

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORK PLACE: FRIEND OR FOE?

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ABSTRACT

The importance and use of social media in the workplace has greatly increased and therefore cannot be ignored in today's information age. Despite the increase in social media usage today, efforts made in understanding the use of these tools in workplaces is still limited especially in developing countries. Very little is known on the ways in which employees and employers in the workplace use social media for it has great influence on work dynamics and can cause problems if left unregulated. Thus, this study sought to investigate how social media is being used in the workplace by both employers and employees, the mostly used public social media in the workplace, the opportunities as well as the challenges that social media presents in the workplace. The focus was on public social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, which are run by commercial providers and are often free. The study involved a survey of literature from both online (mostly on general google and google scholar) and offline materials related to the topic. The findings of the study revealed that organisations and their employees use different kinds of social media tools and services in the workplace. Employers mainly use it in recruitment, collective bargaining and to make visible their products and services and reach out to millions of customers. Employees use social media to operate and communicate on job related issues in a fast and easier way than before resulting in improved productivity, increased efficiency, increased marketing opportunities among other opportunities. On the other hand, the study revealed that social media is misused for non-work related activities by employees such as checking on sport scores, family and friends, downloading music and video, fraud, information leakage, reputation damage, discrimination and many more resulting in decreased productivity. Based on these findings, the paper recommends that organisations should monitor the usage to ensure that employees use social media sites productively and to the interest of the organisation. Employers should also formulate appropriate workplace policies to guide employees on how to use social media for job purposes.

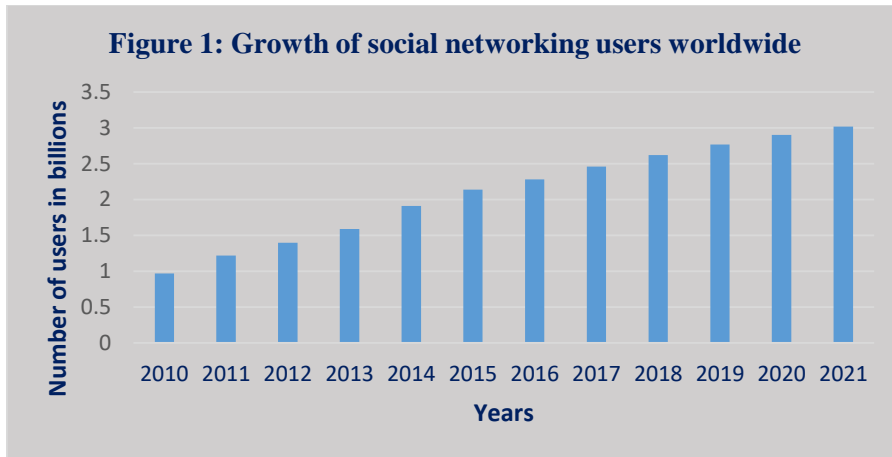
Keywords: Social media, Web 2.0, Social Networking, Internet, World Wide Web, ICTs, electronic environment.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The value of information in today's information and knowledge society has highly appreciated and its sources have significantly increased. The advent of Web 2.0, which allows users not only to

retrieve but also create, organise and share information, gave birth to a whole new data source known as *social media* (Mutanuka, Chilembo and Chulu, 2014). Social media has changed the way people interact socially and respond to happenings around them. Venkat (2011) observed that the number of people using varied social media tools and services is high. For instance, in 2010 according to Venkat (2011), 160 million people were using Myspace, about 250 million people were logging to Facebook each day, twitter had about 15 million frequent users, people were watching not less than 2 billion videos on YouTube on a daily basis, not less than 10 million people were contributing to Wikipedia, and 175,000 blogs erupted daily. By 2013, Smiricky (2013) observed that there were over 600 million Facebook users, more than 300 million Twitter users and over 150 million LinkedIn users. In general, statistics of social network users worldwide have been rising from 2010 and it is estimated that this will continue even by 2021 (figure 1) and beyond. According to Gordon (2018), there were 0.97 billion social media users in 2010, 1.22 in 2011, 1.4 in 2012, 1.59 in 2013, 1.91 in 2014, 2.14 in 2015, 2.28 in 2016, 2.46 in 2017 and 2.62 in 2018. This number according to Gordon (2018) is likely to rise to 2.77 in 2019, 2.9 in 2020 and 3.02 billion users in 2021 (figure 1).

