

Social networking and other web tools can be turned to your advantage.



# Virtually indispensable

The web-based technologies known as Web 2.0 or social software, which began on the public internet, are now permeating organisations. You should have heard of blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. You may view these as an important addition to your organisation’s collaboration capabilities or as a puerile waste of time, but it is not wise to ignore them.

Together with wikis, social bookmarking, RSS, social media sites (YouTube, Flickr), microblogging sites (Twitter) and 3-D virtual worlds, these tools make previously invisible relationships visible for all to see. You can get a clearer picture of who knows who and why that’s important. This has implications for the future of work, and HR’s role in supporting it.

**THE NEW SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES**  
**Blogs** are simple websites an individual or group can easily update. Others can add comments, and different bloggers can link to each other’s work. There are now millions of bloggers on the internet. Some of these writers are lone guns. Others form dense networks around a specific area such as politics, marketing or HR. Organisations such as IBM and Sun have encouraged internal blogs by individuals or groups to aid everything from sharing ideas to managing projects.

**Wikis** are websites where multiple people can create and edit pages, including each other’s material. Wikipedia is the best-known public example of a wiki, but not all wikis are encyclopaedias. Wikis have been used to write policies and record meeting minutes. Some organisations have replaced their intranets with editable wikis (Jansen-Cilag in Australia) and others have used them as a supplement.

**Social networking sites** such as Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace and Plaxo allow users to

**Good HR professionals already show superior network management skills.**

keep track of their contacts and friends, share photos and video with them, and ask them niggling questions (work-related or not). The employers’ response has varied tremendously. In some organisations, access to Facebook is banned. At the other extreme, Serena Software in the United States decided to use Facebook as its intranet. Many organisations are using these tools for recruitment, alumni management and customer communities.

**Virtual worlds** include Second Life and World of Warcraft. Some are online participative games while others are less about scoring points and more about creating your own immersive environment in which to interact with others. Australian banks and government agencies are using online spaces such as Second Life to develop training environments for new starters.

These tools open up plenty of new opportunities for HR professionals. Become familiar with them. The best way is to use them yourself—but not just by yourself. They are called social tools for a reason. Accept a social networking site invite from a friend, comment on a blog or make an edit to a wiki on a topic that interests you.

Focus on real business uses for these tools and their corporate equivalents. They can be a colossal waste of time if deployed on trivial things by demotivated staff. But arguably the same could be said of the coffee break. We don’t ban the drinking of coffee from our workplaces; instead we use it to our advantage. Look for a simple business application and do it—for example, using a wiki to draft a policy, or a social network tool for a recruitment or alumni program.

Help your staff use these tools effectively. A first step is understanding that organisations’ employees are using these tools whether you like it or not. Draft policies with them that allow them to use their creativity, and nurture

their relationships in a way that is positive rather than harmful for you and them.

**ANALYSING SOCIAL NETWORKS**  
Sociologists have used social network analysis (SNA) since the 1930s to map relationships between people and generate statistics to describe them. Since the early 1990s, these techniques have been applied to organisations. Who talks to whom about what? Is the organisational chart really a true indicator of working relationships in an organisation? HR groups are using SNA (sometimes called organisational network analysis) to identify collaboration patterns, examine the effectiveness of mergers and acquisitions, and explore succession planning and potential weak spots in their organisation’s knowledge base.

There are two ways to gather SNA data. The first is through surveys that ask respondents about their relationships. The second is through automatically collecting the records of interactions between using tools such as email, blogs, wikis and social networking sites. The largest effort so far in this area involved researchers from Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University mapping the

30 billion instant messaging conversations between 240 million people around the world. Care has to be taken with these approaches. SNA surveys require a greater than 80 per cent response rate to be accurate. Survey results may not be wholly accurate if respondents suspect that the results will be used to reward some or punish others. Automated mapping of conversations is best done with the consent of those involved, and the results should be made anonymous. Automated SNA mapping will not identify many qualitative aspects of the interactions between people (for example, do participants find the relationship a help or a hindrance?).

**INDIVIDUAL NETWORKING CAPABILITIES**  
There is now a great deal of evidence that high-performing individuals manage their networks better than low-performing individuals. This does not mean they are constantly passing out their business cards at wine evenings. Rather they:

- Go out of their way to form a diverse range of connections with people.
- Draw on these relationships to achieve their goals through win-win alliances with others.

- Nurture relationships with people over a period of time through small acts of generosity and trust building.

Network skills are important and yet they are rarely taught. Good HR professionals already show superior network management skills. They can mentor juniors. They can build these skills into training programs. They can model good network behaviours.

The two previous topics can also help here. Social software makes managing relationships with others easier and more transparent. If used well, these tools allow participants to forge relationships with people they might never have found otherwise and do things they couldn’t have done before. Social network analysis allows individuals to better understand their own networks, as it also allows organisations to better understand the real complexity and power of the networks that form them.

The world is going to get more networked rather than less, and HR professionals need to take their rightful role in leading this future of connections. ●

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