



How Making New Friends on LinkedIn Can Boost Creativity

Proactive online social networking enhances the link between personal innovativeness and creativity.

Love them or loathe them, online social networks pervades almost all aspects of our lives, including the workplace. Some **77 percent** of workers in the United States report using social media at work, regardless of whether their employer has a policy to regulate the activity. For companies and the career-minded, the question is how to harness online social networking to boost the bottom line or become better at one's job.

So far, the answers have been varied. Social media use is **positively** associated with employee productivity. People using social media at work have been found to be **more engaged but also more likely to leave** their company. However, we know little about how social networking technologies affect innovation and creativity, two of the most crucial employee traits that can make or break a company's future.

My new paper, "**Employee creativity in a digital era: the mediating role of social media**", co-authored with Jordi Paniagua (University of Valencia) and Eduardo Rodriguez-Montemayor (INSEAD), helps fill this gap. We found that personal creativity is positively associated with personal innovativeness on information technology, defined as a willingness to use new technologies, and this association is driven by online networking.

New friends are better than old ones

Our paper is based on a study of engineers in a Fortune 500 multinational IT company. Engineers, of course, are one of the sources of creativity in any organisation. In the company we studied, employees used a few internal networking platforms, such as Microsoft Yammer and Wikis, and external ones, mainly LinkedIn and Twitter.

We asked 475 engineers to fill in an online questionnaire measuring how they use digital technologies to make new connections and re-connect with acquaintances, as well as manage information acquired through social media. We measured their creative process engagement with an 11-item scale assessing problem identification, information searching and idea generation. We also asked 30 managers to evaluate the engineers in terms of creativity. Our final sample consisted of 80 engineers evaluated by 12 managers.

First, we found that engineers who were willing to play with new technology were deemed more creative. Eighteen percent of the association between personal innovativeness and creativity was attributed to online social connectivity (OSC). OSC comprises two aspects, online social knowledge management (OSKM) and online social networking (OSN). OSKM refers to the ability to use online social

technologies to improve the search and organisation of information; OSN is linked to the capacity to connect to other people more easily, and thus strengthens the “social” side of creativity. People who are more open to new technologies tend to be have higher OSC and have more diversified networks of weak ties, which previous research has shown to be correlated to creativity.

Second, innovative engineers tended to be more creative if they used social media to connect with engineers whom they did not previously know, but not if they renewed existing connections. Our survey results linked 21 percent of the total effect of personal innovativeness on creativity with making new connections. New friends are just that much more likely to introduce new perspectives and novel information than existing ones.

Meanwhile, online social knowledge management had no bearing on the interdependence between personal innovativeness and creativity, a finding that underscores the difficulty in transferring the tacit knowledge that fuels creativity.

To be more creative, be really linked in

“If you are on social media, and you are not learning, not laughing, not being inspired or not networking, then you are using it wrong,” says **Germany Kent**, a best-selling American author on social media strategies. We can’t speak to her point about not laughing, but our study does show that for employees who want to be more creative or be perceived as creative, being a passive member of online social networks or simply using them as a source of information is not enough. You would do yourself a favour by engaging in actual networking such as connecting via social media with new colleagues, employees working for partner companies or fellow professionals in the industry.

If you are an employer or manager, include in your teams employees who are willing to embrace new technology: They may serve as a spark for the team creative process. Quite often, there will be creative people who are not very interested in using platforms. Having team members who are high in personal innovativeness will help bridge the gap between creativity and technologies.

Companies should also leverage internal networking platforms with useful functions that encourage workers to use them. Large companies tend to have multiple platforms that serve different needs of various units including human resources, marketing, sales, and so on. But keep the number of internal online networking platforms to a minimum; having too many dilutes the pool of employees and complicates the process of forming connections.

What if your employees or teams use external online social networking tools like LinkedIn more than internal ones? The worst you could do is shun these external platforms as potential talent-poaching channels, because your staff are certainly not going to. To use these platforms to your advantage, build an employer brand by curating the information your company puts out there. Discuss with your employees what the brand should look like.

Many companies implement policies regulating the use of external networks, but having a code of conduct matters less than the example set by top executives. You don’t have to be like **Richard Branson**, the Virgin Group founder given to LinkedIn musings about his work and personal life. Just decide what you will post and what you won’t. Your staff will take their cue from you.

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