Undoubtedly, the sharing and collaboration of information through online media is transforming the lives of millions of internet users, and in no population is this more visible than the youths of today. Similarly, numerous employees and organisations are using social media for various purposes including communication and for expressing opinions on different subjects like health, education, politics, sports, products, etc. In fact, Queens Library (2011) claims that social networking is the most popular online activity worldwide, surpassing emailing and web searching. The change brought out by social media is undisputable, and therefore, organisations have to evolve along with it.



Source: Gordon, 2018

Despite the increase in social media usage today, efforts made in understanding the use of these tools and services in workplaces is still limited especially in developing countries like Zambia. Yet, social media has great influence on work dynamics and can cause problems if left unchecked or unregulated. Because of this gap in knowledge, very little is known on ways in which employees and employers use these tools or sites in the workplace. Particularly, there is little understanding of the opportunities and challenges of using social media in the workplace, how it is used and the mostly utilised public social media. According to Cavazza (2008), it is important to understand social mechanisms (motivations, fears, etc.) and to identify relevant social platforms commonly used for different purposes. This desk research therefore, sought to bridge the above knowledge gap.

1.1 Social media defined

The term “*social media*” also known as “*Web 2.0*” refers to the wide range of Internet - based and mobile services which Cavazza (2008) called “infinity of tools and services” because they are too many to mention and are ever growing. These tools and services include among many others blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, social network sites, status-update services (e.g. microblogging services, status - update services such as Twitter), virtual world content and multimedia sharing sites (Dewing, 2010). Social media tools and services take various forms (more or less sophisticated) and fulfill diverse needs of people and organisations. Figure 2 illustrates the richness and diversity of social media.

Figure 2: Social Media Landscape



Source: Trang, 2013

Figure 2 illustrates the various categories the different social media tools and services can be grouped into. They include according to Cavazza (2008) and (Trang (2013) (figure 2) the following categories:

- *Publication tools* with blogs, wikis and citizen journalism portals
- *Sharing tools* for videos, pictures, links, music, slideshows, products reviews or products feedbacks
- *Discussions tools* like forums, video forums, instant messaging and VoIP
- *Social networks*, niche social networks and tools for creating social networks

- *Micro publication* tools and alike
- *Social aggregation* tools like lifestream
- Platforms for live cast hosting and their mobile equivalent
- Virtual worlds, 3D chats and teens dedicated virtual universes
- Social gaming platforms, casual gaming portals and social networks enabled games
- MMO and MMORPG

1.2 Special attributes of social media

Special attributes of social media include *persistence* (a great deal of content posted on social media sites may remain there permanently by default); *replicability* (content can be copied and shared); and *searchability* (content can be found easily using online search tools); *accessibility or global reach* (social media can be used anywhere, at any time, where an Internet connection is available (Dewing, 2010), *immediacy* (provide instantaneous transmission of information to and from individuals or organisations) *interactivity* (effective two-way communication technologies); and *reduced cost* (provide easy, inexpensive and rapid means of generating, accessing, storing, disseminating, transmitting and communicating huge amounts of information).

1.3 Problem

Despite social media popularity in this information era, there is very little knowledge on how it is used in the workplace by both employers and employees. Knowledge of how social media is used in the workplace can inform not only decision but also policy and design of social media tools and services to enhance their productive use in workplaces.

1.4 Objectives

The main objective of this study was to investigate the usage of social media in the workplace by both employers and employees. Specifically, the study sought to:

- (i) Ascertain how social media is being used in the workplace by both employers and employees
- (ii) Find out the mostly used public social media in the workplace
- (iii) Explore the opportunities that social media presents in the workplace
- (iv) Establish the challenges that social media presents in the workplace.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Literature related to the topic under investigation was surveyed on general offline and on using google as well as google scholar. Relevant literature published between 2001 and 2018 was included in the study while literature before 2001 was excluded from the study. Some of the search terms used to look for literature included: “uses of social media,” “workplace use of social media,” “benefits of social media,” and “challenges of social media.”

