1

SOCIAL MEDIA AT WORK

On Saturday, August 23, 2008, at 2:45 in the morning, cell phones across the globe were buzzing with the text message announcing Joe Biden as the Democratic vice presidential candidate. Throughout the weekend, those who received the text message talked in restaurants and community meetings to discuss the implications. As the media spread the story, the unique way the announcement was revealed became almost as important as the choice of running mate.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election was unprecedented in many ways, one of which was the wave of support from younger Americans who seemed to be suddenly awakened to the political landscape. The swell of energy, passion, and commitment from such a wide variety of voters, particularly younger ones, swayed the polls in favor of the Democrats. The use of social media was a key factor in generating that energy and mobilizing a large community to achieve the common goal: elect Barack Obama. Regardless of his or her political beliefs or organizational affiliation, any community activist, corporate leader, or entrepreneur would love to create and harness that kind of fervor. Imagine what could happen if this were applied at work.

TRAILBLAZER

If you are part of an organization—profit, nonprofit, big, small, community, corporate—working with others to achieve common goals is the name of the game. Organizations of all kinds want to engage employees, clients, customers, suppliers, and partners, building brand loyalty to their products and services.

But in today's world, leaders face an increasingly difficult environment in which to accomplish these goals. Ever accelerating rates of change are the hallmark of our postmodern society. Economic uncertainty, shorter development cycles, flatter organizational structures, and transforming social institutions are all coevolving at a pace never before experienced. Executing with speed and excellence has become a sacred mantra of corporate survival if leaders are to keep stride with increasingly fierce global competition.[1]

If leaders are committed to gaining and sustaining competitive advantage, they will need to rely on engaged and committed employees and partners. In this volatile environment, the emerging phenomenon of social media can create an extraordinary opportunity for savvy leaders and organizations to achieve this advantage. These tools are accelerating and enhancing employee innovation, engagement, and performance. Those who are actively using social media in their organizations can be confident that they have new ways to improve their business performance, create long-term capability, and ultimately sustain their success.

Leaders everywhere should seize the opportunity to incorporate social media into their organizations to improve performance and to build highly energized teams and positive cultures. The advantages also include increased organizational learning, enhanced change readiness, and stronger relationships. As leaders learn to leverage social media *inside* their organizations just as individuals do *outside* their organizations, a tremendous boost of agility and vitality is unleashed. Within organizations, social media demonstrates the new reality—the reality that employees are cocreators of organizational success rather than servants of the company who simply salute and take orders.

The leaders we have talked with believe that social media helps them extend their personal leadership influence in uncertain times by accelerating employee development, improving succession planning, and attracting energized pools of new workers in the war for talent. It is a powerful means of continually revitalizing the spirit, heart, and soul of the enterprise. Ultimately, individuals, groups, and organizations will be able to reduce the time it takes to make decisions. This new speed will impact performance and will improve organizational and social innovation.

Why "Social Media"?

In recent years the popularity of social media has spread like wildfire. Yet just as a wildfire can evoke panic with its random and chaotic movement, the ripple effects of this technology are catching many organizational leaders by surprise. If you're among those feeling the anxiety and anticipation about how this proliferation of social media will impact your organization, we can certainly empathize. We have felt the same sense of urgency about understanding and tapping the power of social media in our professional activities.

A short year ago, we were in heated discussion about how to improve our talent management services at Oracle. How can we engage our leaders more? How can we extend our learning process over time? How can we create communities to exchange wisdom and experience? There was a sense of urgency among the team of leaders in the Global Organization and Talent Development group. We knew that our leaders were constantly looking for ways to stay ahead in the marketplace. And we knew that a large percentage of our employees were expecting us to deliver solutions that enabled them to work and learn in ways with which they were most comfortable—online. We were aware that social media offered us a new set of tools to accomplish this, and became energized when we challenged our assumptions about

how to enable people to participate in the talent management process. We were convinced that the use of social media would encourage more involvement and better outcomes. But some concerns came out as well: Once we invite participation, how do we guide the effort so that it is most productive? How do we combat organizational fears? How do we engage those leaders who may be skeptical about changing their behaviors? At the end of the meeting, someone said, "I bet a lot of other people are wrestling with these same questions; we should write this all down to share with others."

If you're reading this book, you know there is a game-changing shift happening, and you are grappling with the very same questions we were. You know you should do something . . . now. We based this book on our own experiences confronting the wave of social media in the workplace and wondering how to make sense of it all.

The Changing Landscape

The term *social media* typically refers to the many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools that enable anyone to publish and access information, collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships. This may sound like the "same old thing," but it's the advance in technology and the changing behavioral norms that have brought a whole new meaning to these activities, supercharging the volume of exchanges among people and extending their reach to every corner of the globe.

When we chose the definition of social media that best describes the focus of this book, we gravitated to the most simple and profound one, given to us by Richard Dennison, senior manager of social media at British Telecom: "Social media is about *participation*." That participation can take the form of simply viewing relevant information that was previously hidden from view. But most often it takes the form of communicating, collaborating, and connecting with anyone, anywhere, anytime.

