Chapter 18
Friend or Foe?
Leveraging – and Mitigating – the Access and Immediacy of Social Media and Information Technologies

Linda Brennan
Mercer University, USA

ABSTRACT

While many organizations and individuals use social media and information technologies (IT) to overcome the limitations of time and space, they often experience unintended consequences from increased immediacy and access. How can they achieve the desirable changes and address the negative effects that can result? This article presents a systematic framework that managers can use to proactively identify ways to either leverage or mitigate the increased immediacy and access. Specific examples are used as illustrations to demonstrate how these issues can be anticipated and used for competitive advantage. They are not offered as specific “prescriptions” for any one organization. Rather, they show how the framework can inform managers as they evaluate proposals for, and implementation plans of, new information systems in their organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has said “IT doesn’t matter,” must not have a wireless personal digital assistant (PDA). For people connected to communications and information systems, IT (information technology) can have a profound – and not always positive – effect. Many years ago, The Academy of Management Executive published a survey (Veiga & Dechant, 1997, p. 77) describing the “wired world woes” of 350 executives from major corporations. The study revealed several common frustrations, with more than half expressing concern that:

• IT has not made their lives better, just busier
• IT wastes as much time as it saves
• IT has caused work relationships to deteriorate
• IT means serious information redundancy and overload
• IT means my office is always with me 24 hours a day.

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In today’s wireless world, these concerns resonate even more loudly. Conference rooms and private offices are no longer safe havens for meetings; they are continually interrupted with a barrage of buzzing messages. Privacy and courtesy are victims of access and immediacy. The Wall Street Journal coined the term “surfer’s voice,” to describe the inattention evident in a person’s voice while talking on the telephone and communicating electronically (Berman, 2003), and recently noted the “Twitter headaches” of immediacy (Needleman, 2009) and the “Blackberry jam” of people walking along the streets of New York checking email and text messages and frequently bumping into one another (Noonan, 2010).

This goes beyond inconvenience to questions of corporate governance. With the increasing use of the Internet, the availability of information has raised the awareness – if not the execution – of corporations’ activities. Environmental practices, fiscal integrity, international performance and philanthropic work are easily scrutinized and questioned with the broad access afforded by networks. Customer satisfaction complaints may be widely discussed online by users before the company even realizes there is a problem.

In addition, the reliance of individuals and organizations on IT makes them vulnerable to system failures. This vulnerability is heightened by broad access. Consider the pharmaceutical company sending an e-mail message to users of an anti-depressant, essentially publishing the names of these patients (Federal Trade Commission, 2002; Rothfeder, 2006). The ripple effect of such a problem is hard to overcome.

These issues are exacerbated when one considers the prevalence of social media and pervasive computing in personal and professional lives. The categorical term, “social media,” generally encompasses Internet-enabled applications for which the content is user generated and modified in a participatory and collaborative fashion. This includes collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.60). Consider the multitude of ways in which an average individual can be reached: home, cellular, and office telephone; personal and professional email; personal and professional social networks; and, just maybe – in person. This does not factor in the information the individual might seek for personal or professional purposes, e.g., the weather, the news, various blogs, and online services. Immediacy barely describes the situation.

Pervasive computing seems to be more hardware-based, whereby “ubiquitous and mobile systems interact seamlessly in everyday life (Soares, 2002).” The computer chip embedded in your garment’s care tag will give care instructions to your washing machine, while your refrigerator will manage the inventory of its contents and the energy consumption of your home. The grocery cart will tempt you with advertisements that change as you walk through the aisles of the store – pervasive means anytime, anywhere. Supermarkets already know what you buy and when you shop. At what point does pervasive become invasive? Intrusive? Inconvenient? Vulnerable?

Of course, these technologies enable positive change and can be transformational. Examples of improvements in productivity, cost structures, value propositions, and customer relations abound. As (Clark, 2006) points out, handheld devices and wearable technologies can improve processes: “Data accessibility, immediate processing, and virtual office capabilities provide positive returns.” Shih (2009) describes how online social networks can be used to build better products, reach new markets, engage customers, and recruit employees. This is why such technologies are adopted. The challenge is to find ways to achieve such desirable changes and address the negative effects that can result.

One useful framework distinguishes between the direct, easily anticipated, first-level productivity effects and the second-level social system effects which are harder to measure and are gen-