

Facebook wants to be in your workplace, but you'll probably find trolls there too

Written by The Conversation

Facebook is gearing up to bring social networking into the workplace with its newly renamed [Workplace](#) service. Workplace, which was previously known as Facebook at Work, has been under a private beta test for the past [two years](#). Workplace provides companies with their own Facebook environment that is restricted to their own employees.

Facebook's foray into the enterprise market joins a list of products from companies that are more commonly associated with that sector. There is IBM's enterprise social network [Connections](#), Microsoft's [Yammer](#), Salesforce's [Chatter](#) and other products like [Jive](#).

Although Facebook is coming into an already crowded market, it is hoping the familiarity most people have with its platform will make it compelling for workers.

Apart from the existing competition, many corporate IT leaders initially expressed [skepticism](#) about the service because of the many problems facing companies if they chose to use it.

The first concern was about security. Facebook promotes, and makes it very easy to share information. While this could be a good thing when sharing important company knowledge within a team, it could present a serious security or privacy issue if the information was shared too widely. Another area of resistance to Facebook is the concern that sensitive company information is being held on Facebook's servers, possibly in the US and subject to access from the US government and its security and law enforcement agencies.

Facebook has tried to allay these fears. It has assured users of the security and privacy of the platform and the ability of companies to have complete control over the environment and the

data shared on it. Workplace will provide users with a separate login and profile to their personal Facebook account. Instead of having, and liking, friends, users can follow others and join groups.

Productivity promise

A more interesting question for companies considering using Workplace is whether there is really any evidence that it actually helps increase productivity.

It is hard to show scientifically whether social networks bring much benefit to a company. Most, if not all of the research in this area is based on case studies which, although they may highlight subjective benefits of a particular company, don't represent real evidence that it does make a difference to worker performance.

Setting aside the lack of evidence, enterprise social networks can serve a role in various ways within a company. Companies need ways of organising communication between people working on a particular project, for example.

There are within companies, groups of people who could benefit from sharing ideas, commonly referred to as "communities of practice". And then there are times when an employee may simply want to know a specific fact and needs to find someone who can help them by tapping into the "corporate knowledge" of all employees of a company. Traditionally, all of these things might be done using a combination of internal websites and email discussion groups, or direct email. Social network platforms like Facebook make these types of interactions that much easier.

What Facebook is probably not so good at is being able to search for past conversations or to summarise what is known about a particular subject, or what was done about a particular issue. This is usually what people who are employed to think about a company's corporate knowledge and history, worry about.

And Facebook won't necessarily help employees find the person with the expertise they need. Ensuring workers have access to the information they need, when they need it, is a very difficult thing to get right. It is not at all obvious that Facebook Workplace would provide that

functionality.

Social networks in a work environment also have a number of other negatives for a company. Typically, only a small percentage of people actually contribute to the discussions. They are [known as](#) “contributors” with the others who don’t contribute being referred to as “lurkers”. The issue with “contributors” is that they actually may not be the ones who know anything valuable and may simply be people who like dominating a conversation online. Worse still, these contributors may actually be undesirable, even “trolls”, negatively influencing what others contribute to the conversation.

The quality of knowledge and information shared online in this type of setting may actually influence the environment to “regress to the extreme”. There are platforms like “[stackoverflow](#)” that have mechanisms that prevent this type of behaviour, but Facebook really doesn’t have effective ways of doing this.

For Facebook, providing a corporate version of its platform provides another way to raise money. It is unlikely though that this new facet of Facebook’s business will be as successful as its principle means of making money, that is as an advertising platform.

David Glance owns shares in Facebook.

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