

Is Social Media Creating a Burden for Your IT Department?

By now, you've probably accepted the fact that social media is becoming an integral part of doing business. Across all industries, companies big and small have started to embrace social media and have begun developing a strong online presence. And, for many, it's paying off. However, as with any new technology, there is a bit of a learning curve. The free and open nature of social media makes it difficult to foresee all the potential issues that could arise, which has caused concern for many CIOs and IT departments.

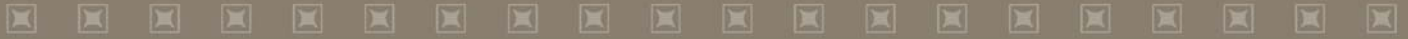
Recent studies have suggested that although the number of workers using social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, for business purposes is growing, many CIOs still prohibit the activity at work due to security, usage, and productivity concerns.

In a survey of over 19 billion URLs visited by 30,000 end-users between July and November 2009, the internet security firm Network Box found that a relatively small number of non-business websites are using an average of 21% of corporate bandwidth. YouTube was the top consumer of bandwidth at 7.8% followed by Facebook at 4.4%.

Adding bandwidth to accommodate this kind of usage typically involves expensive and time-consuming changes to infrastructure, systems, and applications, so many companies have chosen to block access to social networking sites. But, as using social media for business purposes becomes more mainstream, blocking may not be the best option. In which case, a well-defined social media policy is imperative.

Increased monitoring of internet usage is also important. If a company decides to open access to social media sites, it may be necessary to institute usage limits. When an employee is found to be taking advantage of the open policy, then access for that particular employee could be blocked. Make it clear to your staff that while you do understand the importance and place of social media in business, their job is their first priority.

Worker productivity is a big concern for many CIOs. A 2008 Nielsen Online report showed that 65% of online video streaming between Monday and Friday takes place between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. While it is probably safe to assume that most employees have or will engage in non-business related online activities at work, that doesn't necessarily always result in decreased productivity. In fact, many studies have shown that taking a break to watch a short web video or read an online news article actually helps to rest and refocus an employee's mind, which in turn increases productivity. But, stressing responsible usage is important.



Another major issue created by the social media boom is the rapidly increasing number of security risks. The destructive distribution of malware through networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter has proven to be incredibly successful. The Koobface virus, for example, is sent via an infected user's account as a personal message to their friends list. In order to view the message, the recipient is prompted to update their Flash player. When the update is accepted, the virus attacks. Once a computer is infected, the Koobface virus is able to monitor internet activity and collect sensitive information. Because people typically have coworkers in their friends lists, this kind of attack can be particularly harmful to businesses by allowing multiple opportunities for the virus to spread within the company.

The fact that social media has become such an important business tool has made completely blocking access to such websites counterintuitive, but there are some simple steps that can be taken to help protect your company and employees.

1. **Education.** Make sure your employees know and understand the risks involved with social media and how they can affect the company as a whole. Also, be sure to clearly explain the company's social media policy.
2. **Stay up to date.** Regularly review and update all your security safeguards and be sure to stay informed about current risks that could impact the business.
3. **Monitor.** Be aware of the kind of information your employees are sharing online about their work and the company, and make it clear that they will be held responsible for any threat their actions pose to the company.

With the increased integration of social media in our everyday lives, it's only natural that it would extend to the workplace. Social media has opened communication channels that would have been nearly impossible 10 years ago. And, though there are legitimate concerns involved, in the long run, the potential impact of social media on the way we do business could be priceless.