

The Positive and Negative Aspects of Social Networking

Cyrus Foroughi
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Cyrus Foroughi

Social Networking in Today's World

Social networking is ubiquitous in today's digital world. The influence social networking has on all aspects of life in the United States makes it nearly impossible to avoid. Even if you do not have a personal social networking account in some form, it is very likely that you or information about you will show up online via friends, family, or work social network accounts. Facebook alone has over 750 million user accounts and this number continues to grow daily (Kincaid, 2011). Whether you have a personal social networking account, an account associated with your employer, or you just have friends and family with accounts, it is inevitable that social networking will affect your life.

For the purposes of this paper, social networking will be defined as any online means that allow users to connect with each other. From an individual perspective, social networking allows a person to provide any relevant information regarding their personal life, work, family, and any past, present, or future events that may occur. From a business perspective, social networking allows a company to network with potential clients by revealing any company information deemed necessary and providing an accessible site to reveal information on past, present, or future events. Moreover, clients can directly interact with companies by providing positive or negative feedback publicly on a social networking site. Whether one is viewing social networking through the lens of an individual person or a business, there are both positive and negative aspects that need to be considered to fully understand how social networking is affecting the lives of almost everyone.

The Positive Aspects of Social Networking

At its core, social networking allows people to connect. Moreover, people and companies are able to connect with anyone at anytime. This constant stream of nearly instant

information provides individuals and companies an avenue in which they can connect on multiple levels with others. Individuals use social networking to connect with their friends, family, and co-workers. Users are able to upload any information they want whether it be about changes in their life, photos from a recent gathering, or an idea or opinion on any number of issues. Moreover, a study conducted by professionals at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Berkeley found that social networking has positive impacts on the younger generation allowing them "to grapple with social norms, explore interests, develop technical skills and work on new forms of self-expression (Goff, 2009). Businesses are able to use social networking internally to help promote interoffice activities and employee relations overall. Pentagon Spokesman Bryan Whitman (2009) said that the Defense Department is reviewing "the impact and the value that [social networking sites] have to the department." Any individual, company, or establishment that fails to take advantage of social networking sites may regret being able to keep up in a fast paced digital world.

Social networking allows for individuals and companies to communicate with anyone instantly. The speed at which information can reach others can be advantageous for those who know how to take advantage of it. Individuals have used social networking sites to increase their celebrity and financial status by maximizing the potential of various sites. Moreover, individuals who are already considered famous are almost obligated to have an active social networking account to spread information to their fans and build their fan base. Without it, they will inevitably be left behind. It is an unfortunate side effect of the digital age. Businesses must also take advantage of social networking sites to promote major announcements, new products, sales, and events. If they don't, they "will appear behind the times" and will inevitably suffer in the long run (Reeves, 2011). Individuals and companies who use social networking properly will

continue to grow or at a minimum allow for potential growth. Not using social network sites will keep individuals and businesses in the proverbial dark.

The Negative Aspects of Social Networking

The core feature of social networking, the ability to connect anywhere instantly also opens the door for its' biggest weakness: transparency that can lead to a lack of privacy and security. Individuals have the ability to post anything they want but they are also letting others into their lives. Many people have their personal information available for everyone to see. The default public settings on Facebook allow others to see your name, phone number, date of birth, and email address among other things. These four pieces of information provide a very large base for hackers to start on. Of course, hackers are not the only problem. Allowing the public access to your account can have negative impacts at work or in one's personal life. Unflattering photos and comments can put a person in a negative light and can lead to reprimand or release from a job or criticism from family and friends. A recent study in the National Review claimed "10% of college admissions officers now acknowledged looking at social networking sites like Facebook when evaluating applicants, with negative consequences 40% of the time (Derbyshire, 2010)." Moreover, on many social networking sites, acquaintances' posts will show up on your own page and their opinion or comments can make you look bad. Individuals who use social networking increase the risk of having a problem in their personal and professional life because of the transparency and speed at which personal information can be broadcast.

As with any new technology, the risk of addiction is possible. Many people spend hours on various social network sites every day. From an individual perspective, spending too much time on social networking sites can cut into your time doing other daily activities. A study from Ohio State University has shown that students who use social networking sites have

"significantly lower grade-point averages than those" who don't (Excessive Use of Facebook Linked to Low Grades, 2010). Moreover, many students who use their laptops in class check Facebook or similar sites instead of giving their full attention to the professor.

Businesses have to monitor the amount of time their employees spend on social networking sites. While social networking can bring employees closer and promote camaraderie, it has also been linked to lower employee workload output. In Great Britain, nearly 50% of businesses have banned social networking sites (Peacock, 2011). Companies also have to worry about what their employees post in terms of reputation. One negative comment by a single employee can turn viral and put a company in a precarious situation. In today's digital age, a business needs to take advantage of social networking but has to be cautious at the potential drawbacks.

The content that gets posted on many social networking sites also puts users and the owners of the site in a precarious position. This user generated content originally belongs to the user but many sites have terms in their end user license agreements that allow the site owners to use such content as they see fit and store it indefinitely. The sites with such agreements push the ethical boundaries of its users by opening the possibility that the users' content may become the sites' content. Moreover, the social networking sites put themselves in an interesting legal position as users could file claim that content is original and should solely belong to them if it is used by the site.

How To Properly Take Advantage of Social Networking

Social networking is only going to continue to grow. Individuals and companies must realize this and take advantage of the potential gains that can be had from using such an open, fast paced platform. The ability to connect with anyone instantly and promote oneself can be

beneficial in personal and professional life. However, all risks must be accessed from the beginning as to protect a person or company from negative exposure.

Individuals need to ensure that they set their privacy settings so that only those close to them can see personal information. Moreover, individuals must ensure that only appropriate material is posted by them and their friends. One inappropriate comment or photo can lead to personal or professional collapse.

Businesses must make use of social networking to properly promote themselves and their products. Without it, they are likely to fall behind and let other businesses that are willing to make use of social networking sites pull ahead. Of course, businesses must also monitor what its' employees post and how often employees use social networking sites while at work.

Social networking can be beneficial or detrimental to a person or business depending on how it is used. Only after properly analyzing the potential benefits and risks can one properly maximize benefits while minimizing risks. It is with this balance that both individuals and companies can succeed in a fast paced, transparent digital world.

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Legal Week is a magazine that offers information on many topics and normally puts a realistic spin on information so that readers can see real life implications on news.