It's about the *interactions* between people—individuals and groups—and the great potential to share more, learn more, and accomplish more than our grandparents could ever dream possible. Unlike traditional forms of media, which have limited pages or time on the airwaves, social media is "infinite" in its potential.

Social media is represented in various forms and functions: discussion forums, blogs, wikis, and podcasts, and may include the use of videos and pictures. Each of these tools uses a special kind of *social technology* (a communication platform that makes connections possible) called *Web 2.0*. Web 2.0 is the phase of the Internet that enables anyone to create information online. You're likely to have already used some of the popular tools, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, for social networking, Flickr and Snapfish for sharing photos, Wikipedia and Wikispaces for collaborating to share knowledge, and Blogger.com or Wordpress for sharing ideas through blogs. These are just some of the social media gaining momentum through viral marketing at the time of this writing.

The social media wildfire rages on, fed by the high winds of at least three converging forces: the nature of the business environment, changing workforce demographics, and rapid advancements in software technology that enable social connection. Although we will be exploring these forces in more detail in Chapter Two, let's take a quick look at them now.

The Changing Business Environment

The constant flow of information made possible by the Internet has created a more complex business environment—more information, more technology, more possibilities for partnering, more unforseen challenges. In addition, many organizations operate in multiple countries, and employees have become accustomed to working with colleagues across the globe. Because information is available to anyone, the ability to use it in new ways has become a hallmark of the current business landscape. We have moved

from the industrial era well into the information age. Employees who are able to synthesize new information, advance research, and create new innovations are highly valued. E-commerce has changed the way we purchase goods. Trade and consumption are shifting as well. The "long tail" theory, first described by Chris Anderson in a 2004 *Wired* magazine article, shows how marketing and production strategies are changing; that is, companies are counting on selling a smaller volume of unique items to a wider variety of consumers over a long period of time. This theory has been applied to alternative workforces as well. For example, the work that used to be performed by employees or outsourced to contractors may now be given to an undefined larger community that will contribute via the Internet, leveraging the concept of mass collaboration.[2] This is one of the many ways businesses are rethinking how they use their human resources. Traditional ideas of the "typical" career life cycle are becoming obsolete.

Changing Demographics

As the world turns, our global population distribution is shifting. With each successive generation, people are becoming increasingly comfortable working with Internet tools, which dramatically change the nature of work, whether the user is in a nonprofit organization or a commercial business, whether he is a line employee or a senior executive. Gen Yers, or Millennials, are generally extremely comfortable with communicating, connecting, and collaborating via social media. In fact, they demand that their companies provide this capability. The Obama campaign understood this opportunity to reach the younger voters where they "lived" through social media. Many Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, and even Gen Xers are still unfamiliar with this way of working and living. We will discuss how leaders struggling to use social media tools to recruit, retain, and develop their workforces need to remember that one size does not fit all.

Software That Enables Social Connection

Traditional media—newspapers, television, and radio—have been effective means of communications. But with the advent of newer technologies, other forms of communication are proliferating at great speed. The Internet has forever changed the way we communicate. Newspapers have gone online, television news programs are now available on the Web, prime-time shows are available for replay on network Web sites, and radio programs are now available to download and play on mobile devices. Of course, the Internet has also given rise to social media aimed at enabling relationships and collaboration. The speed of this proliferation is rather remarkable.

Various reports show that year over year, the use of global social media tools has increased fourfold and greater. Various types of social media are everywhere. We can't escape them. A revolution is under way. Organizations may choose to ignore this phenomenon at their peril—or they can actively choose to incorporate social media into their regular operations. Doing so may be uncomfortable for many leaders who fear that communicating through social media can take on a life of its own. They may not recognize the value of employees' engaging in a constant exchange of ideas. However, we believe that these cautious leaders will soon see that employee use of social media will prove more advantageous to the organization by harnessing information that can be transformed into knowledge and innovation.

Short-Term and Long-Term Benefits

All organizations want to meet their annual goals, but they also want to maintain their success long into the future. To do both, they must focus on key business levers for short-term performance (such as cost and operational efficiency) as well as longer-term capability (such as talent management and employee engagement).

Speed and innovation continue to be competitive advantages in every field. Social media can enable organizations to bring innovations to light and fruition much faster. In an interconnected and distributed world, there are more "sensors" to monitor activities and opinions. Experts across the globe can track progress in a 24/7 environment, enabling diverse constituents to perform as one unified team across time and space. Furthermore, the information can also be used to capture real-time feedback on a product, service, or strategy, enabling adjustments to be made in a quick-fire fashion.

An organization can foster innovation by bringing ideas to the surface throughout its departments and functions. Previously, employees who were not close to a project may not have been aware that they could contribute to the effort. Social media tools such as forums, social networking profiles, and wikis enable these individuals to offer their ideas and experiences when the project team signals the need for assistance. Groups with like interests can quickly emerge and then disband when no longer needed. And collaboration can include groups who were previously left out. The use of various social media can help companies include external partners and customers in creating new business opportunities.

