Social Media Use in the Workplace: A Study of Dual Effects

John Carlson, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA
Suzanne Zivnuska, California State University, Chico, Chico, CA, USA
Ranida B. Harris, Indiana University Southeast, New Albany, IN, USA
Kenneth J. Harris, Indiana University Southeast, New Albany, IN, USA
Dawn S. Carlson, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Social media use in the workplace may simultaneously contribute to productive behaviors (task-oriented and relationship-building) as well as unproductive behaviors (deviance) at work. Building on channel expansion theory the authors examine the impact of using social media on these organizational behaviors. Using a sample of 220 working individuals they found that intensity of social media use contributed to greater task-oriented social media behaviors, more relationship-building social media behaviors, and more deviant social media behaviors. Further, the authors examined the moderating effect that preoccupation with social media has on these direct relationships and found that preoccupation diminishes the effect of social media use on both productive and un-productive behaviors.

KEYWORDS

Channel Expansion, Intensity of Use, Preoccupation, Social Media, Workplace Deviance

INTRODUCTION

Workplace communication is evolving at a dramatic rate due to the introduction of new and changing technologies such as social media. There are approximately 1.32 billion monthly active users of Facebook alone ("newsroom.fb," 2014). An estimated 86% of job seekers have a social network profile, one in six job seekers found their last job through an online social network, and 54% of social media users have used Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter in their job search in the last year ("Infographic," 2014). Furthermore, socially networked Americans aged 18-64 spend an average of 3.2 hours per day using social media (MarketingCharts staff, 2013). The use of social media by employees in the workplace is unquestionable; the impact of this use is, however, uncertain. Some estimate that Facebook use shaves 1.5% of office productivity, and that British companies alone lose an estimated $2.2 billion per year to social networking (Koerner, 2010). However, it has been noted that social media use by employees can allow firms to harness social capital in a number of ways (Wamba & Carter, 2014). Research suggests that social media can help individuals garner resources such as information and connections that can help productivity (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The impact of new technologies, and specifically communication technologies, has frequently been described as having such parallel “dual effects” (Tehranian, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of our research is to examine how social media use simultaneously helps individuals engage in productive and unproductive workplace behaviors.

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Wikipedia defines social media as “social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.” (“Social Media,” 2014). This definition is relatively broad, as it includes but is not limited to applications that provide social networking, blogging, and on-line support groups. Our intention in using such a broad definition is to provide an umbrella large and robust enough to remain relevant and accommodate emerging technologies well into the future.

Our goal in this research is to examine the use of social media in the workplace and better understand the impact it has simultaneously on both productive behaviors (which we will define as task-oriented and relationship-building) and unproductive behaviors (deviance) at work. Specifically, we integrate expectation discomfort theory (EDT) (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980) and channel expansion theory (CET) (Carlson & Zmud, 1999), with a foundation in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) to show how intense usage of this particular communication medium may enhance an individual’s ability to use the media for different purposes (good and bad). First, we will consider how social media use in the workplace allows people to effectively engage in two kinds of positive work-related behaviors: task-oriented behaviors and relationship-building behaviors. Second, we will examine how that same social media use can contribute to deviant behavior in the workplace. Finally we will consider how preoccupation with social media can ameliorate or exacerbate the effects of social media use on these behaviors.

We expect that our efforts to answer these questions will enable us to contribute to scholarly understanding of social media use in several ways. Firstly, by integrating three theories within which to ground our research model, we believe we have a strong theoretical basis upon which to spur future research in the area. Secondly, we hope to better understand how social media use can lead to both functional and dysfunctional workplace behaviors rather than focusing exclusively on either positive or negative effects. Finally, we offer several new measures related to social media use that may be useful in future investigations of these issues.

Theoretical Development

To better understand the mechanisms behind social media as a communication tool, we integrate EDT (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980), CET (Carlson & Zmud, 1999), and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Together, these theories will allow us to build a research model linking social media (channel) usage to behavioral outcomes of interest.

Social cognitive theory provides the foundation for understanding how social media usage emerges from a reciprocal relationship between personal factors, behaviors, and the environment (Bandura, 1986). Applied to social media use, social cognitive theory suggests that learning about various social media technologies may result in new thinking or a modified sense of self. Based on that new thinking or self-concept, employees may begin to use social media in different ways. Building on that foundation, EDT (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980) and CET (Carlson & Zmud, 1999) help to explain the impacts of that learning process as it relates to social media.

EDT maps well with social cognitive theory and social media. EDT describes a process in which exposure to information about a social media technology (environment) leads to beliefs (cognitions) about the technology. After experience using the technology (behavior), the user compares prior beliefs to this actual experience and derives either negative or positive disconfirmation (more cognitions). When an employee’s expectations about using a technology are not confirmed (“negative disconfirmation”), satisfaction with the technology is low. On the other hand, when the technology is better than expected (“positive disconfirmation”), satisfaction is high. This conclusion determines the user’s satisfaction level with the technology and influences the decision to reuse it or not.

Social media is a unique form of technology insofar as its main purpose is supporting communication that develops a user’s social network. CET (Carlson & Zmud, 1999), a theory of communication media selection and usage, helps us to apply the theoretical foundations in social cognitive theory and EDT specifically to communication style and use. CET posits in part that intense
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