The Impact of Social Media in the Workplace

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Abstract: Today, individuals communicate easier and faster due to accessibility of the Internet. However, when employees are distracted with social media, it can become a concern for organizations. This paper reviews literature concerning social media and its implications at workplaces, and provides recommendations to control it, using Adams' equity theory (1963).

> *Advances in computer technology and the Internet have changed the way America works, learns, and communicates. The Internet has become an integral part of America's economic, political, and social life.*
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> *(Clinton, 2000, para. 1)*

The arrival of communication in the form of social media has connected individuals throughout the world together (Bennett, 2010). Social media can be defined as where people communicate, utilizing online platforms while they are connected to the Internet (Cox & Rethman, 2011). With social media, people interact not only with a single person, but they can choose to connect with many other individuals to speak concurrently, though they are at various locations. In addition, people may engage in a variety of activities; for instance, they can download photographs, upload videos, and electronically transfer information. Social media diminishes the problem of communication with others over long distances, and expedites the ability for people to communicate at any time (Hantula, Kock, D'Arcy, & DeRosa, 2011). Some of the most popular platforms in social media are Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook, which give people the ability to easily connect with friends, relatives, and co-workers (Bennett, 2010; Sherman, 2009). Twitter is a unique form of communication because of its brevity on the postings: the limit is 140 characters, and the users have no need to be acquaintances with each other—by 2009, Twitter had 41 million users (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Conversely, LinkedIn is more business oriented and has 85 million members (Wang & Kobsa, 2009). Users post their professional image to the public, showing their skills, contacting other professionals in the field, and even searching for prospective candidates for their industries (Cox & Rethman, 2011). Facebook, which is the most social in nature, stated they had over 400 million active users in 2009 (Warnakula & Manickam, 2010). Two years later, on November 4, 2011, Facebook stated they had more than 800 million active users, and more than 350 million of these people were utilizing their mobile devices Moreover, Facebook contends that more than 50% of their active users log on to Facebook in any given day. Further, Facebook states the average user has 130 friends with whom they interact. (Facebook Statistics, 2011).

In the past, before the advent of Facebook, other social media sites were also popular: IM, Classmates, and MySpace (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). Additionally, it is noteworthy that the social media phenomenon is not isolated to America; for example, in Asia, people use Cyworld, QQ, or Friendster. In Brazil and India, people use Orkut, and in Spanish speaking countries, people use Hi5 (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). In Japan, Mixi is popular; LunarStorm is popular in Sweden;

Grono in Poland; and Bebo is the platform used in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Previously, communication was mostly done via landline telephones, which afforded limited features. Additionally, people contacted others by sending written correspondence through postal services, but this medium has lost popularity because it is slower and less accessible than electronic mail.

Due to the ease of Internet connections and access in the workplace, organizations can enhance business operations and employee communications by having their own inter-office social media platforms. This offers employees the opportunity to share knowledge and collaborate with each other (Skeels & Grudin, 2009; Stafford & Mearns, 2009). Additionally, this can be utilized as a training tool allowing for flexibility of employees' time and location (Cox & Rethman, 2011; Ferreira & du Plessis, 2009). However, organizations are also facing the adverse side of social media, which is the distraction of employees while performing their jobs (Mastrangelo, Everton, & Jolton, 2006; Sherman 2009). Some of the concerns managers must deal with are the time employees spend with social media while ignoring their work duties (Wang & Kobsa, 2009), and the attention employees devote to their technical gadgets (Ferreira & du Plessis, 2009). Additionally, safety issues may arise due to the distraction social media presents to the employees (Sherman, 2009). The problem for managers is controlling excessive use of social media on the job. The purpose of this paper is to show how Adams' Equity Theory (1963) can be applied to assist managers in remedying the situation of social media distractions in the workplace.

Method

Both authors became interested in investigating the phenomenon of social media use at the workplace, as a result of myriad casual observations on employees' behavior while using social media on a computer or a smart phone. However, these observations were not used to develop an empirical study because the goal of the authors was to investigate research that had already been done concerning social media use in the workplace. Adams' Equity theory was chosen to apply to the problem of social media distraction in the workplace, because we were interested in the way that balance could improve employees' attitudes toward work.

The authors did an extensive literature review using ERIC, JSTOR, Wilson Web, and Google Scholar databases. Only information addressing the use of social media in the workplace was used. Articles that were rejected were those that did not have *social media in the workplace*, or *work distraction* as their main focus. The keywords were *social media, productivity, work distraction, work behavior, work performance theories, workplace, social networking, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Two-factor Theory*, and *Agency Theory*. The investigation was further refined by investigating Adams' Equity Theory, and how the theory relates to employee perception of balance in the workplace.

