

# The Upside to Social Networking

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## Social media can help people better themselves and their workplaces if leaders use technology to promote behavioral change rather than enable work distractions.

**M**any executives see the barrage of instant messages, Facebook notifications and tweets that penetrate their company walls every day as a massive drag on productivity, and with good reason: Studies show that companies that allow access to social networking sites lose productivity as a result. According to a 2009 study by Nucleus Research, some employees spend as much as two hours a day goofing around with friends rather than getting things done.

To illustrate, consider the following scenario. Ben, a sales associate, struggles to stay on task and his performance is suffering. “Smiling and dialing” is drudgery to him. At any point in time, at least five much more interesting distractions beckon. Friends are no more than an instant message, tweet, text, e-mail or social network away.

### Beat 'Em or Join 'Em

Companies that fail to proactively harness the power of social media in an intentional way will fall prey to its primary influence as a work distraction. Proactive leaders recognize that social media can be harnessed to reinforce values and behavioral change and support important corporate initiatives.

For example, a 2008 study on the role of sociability in developing online health communities for diabetics showed how social networking was used to help them develop better disease management habits. Along the same line, Express Scripts, a pharmacy benefit management company, helps patients remember to take their prescribed medications with Glowcaps, medication bottles that trigger an e-mail to family members when someone fails to take the proper dosage of a prescription.

Other companies, such as Salesforce.com, are leveraging the power of social media to increase corporate productivity. The company introduced Chatter, a real-time sales feature that allows sales teams to track

their activities easily, thus dramatically increasing best practice sharing.

Emerging research from corporate training and performance organization VitalSmarts suggests employees can overcome chronic performance problems when good social science is translated into useful technology. However, not all organizations hopped on the bandwagon during the meteoric rise of social media adoption. VitalSmarts was one such company until a pivotal conversation in the spring of 2005 challenged the organization to think differently.

### The China Syndrome

The vision for social media use in the workplace was born during a lunch conversation VitalSmarts' researchers had with renowned psychologist Albert Bandura. Over sandwiches at Stanford University's student center, Bandura, the originator of social learning theory, lamented a looming health and social crisis caused by extremely high smoking rates in China. “With a problem that large, the only way to influence change will be through technology,” he said. “We must find a way to use the Internet and social media tools to help people succeed at self-directed change.”

Bandura's insight into China's smoking problem triggered a realization in the researchers: The corporate world struggles with an equally pervasive issue. In 2010, VitalSmarts conducted the “Lake Wobegon at Work” study, which found that 73 percent of employees have been in circumstances where they knew they needed to change to keep their job or to get ahead yet struggled to successfully change their own habits.

The statistic suggests that learning executives face their own China syndrome. They strive to ensure employees receive regular coaching and feedback from bosses and colleagues, spending a fortune on learning and development to teach leaders how to perform these tasks effectively. But evidence suggests that while some

excel at demanding that performance appraisals and such be carried out with precision, and ensuring that employees receive mandatory training, only a small percentage of those requested to change actually do so.

In the months following that conversation with Bandura, VitalSmarts began sketching the outline of what would become ChangeAnything.com — an effort to use a Web 2.0 tool to enable individuals to turn good intentions into lasting habits — and its potential application for executives from a variety of industries. With every conversation, VitalSmarts

• **Customers:** The CEO of a financial services company said that while a great market existed for financial products aimed at middle-income customers, those in the middle-income ranks rarely bought those products because they couldn't get themselves to save as much as they should toward retirement.

• **Accountability:** A health care executive said that when revenues dropped and they needed to make a quick budget adjustment, middle managers dragged their feet, putting the organization in greater economic peril. He said he wanted to find a way

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found a new China syndrome, or issue of strategic urgency that could not be addressed if individuals could not change their own behavior with greater proficiency.

The researchers began their study by asking each leader, "What is one significant problem you face because people can't change?" Every leader uncovered a new challenge:

- **Best practice compliance:** A sales executive from a large clinical laboratory services company watched her organization's revenues lag behind her competitors because the new sales methodology she advocated wasn't taking hold. Sales associates understood the new concept but weren't using it. Further, since her sales force was scattered all over the world, her ability to influence them was limited.
- **Leadership development:** An IT executive from a global consumer packaged goods manufacturer made a huge investment in quarterly weeklong workshops to develop the next generation of IT leaders from all over the world. He worried about the huge drop-off in application that would inevitably occur from one session to the next as participants returned to their jobs.
- **Health costs:** A health insurance company wanted to reduce health care expenses within its own ranks as well as with its corporate clients who were feeling crushed by skyrocketing expenses. A company executive said the only long-term way to reduce health care expenditures was for employees to change their habits — primarily by eating better, exercising more and quitting smoking. Few succeeded in doing so.

to improve performance by increasing leadership accountability on time-sensitive tasks.

