

PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATORS ON THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS WHEN PERFORMING THEIR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Technology has evolved almost to the point of being commodity-like in nature. Generally, companies invest more in information technology infrastructure than in any other aspect. Social network technology within organisations supports innovation, which stimulates collaboration and improves organisational performance. Increases in the utilisation of a social network provide a competitive edge in the knowledge arena and thus improve the operational functions within the organisation. Technology transforms the way people share information and the ability to network with one another within and outside organisations. This is one reason why many companies trust in technology for success. This paper explores the perceptions of government administrators on the use of social networks when performing their roles and responsibilities. The study was conducted in five national

government departments and the focus was to understand the benefits of social network technology in the performance of administrative roles and responsibilities. A qualitative research method was employed, within which data was gathered from managers and administrative employees, using open-ended questionnaires, interviews and online questionnaires. It was found that the utility and benefits of social networks were perceived and understood differently by respondents, depending on individual interest. This study has established that the use of social networks can play a vital role in the government sector. However, sound regulatory policies governing the use of technology should be in place as they are crucial when formulating standardised policies. Advanced training is required, specifically on professional correspondence, for social networks to be effectively used.

Keywords: administrators, communication, knowledge sharing, productivity, roles of administrators, technology, social networks

1. INTRODUCTION

Social networks fulfil the need of individuals or businesses to communicate and share knowledge from new perspectives, thus building communication ties within organisations (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008:13). They maintain professional networks that are crucial for business (Dewett & Jones, 2001:314). ‘Social network’ refers to an online platform which is aimed at building social and professional relationships among people who share a common interest (Ferreira & du Plessis, 2009:1). The emergence of social networks has forced organisations to change the way they do business. The main aim of applications, such as social networks, in the business world of today, is to promote engagement and interaction (Okoro, 2012:219). Government administrators could benefit greatly from social networks if used properly. However, these platforms work effectively and efficiently when paired with certain factors, such as processes and procedures. Administration is the first level function in an organisation. Employees in this class manage, coordinate and supervise a group of subordinates who

provide administrative support functions to an organisation (Win & Belmonte, 2000:139). Administration entails a variety of responsibilities, such as assistance with the determination of budgeted expenditures and revenues, and making recommendations with regard to space and equipment requirements. Administrative employees have the ability to design and develop work methods and procedures, and to modify existing procedures to accommodate an ever-changing environment (Win & Belmonte, 2000:139). These can be achieved by integrating business processes with technology platforms such as a social network. The study was intended to explore the perceptions of government administrators on the use of social networks *when performing* their roles and responsibilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Administrative functions

The operational functions of administrators vary from one to another. The most common functions include supervising, controlling, organising, planning and carrying out the processes (Dong, 2005:04). Administrators are experts in planning and implementing the long and short-term goals of their organisations. They also apply processes and replace unnecessary tasks with ones that produce the desired results (Conway, 2012:37). They are capable of turning policies into practice and identifying the necessary resources to implement processes.

In South Africa, most administrators in national government departments use comparable methods and procedures to perform their daily operational functions, and their roles are quite similar. Administrators are liable for improving the quality and success of the organisation. They should be able to access the websites to get information and research as well as to obtain quality information as per organisational specifications. Administrators' major responsibility is to further explore their information technology competency. Government departments depend upon the quality of

workmanship and the commitment of administrative workers. They can, therefore, expect a more efficient service in return.

2.2 The role of a social network

Organisations around the world are facing administrative challenges. However, since the birth of technology, administrators are able to solve coordination problems among departments and units. Social networks increase online interdependencies and make critical information more accessible and transparent to employees, while increasing the frequency of problem-solving (Win & Belmonte, 2000:139). This is a tool that enhances the distribution of information and service as part of serving the citizens of a country (Bennett, Owers, Pitt & Tucker, 2010:138).