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Use of social media in the workplace

Generally, the use of social media is embedded in its concept which consists of two words: *social* and *media*. According to Cavazza (2008), the word *social* implies two major uses of social media. Firstly, it implies digital places for sharing (files, tastes, opinions, photos, videos, news stories, etc.) and secondly, they allow for social interactions (individuals gathering into groups or joining online communities, individual participating in online discussions, etc.). While the word *media* suggest that social media tools are also digital places for publication of content. In short, Cavazza (2008) argues that publishing, sharing and socializing are the major ways in which social media is being used. And so social media are places, tools, services allowing individuals to express themselves (and so to exist) in order to meet and share information.

According to the findings of this research, there has been wide spread adoption of these social media sites and most employers and employees are using them in the workplace. For instance, the study by Proskauer Rose LLP (2014), established that majority of businesses use social media for business purposes thereby greatly changing the way organisations operate and communicate. Proskauer Rose LLP (2014) further argues that “*organisations of all kinds are looking for ways to seize advantage in this emerging era marked by greater immediacy, interactivity and transparency*”. Businesses are increasingly using social media as a new way to reach customers more effectively and to spread news of their activities more rapidly (Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som, 2012). Hence, it has quickly become an accepted practice for employees to use social media

internally and externally as well as to achieve organisational outcomes. Generally, social media sites have had a profound effect by changing the nature of efficiency of communication processes in both business and private life (Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som, 2012).

An institution can hardly survive in this complex business environment. No organisation can work in a vacuum. Connectivity with other individuals or organisations in order to remain up-to-date with knowledge has become imperative for organisations to thrive. For instance, the Zambia Postal Services Corporation used to make a lot of money through posting of letters before the advent of Internet. But now, there are few people posting letters in the physical environment and the company has had to re-strategise itself to survive in this electronic environment by diversifying and introducing a number of e- products and e-services such as e-letter, online sales for buyers of second hand vehicles and Electronic Zambia Transport Information System (E-ZAMTIS). Internet has broken the distance barrier. People can e-mail letters easily, cheaply and faster through Internet.

3.1.1 Opportunities of using social media in the workplace

According to the findings of this study, social media is considered a friend in the workplace as it presents a number of opportunities. To start with, it was revealed that using social media sites *increase employee productivity* (TriNet, 2012; Munene and Nyaribo, 2013) through low-cost, instant, communication platforms available in social media. Employees can instantly communicate with other employees and clients or meet and consult online regardless of where they can be found there is connectivity. According to Munene and Nyaribo (2013), organisational success largely depends on employees who are considered as one of the most important assets of any organisation because they are capable of creating value and enabling an organisations have sustainable competitive advantage. The success of any organisation depends on the productivity of employees. Additionally, Fahmy's (2009) study affirms that employees who use social media sites are more productive than those who do not. They tend to be more social by nature and are connected to other people through social media sites making them better persons in the workplace in terms of interacting with others and solving problems.

Fahmy (2009), further found that employees who used internet for personal surfing had more sharpened employee concentration. It is assumed that by taking short breathers, the brain will be refreshed and renewed. TriNet (2012) amplifies that professional social media sites such as LinkedIn, allow employees to join specific work groups in order to engage in conversations with other professionals in similar industries thereby broadening the employee's knowledge base and therefore help to generate new and innovative ways of meeting business challenges. Moreover, employees according to the findings are using social networking sites to build targeted professional networks that help them stay current with market trends. It also promotes trust among them and fosters a more collaborative environment.

Studies further revealed that social networking tools *increase the efficiency of employees* at work (AT & T, 2008). In a survey of more than 2,500 people in five European countries conducted by AT & T, it was revealed that employees who used social networking tools in the workplace became more efficient at work, generated new ideas and became innovative, gain new knowledge, improved their problem solving skills, had more knowledge about other employees and customers, and used social networking tools for team building (AT&T, 2008).

The findings further indicated that *social media is used as a marketing tool*. It was found to play a critical role in marketing and advertising aspects of any business. According to TriNet (2012), *“using social media as a sales and marketing tool is a very inexpensive mode of advertising because it reaches a vast audience for a marginal investment.”* Organisations are using social media to introduce and promote new products and services in a way that increases a potential target market exponentially. They are being used by consumers to communicate with each other and to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas about a company's products or services, thereby creating a more personal connection while building brand loyalty (TriNet, 2012). Instead of spending huge amounts of money on marketing and advertising campaigns, company's happy customers can advertise on its behalf. Many consumers rely heavily for peer reviews of businesses on social media sites other than the source for product information because they trust their peers to fairly review products for them (TriNet, 2012).