Equity Theory

To assist managers in controlling employee use of social media during working hours, managers need to be equipped with tools in the form of tested, applicable management theories. One theory that can be applied to the work environment is John Adams' Equity Theory (1963). Equity Theory is a justice theory that deals with relationships and the perceptions of the people in any given relationship. These relationships include those existing between employees and the organizations for which they work. Equity Theory focuses on what people perceive as fair or as unfair in terms of input and outcomes in a relationship. In a relationship, people will seek to achieve a good ratio between their inputs and outcomes (Adams, 1963). Distress can be caused

for individuals when they feel either under rewarded or over rewarded (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). When applied to business relationships, inputs for employees could be things typically thought of as good employee behavior, such as arriving to work on time, completing jobs in a timely manner, respect for others, keeping job skills current, and staying focused on job activities during work time, while outcomes could be good wages, various job benefits, pleasant work environment, employee recognition, and opportunities for advancement. Adams (1963) draws from Festinger's Dissonance Theory to put forth two postulates to describe the effects of the imbalance of input and outcomes or inequity in a relationship:

> (a) The presence of inequity in Person creates tension in him. The tension is proportional to the magnitude of inequity present. (b) The tension created in Person will drive him to reduce it. The strength of the drive is proportional to the tension created; *ergo*, it is proportional to the magnitude of inequity present. (p. 427)

Adams (1963) presented eight ways individuals may strive to reduce inequity in any given relationship: (a) An individual may increase low inputs. (b) An individual may decrease high inputs. (c) An individual may increase outcomes. (d) An individual may decrease outcomes. (e) An individual may terminate the relationship. (f) An individual may distort their view of reality concerning their own inputs and outcomes. (g) An individual may distort their view of reality concerning the input and outcome of others. (h) An individual may pick other people to compare themselves to. The application of Adams' equity theory could be used to reduce the excessive use of social media in the workplace.

Adam's Equity Theory (1963) may appear basic, but is complicated in the business environment because many work elements are ambiguous. The perception of what constitutes inputs and what constitutes outcomes often varies among individuals (Huseman et al., 1987). An example of differing perceptions in input and outcome would be some individuals see doing complex tasks as input, while others see the same task as an outcome (Huseman et al., 1987). Due to different views of input and outcome, the task of rewarding employees for positive inputs can become difficult.

Reducing Use of Social Media in the Workplace

Warnakula and Manickam (2010) found that 98.9% of the employees surveyed in Sri Lanka visited their social networks at the office. Employees are supposed to perform the tasks assigned to them, but often their electronic social connections become a means of distraction (Mastrangelo et al., 2006; Sherman, 2009) due to the "beeps" alerting them about a new Facebook post, or by a Tweet. Frequently, employees disengage with their duties to respond to the social media alerts. Warnakula and Manickam (2010) found that more than 60.8% of study participants said they checked Facebook at work. Furthermore, because employees may be focusing on responding to the social media, the tasks they are executing may be done inadequately, leading to productivity losses (Warnakula & Manickam, 2010) or safety issues (Sherman, 2009). However, part of the problem of excessive use of social media in the workplace may be that employees feel entitled to use this form of communication during work because they may believe it helps balance their job input with their job outcome (Adams, 1963). Using social media would be one way of reducing their input, if they perceive they put more into their jobs than they receive from it.

With the advent of smart phones which give people compact, portable social networking access (Pence, 2011), organizations can no longer reduce the use of social media by having avenues of social media inaccessible on workplace computers. Reducing social networking rests on organizations to control employee use of social media through use of management tactics.

Through the use of Equity Theory, managers may be able to control excessive use of social media by striving for more balance in employee input and outcome. It would be essential to link excessive social media use with a reduction in employee input and employee work productivity. For instance, managers can meet the challenge of controlling social media at work (a) during the hiring process, (b) at new employee orientations, (c) through employee recognition programs, (d) through the use of visual aids in the work environment, and (e) through ongoing training programs.

Hiring Process

Hiring new employees whose job skills and personalities match well with available organizational positions is the goal of the hiring process; however, often a proper match does not occur. In interviews with 166 managers, Nowicki and Rosse (2002) found that managers often felt their hiring procedures were insufficient, because the interviews they gave to prospective employees were not meticulous enough. This type of interviewing often results in selecting someone with the wrong skill set or personality fit for a job. Furthermore, it is important that employees feel emotionally engaged in their work for them to experience job satisfaction (Lopez, Green, Carmody-Buhh, & Garza-Ortiz, 2011). Lack of proper fit of employees with jobs may stem from inadequate hiring processes, leading to an imbalance of inputs and outcomes for employees, creating tension which the employee will then aim to reduce (Adams, 1963). One way employees may strive to balance tension at work could be by accessing social media during their working hours. To achieve balance between employee input and outcome, managers who oversee hiring procedures could have better employee-job matches by instituting more rigorous interviewing procedures. Managers may benefit by using personality profiling tools such as the Myers-Briggs model or the Predictive Index System (Violette & Shields, 2007). Moreover, assessments of skill levels in specific areas would help with employee-job matches, so employees could be placed in a job that is not too difficult, but challenging enough to keep the employee engaged, thereby reducing the desire to access social media during work time.