Leaders and individuals need assistance influencing mission-critical change to be carried out at the individual level. VitalSmarts' researchers decided to fulfill Bandura's mandate by turning sound social science into applied technology in order to avert other China syndromes.

### 'Ben' There, Doing That

Consider how Ben the sales associate might have saved his job by using the same technology that contributed to his former delinquency. If Ben were a real employee, his midyear review would have resulted in him being placed on progressive discipline. He would have 90 days to turn things around or he'd be on the street. At the conclusion of his review, Ben's boss could set up an account for him at ChangeAnything.com or an equivalent help source. Within 15 minutes of returning to his desk, he could have created a change plan that included the following:

- A template for change based on the tactics of the most productive salespeople in his company.
- The option of selecting a peer coach from outside the company who would automatically receive e-mails or text messages charting Ben's daily progress and providing advice as needed.
- Regular automated updates on his efforts sent to his boss.
- Cues and reminders texted to him during the time of day when he was most inclined to get off track.

- Social comparison information to let him know how he fared compared to peers.
- The option to export key data to Facebook or other social networks to help him stay on track.
- A prediction meter to monitor the strength of Ben's plan and efforts and give him early indication of the likelihood of his future success or failure.
- A handful of rich-media resources he could use to build needed skills.

In the ideal scenario, after 60 days Ben's performance would improve markedly. He would maintain the frequency of coaching and feedback as he discovered support was vital to keep his attention on new habits while they took root. Perhaps most importantly, Ben would recognize that the same set of tools that tempted him to waste time online was now engaging him in a process to secure his job and contribute better to his organization.

Social scientists have demonstrated for years that Web tools can be shaped into influence tools to support self-directed change. For example, automated e-mails help people stay on track with dieting, exercise and other health maintenance habits. Political movements can be dramatically enabled through tools such as Facebook and Twitter. For instance, flash mobs organized with social networking tools in Iran sent powerful messages of discontent from voters suspicious of rigged elections in 2009.

Yet, while evidence of the influence potential of such technology has grown, corporate leaders have been slow to adopt it for anything more than customer communication and marketing. Any attempt to facilitate change by using social media could spark interest and research in this fertile opportunity — and, by so doing, enable individuals to achieve personally and professionally meaningful goals far more effectively than they currently do.

Here is a sampling of how Web 2.0 technology can help leaders apply social science to promote positive behavioral change.

- **Accountability:** Leaders can track compliance on change challenges across large dispersed populations. For example, participants in a high-potential leadership development program can be organized into a social group where all can see who has or has not completed application commitments. Each time a group member completes a task others can be notified — creating a sense of positive challenge.
- **Best practices:** Leaders and peers can create best-practice change plans that increase the chance of success for others with similar goals. For example, a network marketing company might discover how distributors who make dramatic increases in sales success use a site like ChangeAnything.com to achieve their increases. Those best practices can

be translated into a plan that any new member of the site can immediately employ and improve upon. The plan gets smarter with every successful distributor, thus creating a virtuous learning cycle for successive participants.

- **Influence research:** A robust reporting system allows leaders to see what works and what doesn't to influence change across a large enterprise. For example, a health care company trying to reduce hospital-acquired infections by increasing hand hygiene compliance can use online behavior change assessments. Reports let them see what has worked where and what hasn't, allowing rapid-cycle learning on their influence strategy.
- **Multiple sources of influence:** Through the use of change plans on social network sites, employees can use texts, e-mails, videos, photos, blogs, forums, group comparisons, success prediction formulas, incentives and sanctions, competitions, games and reward systems to aid them in reaching their behavior change goals.
- **Personal and professional:** The more users see technology as personally and professionally meaningful, the more likely they are to employ it effectively. Thus, social media platforms can be as helpful for individuals trying to quit smoking or lose weight as they are for professionals trying to increase sales or advance in their careers.

### Early Wins

While it is too early to report results from the organizational applications of ChangeAnything.com, the developers have been encouraged by individual success cases from early adopters. For example, users have broken through long-standing barriers to achieve important life changes, such as shedding significant weight or giving up smoking. Others are using tools to do disparate things such as repairing bad behavior in a toxic relationship or overcoming the urge to check text messages while driving.

In a social media world where the friend-poking, wall-posting, photo-tagging value proposition seems to be little more than anti-boredom, people around the world are looking for more meaningful benefits. Research shows social media can be used to help people better themselves, their workplaces, their families, their communities and even their nations. Wise leaders are discovering this technology can be changed from a negative distraction into a powerful form of positive influence. [CLO](#)

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