Social media is also used to *gather information and knowledge* about competitors, employees, customers and suppliers (AT & T, 2008). TriNet adds that both customers and potential employees use social media to research companies that they have an interest in knowing more about. According to Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som (2012), a social media site is the quickest way to collect information. “*Organisations are actively leveraging the power of social media networks to find new business opportunities, new groups of like-minded individuals and organisations, and new sources of industry specific wisdom, advice and expertise*” (Wilson, 2009). Social media allow organisations to store and transmit information of different marketing strategies and procedures. Organisational presence can be maintained through social media in the workplace (Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som, 2012). In addition, employees of the organisation can use social media to access information about their employment rights and about employment law in general far more easily than was the case in the past. Most organisations provide information on employment rights in an easy to understand format, which include links to Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. In addition, there are a range of websites offering employment law information and advice in increasingly innovative formats, such as downloadable podcasts¹ and YouTube instructional videos.

Some employers at present rely on social media sites for *recruitment* processes so as to reduce on recruitment costs, and bunch of curriculum vitae generated by job boards can be lessened. Social media tools can facilitate job applicants to their assessment procedures (Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som, 2012). This is evident from the findings of a survey by CareerBuilder.com which found that most employers were utilising social media to screen potential employees. Additionally, Eisele (2006) surveyed 1,000 biggest organisations in Germany about their experiences with Internet and recruitment; and found that many companies reported the use of web-based solutions as an improvement of their recruitment processes and achieved lower recruitment costs. It was also reported that the use of some form of e-recruitment methods reduced the hiring costs to about tremendously in comparison to common traditional recruitment tools like newspapers (Lee, 2005; Cober *et al.*, 2001). Thus, it is generally acceptable that using social media sites for recruitment can make an outstanding impact in the reduction of the recruitment costs and as well as improve employee productivity (Aguenza, Al-Kassem and Som, 2012).

According to TriNet (2012), gone are the days when organisations used to post jobs on a notice boards or walls or newspaper advertisements. As an alternative, recruiters today are steadily turning to social media sites to entice and recruit the best talent. To avoid wasting time on curriculum vitae submitted by unqualified candidates, recruiters are now choosing to perform targeted searches on professional social media sites, such as LinkedIn. This allows recruiters to search for candidates with specific knowledge, skills and experience. Prospective employees are also using company profiles posted on social media sites to develop lists of companies where they would be interested in working. By creating a detailed profile, a company can be able to attract the best candidates and maintain strong ties with former valued employees who could be potential candidates in the future (TriNet, 2012).

On the other hand, it is argued that if social media is used as part of the hiring process, it may lead to issues of *discrimination*. According to TriNet (2012), a candidate may argue that a company had access to information about a protected status, such as race, disability or age when making hiring decisions. Knowledge of this information may be seen as a basis for adverse employment action. According to TriNet, (2012) it is a best practice to use social media sites after the candidate has been interviewed and only if the company is interested in the candidate.

According to TriNet (2012), social media is being used as a vehicle to *engage clients*. Organisations have a customer base that can be engaged through social media for whatever product or service they offer. However,

“the manner of engagement is unique because social media has revolutionised the style of business-to-customer communications. Customers no longer want to be talked at. Instead, they are looking for organisations to listen, to appropriately engage, and to respond to them. Social media sites are now used as a version of electronic word of mouth and provide a platform for one’s consumers to not only speak directly to accompany, but also for consumers to communicate with each other, sharing reviews or testimonials about specific products or services. Companies that join social media sites are able to create stronger relationships with their customers and are also able to improve customer service by utilising social media to address customer service issues” (TriNet, 2012).

Firms can take advantage to leverage social media to solicit constructive feedback from both customers and employees. Social media allows companies to collect feedback both more quickly and more cost-effectively than does a traditional email or phone survey strategy (TriNet, 2012).

Social media is also increasingly being used for both internal and external *communication* (Patterson, 2012). Employees are able to easily communicate with each other in work related activities, thereby improving channels of communication. Thus, social media has broken the barrier of work station. An employee can work from anywhere other than the office and be able to get in touch with colleagues at the office. They can send documents through WhatsApp for instance. Commenting on the usefulness of social media in communication Mwale-Munsanje-(2014) writes:

“The association has continued to use Facebook as a means of communicating to members and also as a discussion forum. Currently the association Facebook account has a membership of over 500. This has greatly helped the association to reach out to many young professionals”.

