is, after all, a very public forum. "Making an unguarded comment about your organization in a bar is bad enough," Paul Wood observes. "Making it on the Internet where it can be incredibly hard to remove – and where hundreds or even thousands of people might get to see it – can, in commercial terms, be absolutely lethal."

And that's quite apart from the very real threat posed by spammers, virus-writers and their partners in crime who set up false profiles, trawl through social networking sites and piece together job titles, phone numbers, email addresses and so on – just the sort of information they need to launch sophisticated, highly targeted attacks on corporate networks.

We've Been Here Before – or Have We?

But wait! Doesn't this all seem familiar? A similar debate heralded the arrival of Instant Messaging (IM) on the business scene. IM, too, was an essentially social medium that only began to transfer to the business world when its devotees started to use it at work (with or without their companies' endorsement). There was no shortage of skeptics claiming it was just a time-wasting fad that would never last. Yet these gloomy perceptions and negative predictions proved unfounded. IM is now a well-established tool for real-time business communication, with adoption in the financial, telecommunications and IT sectors already reaching an impressive 30-40%.

Perhaps the same thing will happen with social networking and it will become an integral feature of global commerce. But at this point in its development, it's just not possible (or prudent) to make such a prediction with total confidence. Maybe posterity will actually show that, with its emphasis on two-way conversation rather than traditional top-down online communication, social networking really was a bridge too far for business – and that the minuses outweighed the plus-points. Time will tell. But businesses just can't wait that long!

When deciding on their policy towards social networking, individual organizations will have to weigh the pros and cons, the risks and benefits in



Fig.1: The list of social networking websites goes on....and on.

the context of their own particular field of business, their aims, their working practices and their business culture. In some cases, this may mean deciding on a total ban. But if it doesn't, the key will be to establish a level of control that delivers effective protection without negating the informality and fast-moving fluidity that lie at the heart of the whole concept of social networking.

But framing an access and usage policy – and making employees aware of their responsibilities (even outside working hours!) – is only a first step. The trouble is, unless your Web security capability is equal to the task of enforcing it, you might just as well not have a policy at all.

Minding your Business

This is where managed Web security services can make a real, immediate and cost-effective difference. Operating at the Internet level, MessageLabs Web Security Services combines benchmark, constantly updated URL filtering, anti-malware and anti-spam capabilities with ease-of-use and the flexibility necessary to allow businesses to devise and implement exactly the right social networking policy for their specific needs.

Paul Wood explains, "Because it is highly configurable, our service enables different website blocking and filtering rules to be applied and then monitored right down to user group or even individual employee level. It also helps firms meet their legal obligations to employees by preventing exposure, whether accidental or deliberate, to pornographic or other offensive Web content – for example, via an apparently harmless link on a social networking site."

Rules can even be set up to include a total ban on individual sites or, consistent with a more relaxed approach, to enable all or some staff to have access to these sites during certain parts of the day. This is key functionality for managers concerned with productivity, as controls can be set which permit access to social networking sites during lunch hours or outside of core working hours, but not during the main working day.

Cyber-criminals are becoming especially notorious for posting fake profiles enticing "friends" to click on links to other websites that actually download unwanted spyware or adware, or simply generate click-through revenue for the perpetrator. The incorporation of viruses and worms in Flash files embedded within profiles is another favorite – and potentially damaging – tactic. So MessageLabs unique ability to scan webpages in real time for spyware and viruses, and to block access to such webpages is absolutely essential for organizations that decide to embrace or permit social networking.

All the indications are that social networking is not just a passing fad. The genie is now out of the bottle and has already beguiled millions of users. So it will surely be around, in some shape or form, for many years to come. But deploying a proven Web security solution like MessageLabs managed service can help ensure that, for your business, social networking doesn't become the revolution from hell.

To find out more about how MessageLabs Services can help your business harness the potential benefits of social networking while protecting you against the risks, visit <http://www.messagelabs.com/products/>.

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