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Web 2.0 in the workplace: Implications for organisational psychology

Interactive Paper: Web 2.0 and Social Media in the Workplace: Implications for Organisational Psychology

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Overview

In this session we aim to present a balanced review of relevant research and debate on the social and psychological merits and dangers of using Web 2.0 and social media in organisations. Following this brief review, we will then stage an interactive debate, where delegates will be encouraged to choose a side and present key arguments on positive versus negative implications of Web 2.0 usage for employees and organisations. Web 2.0 represents the second generation of the internet where, in contrast to the 'read only' era of the internet (Web 1.0), users can now contribute to web content as well as read content. At the heart of Web 2.0 are social networking sites, but they also sit within a wider range of interactive tools and features (e.g. blogs, wikis, memes, avatars) that serve to make up a "people-centric web that stimulates conversations, interpersonal networking, personalisation and individualism" (CIPD, 2008, p5). We will argue, based on emerging research and theory, that progressive patterns of Internet usage carry a range of psychological opportunities and threats, both in terms of individual usage, and aggregate sharing of information across employee collectives and social organisational communities. We propose that it is timely for researchers and practitioners to consolidate our knowledge in this area, so that we can move forward in gathering evidence and formulating policy as responsibly and effectively as possible.

Research Background

There are a number of challenges and opportunities for occupational and organisational psychology science and practice with regard to Web 2.0 and social media use in the workplace.

On the negative side, there are a range of psychological issues facing users trying to navigate the online environment in a socially responsible, constructive, and reflectively self-aware fashion. Some of these potential user problems highlighted by research are relatively self-oriented, putting users at risk to themselves via their pre-existing tendencies, including heightened expressions of narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), internet addiction behaviours (Griffiths, 2010), and the intermittent misuse of the internet on company time, often termed cyberslacking or cyberdeviance (Weatherbee, 2010). Some of these issues may not harm other workers directly, but create

occupational risks around employee productivity, well-being, and the pursuit of organisational goals. In contrast, other user issues around Web 2.0 and social networking may be more actively directed at undermining or interfering with others, having wider social consequences within organisational environments, including cyberbullying (Privitera & Campbell, 2009), mishandling confidential information, and unfair or invalid recruitment and selection practices (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009).

Beyond the psychology of employee and managerial users themselves, there are systemic risks concerning privacy and regulation of internet usage within and across organisations (Fuchs, 2011). Organisational and employee reputations are at risk for becoming fragile, insecure, and highly vulnerable to competition given that Web 2.0 is generally very accessible, abundant, and open to all. Thinking of Web 2.0 as a global resource, the 'tragedy of the cyber commons' means that the internet is at the whim of many aggressively competing users without clear private ownership, carrying a high risk of it becoming degraded, oversaturated, and unsustainable. The prevalence of offensive or pornographic content and the possibility of hacking and information leaks are just two examples of how Web 2.0 can constitute a psychologically problematic infrastructure for organisations. The employees themselves, even if they are working productively, may be exploited, and the products of their labour appropriated, plagiarised, or simply unrecognised (Fuchs, 2011).

However, there are also many opportunities for research to continue to explore the positive psychological opportunities and benefits of Web 2.0 and social networking in workplaces. Employees can participate democratically and inclusively online as connected individuals, whilst retaining distinctive individuality, meeting a range of personal and social identity needs simultaneously. A business case for social media use implies reaching more talented employees and diverse markets more easily (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). More passive and diverse job applicants can also be targeted in this way, enlarging talent pools. Building social capital and spanning boundaries via Web 2.0 with other networked organisations and stakeholder groups also seems likely to have beneficial effects on employee well-being and on organisational success. Furthermore, Web 2.0 constitutes a potentially rich and immersive psychological environment for new possibilities, including taking advantage of jobs and functions that can be performed advantageously within a sophisticated online environment, such as remote cybertherapy and virtual training simulations. There is even some evidence to show that leisurely internet browsing in moderation can actually ensure that employees are more productive, as it helps them to take short breaks whilst keeping their minds active (Coker, 2011). Although a lot of research has problematized immersion in a socially interactive web environment, taking a positive perspective may be fruitful in restoring some balance to the emerging evidence base.

Implications for Practice

Evidence suggests that organisational usage of Web 2.0 and social networking media is set to rise in practice (CIPD, 2008). In parallel to the research findings, practical implications will continue to abound in terms of how organisations and occupational psychologists respond to the terrain of Web 2.0.

For example, in practice we may start to see a need for the creation, design, and HR to properly embed job roles explicitly addressing Web 2.0 working within a particular occupational context. Online Web 2.0 forums may also be used to catalyse organisational changes, learning, and reconfigurations of knowledge. Crowd-sourcing organisational issues online, for example, is a very cost-effective way to harness a wide range of employee perspectives, solve a problem and potentially improve employment relations all at the same time (CIPD, 2008). Employees can also draw on tools and features of Web 2.0 to creatively enrich their own personal work and engage in citizenship for the organisation as a whole. However, fuller organisational engagement may also require costly training and investment to help employees to use such forms of communication in a mutually beneficial and responsible manner. Associated with this point is the need to ensure that older employees and other diverse minorities are not excluded or mistreated via complex Web-supported work practices (e.g. Davison et al, 2011). In the interests of balance, rather than embracing Web 2.0 totally uncritically, practitioners also need to consider what valuable functions and resources Web 2.0 in fact cannot substitute for, such as the more tangible physical and human assets of the firm, as well as its community location, history, and long-standing partnerships.

In relation to many of the points made above, there is a need for academics and practitioners in occupational psychology to work together to gather high-quality research evidence and data on protocols, benchmarks, patterns of usage, internet-related psychological disorders (e.g. the forthcoming fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, *DSM-V*, in 2013) and legal precedents to monitor the organisational and employee costs and benefits of increased social media use in organisations. To date, it would appear that research has lagged behind practice and the ongoing progress in this field often seems to be confined to relatively niche journals (e.g. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, *Business Communication Quarterly*).

Conclusion

Despite increasing engagement with Web 2.0 and the use of social networking sites by organisations, there is continuing debate around whether the informational, social, and psychological aspects of Internet usage in organisations are beneficial to individuals in organisations (CIPD, 2008; Davison et al., 2011). Accordingly, we will use this session to stage a debate on the merits and risks

of Web2.0 and social media, asking delegates to take a side (merits versus risks) and formulate a summary set of arguments as follows:

1) Which key issues (prioritise the top 3) surrounding the use of Web2.0 and social media are most concerning (or valuable) for employees and organisations?

2) In the 21st century, what will constitute best (or worst) occupational psychology practice in how organisations use Web2.0 and social media to support their HR and strategy?

3) In organisational stakeholder terms, who stands to gain the most (or lose the most) from widespread usage and adoption of Web 2.0 and social media in workplaces?

Session Format (40 minutes in total):

Introduction (to topic and format of session) – 5 minutes

Presentation of academic literature and implications for practice– 15 minutes

Interactive debate with audience members – 15 minutes

Feedback from debate – 5 minutes

References

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