In the study by Cilliers (2013), it was further revealed that social media is also utilized in *collective labour relations* whereby some employers and union representatives have created controlled websites or WhatsApp groups to inform employees and unions of the status of collective bargaining. Such platforms play a key role to keep workplace relations steady and peaceful, and simultaneously, put false rumors to rest.

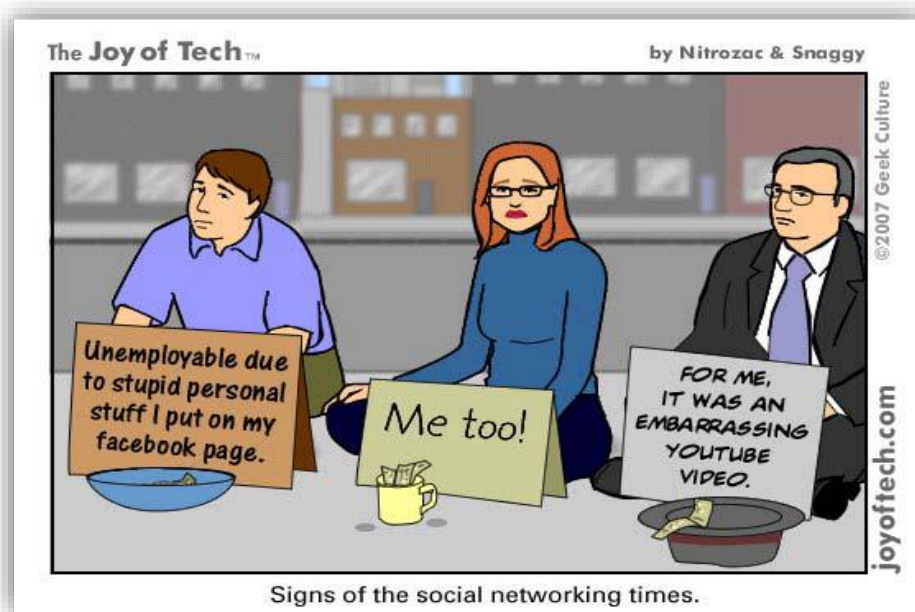
3.1.2 Challenges of using social media in the workplace

Although some scholars predict significant potential for social media in transforming businesses, others have raised concerns over the use of these tools in workplaces that they can also be a minefield of potential problems in an organisation. Wilson (2009) identified five principal risks that an organisation has in regard to social networking: perceived loss in staff productivity, data leakage from staff gossiping freely in an open environment, damage to a business’s reputation,

scam practiced by cyber crooks, and the open access to organisation's information due to outdated passwords.

According to the findings of the research, one of the concerns of using social media is *too much abuse by employees* in the workplace. First of all, employees lose more hours for the institution by using social media. This kind of social media misuse in the workplace has increased of late. According to Proskauer Rose LLP (2014) survey, the majority of businesses have had to deal with social media misuse as more businesses reported having to take disciplinary action against employees for misuse. The disciplinary actions against employees who misuse social media may take the form of losing employment such as what is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: Consequences of social media



Source: Smiricky, 2013

Secondly, it was revealed in the study that use of social media in the workplace does *decreased employee productivity*. A study conducted by Nucleus Research with 237 corporate employees showed that the majority of employees that check websites during work hours record a decrease in their productivity (Gaudin, 2009). Productivity of employees dropped due to addictive and excessive browsing and uploading photos which were not related to the workplace (Aguenza, Al-

Kassem and Som, 2012). Additionally, employees who continually use social media sites may not be as focused as they should be—a risk that this could negatively affect their productivity (TriNet, 2012). A lot of time, is wasted on websites and on updating their profiles, downloading videos and music, playing games, posting messages, chatting and so on during work hours, weakening productivity and increasing security risks to the company by sharing data externally (Wilson, 2009). According to Munene and Nyaribo (2013), wasting time through internet activities is simple and it is a huge hidden cost to business. If the company has an eight-person department and each of them spends an hour a day on the above activities, that is a whole employee wasted.

