

# Let's return to working hard and playing hard



### NEWS FROM THE LBS MANAGEMENT INNOVATION LAB

Do you use Facebook at work? Probably not. According to some studies, as many as two-thirds of UK companies have banned online social networking during the working day. It is seen as time-wasting, a breeder of gossip, and a security concern.

This type of knee-jerk reaction is understandable, and it happens every time new technology enters the workplace. But it is also dead wrong. Research has uncovered an important correlation between commitment to a job and social interaction at work.

“Work hard, play hard” has been the mantra of Silicon Valley start-ups for years, but it takes on new meaning in today’s workplace. Not only are the media for social interaction changing, we also have a new generation of employees – so-called Generation Y – with new expectations about work.

Think about what we really mean by “work hard, play hard”: if your employees take a “social networking” slice out of their work day, does that mean the “value-adding” work slice becomes smaller? Or does it help to grow the size of the pie? I would argue

that it is the latter – if people are allowed to interact socially at work, they are likely to engage more fully, and for longer, than those who are not.

And the pie grows in three ways. First, by condoning play at work, you change the psychological contract. The message becomes: “I trust you to do the right thing, and I will evaluate you on your outputs, not on your inputs.” Staff will appreciate the space you give them, and will likely repay your trust with more creative, thoughtful results.

Second, the more your employees engage in social networking at work, the more the boundary between work and home blurs. Some people keep the more creative or playful parts of their personalities hidden at work. Others, often working in start-ups or for themselves, are happy to interweave their home and work lives. They bring their whole

selves to work, and they put in the effort needed to get the job done.

Third, the emergence of a new technology typically has far-reaching, unpredictable consequences. For example, paging technology, originally invented to alert doctors to emergencies, spawned an entirely new form of social interaction: text-messaging. Online networking may look like an enjoyable waste of time today, but it may well inspire new and productive ways of working.

One company taking the potential of social networking seriously is London-based You at Work, which sells flexible benefits services. Because its systems are entirely online, the firm has a real interest in figuring out how to make computer-based systems more interactive and valuable. People spend a lot of time “using Facebook and YouTube”, says CEO Bruce Rayner. “We thought: is there a way to harness some of that energy to increase employee engagement?” he explains.

This led to a new offering that incorporates Web 2.0 alongside the employee benefits platform. The software allows users to access online social groups, such as sports/social club communities, instant messaging and discussion forums. Other applications in the works include a talent management system and a best-practice sharing network.

Such systems allow companies to provide Web 2.0 capabilities that they can control. The bigger challenge is cultural – managers have to overcome prejudices about social networking and other apparently frivolous activities. And that will take time.

◆ Julian Birkinshaw

### WHO'S WHO IN THE LAB

The Management Innovation Lab is:

◆ Gary Hamel, visiting professor of strategic and international management at London Business School, founder of consulting firm Strategos and director of the Woodside Institute.

◆ Julian Birkinshaw, professor of strategic and international management, LBS.

◆ Alan Matcham, the Lab's first executive director. He was previously European head of advanced thought leadership programmes at Oracle.

◆ Jules Goddard, a research fellow at the Lab.

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