
Manage Your Team Over Social Media, But Maintain Face Time



By Pawel Korzynski , Visiting Scholar at INSEAD

Leaders who engage positively on employee social networks improve their firms' communication effectiveness. But it's no substitute for appearing in front of employees when issuing directives and giving bad news.

Effective communication is increasingly being seen as the cornerstone of successful modern organisations. According to the Towers Watson Communications ROI Study Report, in times of change, companies that keep the lines of communication open to engage their employees are able to retain talent, provide value to clients and deliver better performance to shareholders. These companies educate their employees about organisational performance objectives, culture and values while at the same time collecting their opinions about the company.

Managers might therefore see social networking platforms as a quick win to enhance communication with their teams who are increasingly likely to be spread across geographies. However, before launching into online communications, firms should ensure that they have a general culture of openness to create a successful dialogue via online social networking.

Based on the findings from my paper “[How does online social networking help leaders communicate? Evidence from the Fortune 500](#)” an open, supportive environment has to be established through traditional face-to-face communication before companies can expect opinions and ideas to be shared online. Participants of the study comprised 190 directors, managers or team leaders holding positions in the Fortune 500 list of the largest global companies in 2013. Leaders were asked to evaluate organisational communication in relation to several areas of the business including, but not limited to: understanding the business; organisational performance; organisational culture and values; integration of new employees and customers.

The participants were asked to specify the number of hours they spent each week on internal and external networking platforms for business purposes as well as the number of platforms they used, the percentage of employees with whom they communicated on each type of platform and the type of activities they undertook. These activities could be described as either “directive”, “delegating”, “supportive” or “participating”. Finally, they were asked whether their organisational culture was one of being open or closed and whether a code of conduct had been put in place relating to the benefits and risks of using internal and external networking platforms.

The importance of trust

One of the key findings was that online communications were significantly more effective when a code of conduct was in place (in 84 percent of the Fortune 500 companies surveyed, a code of conduct had been established). This is not surprising given that the purpose of an online social networking tool is to share knowledge — and in order for knowledge sharing to take place, first managers and employees need to feel they can do so in a safe way. By delivering a code of conduct companies can enable privacy by providing users with control and security on the platform.

Inevitably, many questions are raised especially among individuals at a senior level about how the data obtained via social networks will be used and it is important for managers to know which particular topics can be safely discussed online in accordance with top management’s directives.

Opening the lines of communication

Once a company has taken the decision to adopt an online social networking platform, senior managers' support is critical in this regard because of their role as influencers in the organisation. However, even with a code of conduct in place, above anything else, managers need to show they are willing to listen to others and this needs to be established before an online tool is ever implemented. Internal meetings, brainstorming sessions and 180 degree evaluations are all useful techniques to establish trust between the manager and his or her reports, so that online dialogue becomes easier. If employees are sure that their managers are listening offline, it is easier to overcome misunderstandings that may happen online where information can be misinterpreted and emotions do not come across so clearly.

Organisations with an open culture where employees are encouraged to express their opinions and listen to others' views in traditional offline settings are better positioned to make effective use of online communications. This consultative style of leadership easily translates into an online setting.

When looking at the different types of communication activity undertaken online, leaders who demonstrated a more supportive style of leadership rather than a directive style enjoyed a positive effect on their communication effectiveness. In other words, those that were asking questions, giving feedback and leading their direct reports to reach conclusions via online dialogue were seen to benefit most from social networks because they were effectively developing good relationships and supporting teamwork. On the other hand, those who were engaging in more directive activities online were seen to harm their communication effectiveness because these activities were seen to destroy the feeling of support that may have been built.

It's quality not quantity

The amount of time spent on internal and external platforms is not necessarily associated with the managers' communication effectiveness. Rather, it is a question of wise use of time and knowing when it's appropriate to communicate online. As shown above, leadership style is an important consideration, but so too is knowing when face-to-face communication cannot be replaced. For example, in situations which are complex or controversial and where emotions come into play.

Managers today cannot ignore the fact that networking platforms are changing the way we work and their skill lies in knowing which communication method is appropriate for which situation. But before any advances can be made online, very little can be achieved without an organisational culture which is open and where dialogue is part of everyday activity.



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