Chapter 49
How Employees Can Leverage Web 2.0 in New Ways to Reflect on Employment and Employers

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ABSTRACT
How and why businesses can and should exploit Web 2.0 communication technologies for competitive advantage has recently become the focus of scholarly attention. Yet at the same time, one key organizational actor in the business equation—the employee as an individual and collective actor with distinct interests from that of the employer, has been given scant attention. Using media accounts, questionnaire and interview data, this chapter seeks to map out early trends in employee interests in Web 2.0. The findings point towards three distinct, yet interconnected employee uses for Web 2.0—collaborative practices that extend employee abilities to exchange a wide-range of ‘insider information,’ express conflict, and ‘take action’ against employers. Due to the nature and size of cyberspace, however, more research is required to gauge the popularity and effect of these emergent trends.

INTRODUCTION

Due to new Internet technological developments that no longer limit Web-pages to being asymmetrical broadcasts of information and opinion (Herring et al., 2004), and how new Internet communication technologies massively decrease the technical knowledge to post information to the Internet, ordinary people need no longer be the passive recipients of Web-page information (Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006). The new reality is that the Internet is increasingly becoming the focal point for everyday purposes (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002). What is more, the rise of Web 2.0 communication technologies, such as social networking and blog-
ging platforms, has led to ordinary individuals becoming a primary dynamic of the Internet (Coté and Pybus, 2007).

However, emergent research in this domain demonstrates a clear bias towards assessing and evaluating Web 2.0 as a range of tools that may help employers gain competitive advantage over rival organizations. For instance, in this field there has been research that explores the possibilities for businesses to take advantage of new Internet communication technologies, such as ‘employee blogs’, wikis and message boards, in conjunction with existing teamworking initiatives (Hoel and Hollins, 2006; Brown, Huettner and James-Tanny, 2007; Efimova and Grudin, 2007). Research suggests there are business advantages in senior members of the organization using ‘corporate blogs’ as a new way to manage public and customer relations (Wood, Behling, and Haugen, 2006). There are also debates that surround the merits of using information from the social networking profiles of prospective employees as part of a wider corporate recruitment and selection process (Brockett, 2007; Berry, 2007).

While Web 2.0 in the context of the business organization is clearly a very new and emergent field, it is also clear to note that there is a distinct neglect of how employees are adapting to and exploiting a series of Internet communication technologies for their own distinct benefits. This is especially concerning when it has been known for some time that early Internet communication technologies can augment powers of organization and integration (Castells, 2000) and allow fragmented individuals to re-assert identities and interests in an advanced and technologically-driven capitalist age (Barglow, 1994). That said, fragments of research have emerged in this field, for example, considering the legal implications for employees who blog about their work (Gely and Bierman, 2006) and how blogs may allow employees to resist and cope with the labour process (Schoneboom, 2006 and 2007; Richards, 2008; Ellis and Richards, 2009). As such, in the light of paradigmatic changes to the nature of Internet, it is very reasonable to suggest there would be a great deal of value in mapping out and up-dating the wider possibilities for employees who pursue their employment-related interests through new forms of Internet communication technology.

To achieve these aims the paper is divided into four sections. First, extant literature on both individual and collective employee use of the Internet is discussed. This paves the way for findings to be analysed later on in the paper. Following an overview of the literature the methodological approach used in this paper is outlined. The analysis is presented in the final three sections, divided into the presentation of data, an overall discussion of the findings, and concluding comments.

**BACKGROUND: PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON EMPLOYEE USES FOR THE INTERNET**

British and USA survey data indicates that the use of the Internet amongst adults of employment age has grown steadily since the early 1990s. Such has been the accumulative effect, by 2007 approximately 70 per cent of all adults between 16 and 54 years of age claim to use the Internet everyday or almost everyday, and almost 50 per cent of all working adults can access the Internet in the workplace (National Statistics Online, 2007). More specific survey data indicates nearly all office-based employees have access to the Internet and email raising widespread concern over the potential misuse of such technology on work time (Whitfield, 2005). In the USA, 62 per cent of adults who are currently employed use the Internet or email at work (Madden and Jones, 2008). Survey research that looks at employee use of Web 2.0 is currently limited, yet early indications point towards such technologies being adopted by around 60 per cent of professional employees as a career development tool (Suff, 2004). Furthermore, the most recent survey-based