Many organizations are already taking advantage of social media to boost short-term performance. Throughout the book and especially in Chapters Four and Five, we'll share examples of how Cisco, BT, Humana, Intel, and other companies are using social media strategies that enable employees (and even company alumni and retirees) to communicate more effectively, access needed information faster, and collaborate with a wider network across the globe. But perhaps less visible are the ways social media helps build an organization's long-term capability, an attribute that relies heavily on attracting and keeping the best employees. In the quest for securing the interest of stellar job candidates, some organizations are using social media for employee recruitment, promoting the company's values, strategies, and

challenges to a targeted audience. With the continuing increase of mergers and acquisitions across the globe, social media can also play a key role in speeding up the integration and adoption of corporate cultures and values, and serve as a bridge that spans cultures, fostering acknowledgment and understanding of diverse populations, beliefs, practices, products, and services.

Indeed, social media is helping transform the entire domain of human relationships. Employees can reside anywhere as they initiate projects, form teams, and produce outcomes. Given this new world of work in the twenty-first century, organizations can increase the value of their knowledge and improve their chance of thriving for years to come by deciding to support, design, and cocreate formal social media strategies.

Achieving Adoption in Your Organization

Although the business benefits of social media are significant, many organizational leaders and corporate executives are ill prepared to harness it strategically. Our aim in this book is not only to introduce the richness and variety of social media but also to offer insights and advice derived from the experiences of many organizations. When haphazardly implemented, change can inhibit productivity and employee commitment. So we will likewise offer suggestions about how to accelerate time-to-value and avoid unnecessary delay in establishing programs enabled by social media.

At its core, use of social media depends on human nature and taps into both the energies and frailties of human emotions. A disruption in the status quo is threatening for most, particularly if the processes, tools, and relationships involved will change. Just as when crossing into any new frontier, implementing and adopting social media are rife with unforeseen challenges, but the risks are counterbalanced by the promise of success. In Chapter Six we offer a recommended approach and useful tips for successfully gaining adoption. Even without a thoughtful and

purposeful approach to implementation, most organizations will still experience some value from social media. Many employees already communicate, collaborate, and connect in their personal lives, and those relationships are benefiting the organization, as employees are more equipped to share their knowledge and resource networks. With just a little more thought and insight, you can multiply the benefits many times over.

Of course, every organization is different, and the potential application of diverse social media can vary greatly. But the playbook we present in Chapter Six offers a basic framework for creating social networks that can help organizations capture the greatest advantages of real-time collaboration. Processes can be redesigned or reconfigured more quickly, and organizations can reap the rewards.

Join the Conversation

If you are still asking yourself why you or your organization need to pay attention to social media, consider the following: in a world of viral communications and relentless change and evolution (or perhaps revolution!), it is more imperative than ever before to furnish employees and teams with the tools to connect, create new connections, and stay connected. The ability to share information more quickly can lead to better decisions and more commitment from those people who contribute to the discussions or who simply read and stay abreast of the issues presented. Employees, as well as customers and clients, quickly become experts on products and services. Through the formation of affinity groups, your customers, peers, clients, suppliers, and employees can become your strongest allies, especially when they are part of the cocreation of your products and services. Social media can help you form a close connection with a broader pool of

ideas. Every executive will need to incorporate social media into his or her organization's daily operation. To work in the new millennium otherwise is like "stopping the clock to save time." It just won't be possible. As we'll discuss further in the book, capitalizing on social media can also help in the process of creating sustainable competitive advantage.

Establishing a successful organizational social media strategy is challenging, but leaders who don't attempt it will be left behind as others try, learn, and try again. We are convinced that the courageous will inevitably be rewarded with greater organizational health, improved business performance, and long-term sustainability.

We hope this book will provide a basic overview of social media to help in understanding the most prevalent tools available. But we've found that it is one thing to understand the various forms of social media at an intellectual level and quite another to figure out how they fit into the structure of daily professional interactions. To ease the confusion, we provide a simple road map for how to grasp, integrate, and leverage the many uses of social media in organizations and communities of practice. Most important, we include examples of those who may be a few steps ahead of the curve in implementing and learning how to take advantage of social media in their organizations.

The leaders we've interviewed openly shared their experiences of how they are implementing social media at work. These forward-thinking leaders and organizations are blazing the trail right along with you. They want you to join the conversation as well, to expand everyone's wisdom. At the end of each chapter, you will see opportunities to share your questions and ideas on our social networking site.

Whether you are a manager struggling to tap the collective knowledge of your virtual team members or an executive

attempting to foster greater collaboration in your business decisions, we hope that the stories and examples we've included will resonate with you. If you're an organization development practitioner diagnosing culture or a human resources leader working on succession planning or growing the leadership pipeline, we are confident that social media can help. It has certainly helped us. Virtually any leader can find ways to improve performance or cohesion among team members through social media. The Obama campaign did. We anticipate that you will too.