ABSTRACT

Because Millennials and Generation X tend to desire close relationships with their leaders, expect frequent and open communication, and integrate their personal and professional contacts via social media, it was predicted they would be more likely than Baby Boomers to accept a Facebook friend request from their boss. Although no main effect was found for generational differences, a significant interaction between self-disclosure and generation was found, such that self-disclosure was positively related to acceptance of a friend request from one’s boss for Baby Boomers and Generation X, but negatively related for Millennials. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, Friend Request, Generational Differences, Social Media, Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships

INTRODUCTION

With the ever-increasing popularity of social media, employees are interacting more with their coworkers, supervisors, and other professional contacts in online social networks such as Facebook (McDonald & Thompson, 2016; O’Connor & Schmidt, 2015). A recent study indicated that 60 percent of employees report having one or more co-worker ‘friends’ on Facebook, and 25 percent of employees reported they were Facebook friends with their supervisor (Weidner, Wynne, & O’Brien, 2012). Likewise, a study of over 300 full-time professionals found that over 90 percent had accepted Facebook friend requests from their co-workers (Frampton & Child, 2013). While such social media connections between employees and their professional contacts results in greater sharing of information and builds social capital, they may also present concerns with regard to privacy and professionalism (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013).

The challenge lies in carefully balancing what is disclosed to whom. Without visual or setting cues, social network users may forget to self-monitor what they post (Nguyen, Bin & Campbell, 2012). In addition, individuals do not have total control over what is posted about them since personal contacts have the ability to disclose information that may be viewed as inappropriate or unprofessional. It is also important to note that not all professional relationships may be the same and that the level of concern about what is disclosed via social networks and by who will differ depending on the type of relationship (Karl & Peluchette, 2011; Peluchette, Karl, Coustasse, & Emmett, 2012). Probably one
of the most valued professional relationships that individuals have is with their immediate supervisor/boss and the question of whether one should connect with one’s boss via social media has received considerable attention in the popular press in recent years. From “Request denied: Reasons not to friend your boss on Facebook” to “5 Reasons to Friend Your Boss on Facebook,” there are literally thousands of online articles dealing with this issue.

However, the academic literature examining workplace social media connections has been slow to emerge and, to date, research shows rather mixed findings. Some studies indicate that respondents are supportive of such connections with supervisors, seeing it as an opportunity to build networking and enhance one’s career. For example, Karl and Peluchette (2011) surveyed undergraduate students in the U.S. and found that most (84%) would accept the request, although 33 percent indicated they would have reservations about doing so. Similarly, a study of healthcare providers found that 72 percent would accept a friend request from their boss, although 24 percent would have reservations about this (Peluchette, Karl, Coustasse & Emmett, 2012). In addition, a study of 765 librarians found that only 19 percent would not accept requests from their supervisor (Del Bosque, 2013).

Other studies show evidence of concern about such relationships, citing the need for privacy and boundaries or concerns about negative impressions being formed. In a qualitative study examining 75 contributors to four blog sites, Peluchette, Karl and Fertig (2013) found that 45 percent (N=34) believed that the boss’s friend request should be accepted, but 21 of the 34 indicated that privacy settings should be used and the boss should be blocked from all or most content. In addition, seven of the 34 believed that users would need to keep their site free of anything that is not highly professional. Two others advised accepting the boss’s friend request but creating a second Facebook page for “real” friends. In another qualitative study of Microsoft employees, Skeels and Grudin (2009) found that several participants experienced uneasiness when receiving a friend request from a senior manager. For example, one employee said, “It led to a dilemma because what do you do when your VP invites you to be his friend?” Another asked, “If a senior manager invites you, what’s the protocol for turning that down?” (p. 7). Most of their respondents reluctantly accepted the requests but restricted what they posted. Yet, they were still concerned about their friends’ postings, as exhibited by the following comment: “Can I rely on my friends to not put something incredibly embarrassing on my profile?”

While the above findings show a range of attitudes regarding this issue, we know little about how these attitudes might differ by those in different generational groups. Recent statistics show that, while Facebook is still very popular with Millennials, the largest growth in users has occurred with older generations. Since 2011, Facebook has added 16.4 million new users in the 35 to 54-year old demographic an (increase of 41 percent), 2.4 million new users among adults age 55 and over (an increase of 80 percent), and 10.8 million new users in the 25 to 34 demographic (an increase of 32 percent) (Neal, 2014). Now that there are multiple generations in the workplace who are using social networking sites, it is important to examine whether there are generational differences in attitudes regarding employee/boss friend relationships via Facebook. This paper will begin by discussing differences between the generational groups (e.g. Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials) and how these differences might influence their likelihood to accept a Facebook friend request from their boss. Using the generational birth year guidelines of Howe and Strauss (2009), we define Baby Boomers as those born 1943 to 1960, Gen Xers born 1961 to 1981, and Millennials born 1982 or later. We also examine two additional factors that may be likely to influence this decision, namely their personal disposition for self-disclosure and the quality of the relationship that individuals have with their supervisor. Figure 1 outlines the framework for our study.

**Generational Differences**

Academic research examining the managerial implications of managing different generations in the same workplace has grown tremendously in recent years. Much of this research has focused on job attitudes (e.g., Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt & Grade, 2012), job values (e.g., Parry & Urwin, 2011), and the narcissistic personality trait (e.g., Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell & Bushman,
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