Orientation

Orientation is a time when new employees are typically introduced to an organization's policies and procedures. At this time, they also get acquainted with the organization's culture. Policies regulating employee use of social media during work hours should be given to new hires immediately. It is important that managers be explicit when presenting the organization's expectations, as employees will seek to do well, but need to clearly know what is expected of them (Gerry, 1997). Furthermore, employees should be introduced to the concept of job equity and its application to them. The organization should ensure that employees expect an equitable balance of outcome to their input. In other words, the manager should take time to explain to the new hires the essence of job performance in exchange for pay and benefits. Employees should be given venues of bringing up concerns about job equity, such as employee suggestions, mentorship, human resource contact information, and lines of communications with superiors. In addition, they should be informed that using social media for personal endeavors during work time is a factor that affects job balance.

Employee Recognition Programs

Employee recognition programs can be a key factor in employees feeling their work input and outcome is equitable. These programs can include appreciation of employees who have consistently focused on work duties, instead of connecting to social media to distract them. Performance based recognition would reinforce the concept of equity because employee input of resisting social media and staying focused on work would receive the outcome of being

recognized, thus supplying balance in terms of equity. Performance based recognition gives intrinsic reward as it acknowledges the journey of the work, not just the destination (Hart, 2011). When the "journey of the work" is reinforced, the use of social media could be reduced because it does not fit in with the commitment employees should make toward work goals. Employee recognition can be done at meetings, through use of employee of the month programs, or organizational newsletters. Holistic approaches to recognition are designed to build good employee relationships and can influence the overall success of recognition programs (Hart, 2011).

Visual Aids

Visual aids could be posted around the facilities to remind employees to resist the distraction of social media at work. Images are often easier to understand and more effective than written materials are (Turnbull, 2005). Moreover, when carefully used words accompany the visual displays, the images may be even more effective (Turnbull, 2005). The artifacts could be charts, posters, attractive slogans, or simple sketches. These materials could portray safety issues and liability issues that arise from distractions caused by use of social media. Additionally, the imagery could display information about revenue loss from reduced employee input. Moreover, the graphics could reinforce the company's policies and guidelines for social media use and the consequences involved.

Training Programs

Training programs can be essential in educating employees on the excessive use of social media for personal use in the workplace. During training programs, employees should be learning about organizational social media policies and the employees' responsibility in complying with these policies. During training, the concept of equity theory and job input and outcome balance should be stressed. It would be important to connect excessive use of accessing social media with reduction in work input that would lead to employees experiencing reduced outcomes. In order for training to be effective, it should be engaging and inclusive of all personnel. Moreover, training should use a variety of media, and be repeated at regular intervals. To achieve engagement, training should be done in an interactive manner. During this time, employees could learn that although social media is a valuable medium of communication, excessive use can interfere with job performance or safety issues (Sherman, 2009). Inclusiveness is especially valuable in controlling excessive social media use. It is necessary for all people in the company to be cognizant of how misuse of social media can reduce job input and outcomes. Training which involves various media would help employees fully comprehend the input to outcome balance. Because people learn differently, using a variety of media for training would help ensure that everyone understands the issue. Role playing scenarios, addressing a variety of social media misuse, could help employees experience the problem of reduced employee input. For the results of training to be effective, the training must be ongoing because delivering a training session once to employees certainly could provide some results to managers; however, it could be more effective if organizations facilitate educational opportunities frequently to engage employees with policy and social media issues (Herder, 2009). Training about social media could be instrumental for managers to educate employees to engage with social networking activities in a responsible manner, and to respect the values and mission of the enterprise.

Discussion

Controlling social media in the workplace has moved to the forefront of management issues as many executives view its use as a killer of productivity (Skeels & Grudin, 2009).

Companies should devote effort to having clear policies and guidelines in this matter, and explaining them to employees who would sign a form that reflects their understanding of the policies and guidelines (Bennett, 2010). Having a formal policy with the employee's signature acknowledging the information on the policy is important to avoid legal litigations that may arise when managers try to control the use of social media (Bennett, 2010). In addition, Cox and Rethman (2011) proposed that employers carefully consider including social media use in their employees' contracts.

When considering social media and its impact at the workplace, it is important for employees to have clear policies, and understand them throughout training that prevent waste of time (Stafford & Mearns, 2009), and productivity reduction for their organizations (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). The use of social media should be promoted as a working tool, for example employees could exchange information with other members about common interests, policies, services and products. There should be a safe and collaborative work environment where employees have an enriching learning experience (Stafford & Mearns, 2009); for instance, managers could educate their employees about having a professional online presence, and teach them the risks of posting inappropriate pictures or comments on social media. In line with Adams' Equity Theory (1963), if employees are cognizant of their valuable input toward the organizational goal, they will feel their contributions are essential for the company's success, and they will have satisfaction with the outcomes they experience.

Social media has changed people's lives in many ways; changes have reached out to organizations and the human interactions in them. Positive or negative behaviors influenced by social media need to find equilibrium; whether positive, to maximize the benefits generated through its utilization in different arenas, or the negative aspects in need of redirection. All angles of social media use need further empirical research, so new information concerning this phenomenon can be investigated for future application to the field of education that could contribute, preserve or enhance knowledge (Stafford & Mearns, 2009).

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