FACEBOOK IN THE WORKPLACE: BOON OR BANE?

HARD TALK

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HOW many of us had covertly played games on the workplace's desktop, only to reflexively press Alt + Tab buttons at the first hint of the boss?

If you are slow by a second or two, your boss would've caught you and given you a good work ethic lecture.

Well, it's not uncommon for employers to frown upon such distractions, but what about Facebook minus the games? Can employees still work productively if they are allowed to use it freely?

More than games, Facebook gives you an outlet to express yourself while you are stressed at work. Can it truly be an effective tool for work stress management?

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

In my opinion, whether or not employees are allowed to access Facebook usually depends on organisational culture. Put simply, organisational culture describes the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of an organisation.

The amount of freedom and trust given to the employees would probably affect the employer's decision on whether to restrict or ban such non-work activities.

Naturally, the more freedom one possesses, the more control the person will have. In the field of industrial-organisational psychology, the amount of control a person can exert over his (or her) job can reasonably predict job satisfaction and stress levels.

In that sense, a restriction of social media usage like Facebook can decrease employees' job control, which consequently make them less satisfied and more stressed with their work.

Blocking access to Facebook speaks volume on the level of trust employers share with their employees. Any attempt to control employees' activities reduces that level of trust. What's more, the attempt may not be successful with the increasing usage of smartphones.

FACEBOOK ADDICTION

Just as it's possible to get addicted to games, it's also possible to get addicted to Facebook. It's understandable that employers are concerned over how the habit of checking Facebook every 15 minutes might spin out of control.

To make things more complicated, Facebook can be more addictive than games because it gets updated regularly whenever your friends post something.

It's not unusual to be distracted with what your peers are up to when your work gets repetitive and boring.

MORE THAN A GAME

Through Facebook, you can chat with your friends, see photos, comment on status updates and post your own updates for others to see.

Many experts have claimed that such a platform does not allow for true communication between two parties, but it is still undeniable that people have resorted to Facebook to satisfy their social needs.

In our increasingly busy societies, would a platform like Facebook improve workplace productivity by satisfying employees' social needs and helping them cope with stress?

One might argue that turning to digital communication to fulfill one's social needs can disrupt the cohesiveness of employees at work.

Can face-to-face communication between colleagues be affected because of a certain dependency on Facebook to socialise?

If so, productivity at work might be affected because an amount of attention is devoted to socialising on networking sites, instead of building lasting work relationships with co-workers.

SOLUTION: SETTING GROUND RULES?

With the abovementioned issues at stake, would it help if the company set some ground rules?

On one hand, the employer has to establish that trust with his (or her) employees by providing for more job control. After all, a happy employee is a productive employee.

On the other hand, the employer has to ensure that Facebook usage would not compromise work that needs to be done. As we know, Facebook has the potential to substitute deep and meaningful face-to-face conversation at the workplace.

Therefore, there is a need for a balance between maintaining employees' positive mood and their motivation to work.

How about setting aside a certain time for employees to check their Facebook accounts? For instance, during lunch hours or tea breaks?

To this point you might probably ask why not ban Facebook usage? According to PCWorld, it is not advisable for companies to do so.

THE RISE OF SMARTPHONES

With the prevalence of smartphones, restricting Facebook access at work may prove to be redundant. Anyone could access their Facebook, play games and surf inappropriate sites with such devices.

Unless a company is authoritative enough to restrict the use of such smartphones, there's little that employers can do. Essentially, much of the responsibility falls on the employees' shoulders.

IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO WORK CULTURE

Given that it's unwise to place restrictions on Facebook access, and that employees today have a lot more say with what they do at work, is there a way employers can manage Facebook usage to maintain optimal productivity?

Personally, I think the best way to influence how employees behave in the workplace is through the organisation's culture. The effect is more likely to be more lasting than imposing rules and regulations.

It's similar to how a country maintains order through laws. If people understand the rationales behind laws, they will be more than happy to follow them.

If, however, people do not understand why a certain law is passed, they simply follow out of fear of punishment. In fact, more people would likely break the law to challenge it.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL: PRODUCTIVITY

In any organisation, employers have to instill the right working attitude in employees so that they would understand that the ultimate goal is productivity, and teamwork.

The message should be that they are free to access Facebook anytime they want, but not at the cost of their own productivity or their relationship with colleagues.

With that, employees feel that they can be trusted to make their own judgment and hence stay satisfied with the company. At the same time, they remain motivated to do what they have to do.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Developing a strong work ethic in the workplace can go a long way. If employees simply don't care and access Facebook when there's work to be done, chances are that any newcomer would follow suit as well.

So, behold the power of cultivating a constructive work culture!

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