Company information leakage was also found to be another challenge of social media usage in the workplace: In a study by AT and T (2008), respondents reported that social networks are a distraction to employees and a source of company leaks of confidential information. An employer or employee risk disseminating proprietary or confidential information, such as customer information, internal policies and procedures, product information, financial records, and trade secrets through use of social media. An employee's post about a successful day for the company, for example, could violate notice, disclosure, or reporting requirements. Employees in the healthcare industry are especially susceptible to potential confidentiality breaches due to close contact with patients' private medical records and information (TriNet, 2012).

Related to the above was the concern that employees risk *exposure of their potentially protected information*. A company may obtain information about illegal or other conduct of potential concern, such as employee's drug use or excessive drinking, medical or health issues, disability status, genetic information, sexual orientation, religion and other lifestyle information about their employees through social media. This may have serious implications on the employees job as knowledge of protected information may be seen as a basis for adverse employment action (Patterson, 2012 and TriNet, 2012).

Social media use in the workplace was also seen to be a danger in that others may use it to damage an employee or organization's reputation. "*Social media could be used as a forum for disgruntled employees to launch online attacks against companies or employees, thereby creating possible litigious situations*" (TriNet, 2012). Posting on social media sites is also vulnerable to cyber-

criminal activities by disseminating wrong information which can cause embarrassment to the organization concerned.

The study also showed that there was danger in using social media caused by the *scams practiced by cyber crooks*. It was observed that social media sites have become a common source of malware or spyware that can pose security risks to organisations. Companies need to deploy a variety of tools in an intelligent way to monitor, manage and control how different individuals use new web applications being used in the workplace (TriNet, 2012).

Information overload was also revealed to be another challenge of using social media in the workplace. This is one of the issues that influence the mind of most users concerning the use of social media in the workplace. Social media has several types of media, so much so that users can easily be overloaded with information, which may be difficult to deal with by those who are not information literate.

3.2 Most popular public social media

Literature revealed that the most popular social media is Facebook followed by LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter (Mulauzi and Akakandelwa, 2018; Smith and Anderson, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2015). According to Queens Library (2011), approximately 3 in every 4 minutes spent on social networking sites were spent on Facebook and about 1 in every 7 minutes spent online took place on Facebook around the globe.

5.0 WAY FORWARD/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media is a tool to reckon with in as far as real time information dissemination around the globe is concerned. However, it is important to note that “*from the onset, social media can either build or destroy...[While] it is ... a brilliant tool for business transaction for those with business acumen*” (Kapapula, 2018), employers need to consider how social media sites is likely to impact their organisations on both angles. The widespread use of these sites by employees raises inevitable questions on how social media can serve the interests of organisations by enhancing productivity and unleashing the potential its potential in the workplace. At the same time, employers must be

able to embrace the technology and minimise risks associated with social media. These can be done through:

- Formulation of social media policy which can guide employees on how to make productive use of social media at work. A comprehensive social media policy can minimise future costs by placing employees on notice as to what content and behavior is acceptable in using social media. Policy can serve as a foundation for future disciplinary action to be taken (Simiricky, 2013)
- Employers should educate and train employees on what is considered “protected activity or information” for the organisation. A robust Internet education policy within a company—as well as effective monitoring tools—are critical to solving social networking security issues in order to keep employees safe compliant, and productive (TriNet, 2012).
- Employers should monitor all social media activities to ensure compliance with company policies. Proponents of monitoring argue that this is proper as the employer has the obligation of ensuring that productivity is enhanced and company time is not wasted or abused (Munene and Nyaribo, 2013). Employers should therefore, take keen interest to know how social media is being used and in what capacity.
- Organisations should incorporate social media into company marketing plans to ensure that social media is used to enhance productivity

6.0 CONCLUSION

Whether you like them or not, employers need to face the reality that social media sites are not merely a fad that will fade with time. They will continue to grow in popularity and are here to stay. At times one feels that one is too busy to spend time on social media (and secretly judge those that do). The reality is that we may all be missing an opportunity as the chances are that most competitors are already using social media to their advantage. Certainly most employees have been using social media extensively. Above all - a Manager in an organisation needs to understand that customers are using and receiving information via this important, new communications media right now. So there is no way to avoid it. The onus is on employers to ensure responsible use of this ingenious tool for the betterment of the organization.

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