Within the government sector, social networks integrate into the social structure to transform administrative procedures to achieve more effective communication (Al-Nuaim, 2012:01). The success and the continuity of the organisation depend on technology, and it is also up to the staff to protect social technology to ensure that the company's reputation is not ruined (Karabacak & Sogukpinar, 2005:147). Social networks within organisations support innovation, stimulate collaboration, improve organisational performance (Tapscott, 1996; Christensen & Maskell, 2003) and encourage sharing among employees. Sharing boosts an employee's self-respect and confidence. However, this technological innovation should be driven with careful consideration to run effectively and efficiently.

2.3 Knowledge-sharing

Knowledge-sharing supports the movement of ideas and practices between clusters of personnel (Cabrera, Collins & Salgado, 2006:245). The process of information-sharing manifests itself in knowledge creation, but for this to occur, collaborative action is required to accomplish a particular task during a given period (Cabrera et al., 2006:246). Knowledge and information-sharing are vital aspects within a working environment (Cabrera et al., 2006:250). Through information-sharing and the stimulation of learning,

service quality can be improved. Where people in an organisation share information openly and willingly, it manifests itself in an information-sharing culture (Mkhomazi & Iyamu, 2013:605).

2.4 Communication

One of the benefits of technology is to enable individuals to communicate (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008:13; Guseh, Brendel & Brendel, 2009:586). The introduction of new technologies in an organisation enables effective communication among colleagues (Dimicco, Millen, Geyer, Dugan, Brownholtz & Muller, 2008:711). The use of technology in an organisation supports communication practices (Bennett et al., 2010:745) by linking external and internal stakeholders (Zoe & Ogba, 2009:14), and encouraging engagement between employees. Such interactions can create commitment and build social ties among stakeholders (Leslie, 2005:181). In addition, Trianni and Dorigo (2006:213) assert that communication plays an important role in the accomplishment of administrative functions. It improves performance, creates collaboration, builds team spirit, and improves and strengthens relationships (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008:13).

Technology fulfils the needs of individuals or businesses to communicate and to share knowledge from new perspectives and builds communication ties within organisations (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008:15). The study of Cho, Gay, Davidson and Ingraffea (2007:309) determined that technology built excellent management and communication styles and, furthermore, improved learning performances. These platforms have the potential to convert the workplace into an environment where learning becomes natural and powerful. For this reason, the adoption of a social network by government departments to incorporate newly advanced technology in the performance of their administrative functions, will improve the performance of their administrators and increase productivity (Bennett et al., 2010:139).

2.5 Types of social networks

Social networks are vast and can have different effects on team productivity. The types of social networks mentioned are acceptable and specifically adopted for optimum security.

2.5.1 YouTube

YouTube is a video sharing website. It hosts a large number of "how-to" videos that define how the video holders resolve specific problems and dilemmas (Li, Ming, Li & Chua, 2009:773). Cheng, Dale and Liu (2008:229) further describe YouTube as a popular video sharing site within an online environment. It supports project development (Lange, 2007:361), and classroom teaching, and is suitable for conducting interviews and training sessions. The platform promotes "inter-generational" communication. Academics use this video-sharing type of technology to facilitate learning frameworks by making use of images (Duffy, 2007:173). This type of social network is also used by politicians when on an election trail (Gueorguieva, 2008:288). It could also be adopted by government administrators to share the training sessions of some of the programmes that struggle to perform effectively.

2.5.2 LinkedIn

LinkedIn is one of the leading social networking sites in the world. LinkedIn promises to make professionals "more productive and successful" by providing "access to people, jobs, news, updates, and ideas that aid you to be great at what you do" (Utz, 2016:2685). Utz (2016) further mentions that this platform is specifically designed for business. The goal of this platform is to allow registered members to establish and document networks of people they know and trust professionally. Professionals using the platform share and receive fresh, original information faster and more timeously. This is one social network among the others that was recommended by professionals, including government administrators, to grow their careers in the right direction.

2.5.3 Skype for business

LinkedIn and Skype are similar to each other. Skype is a voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) software application. This software is used for voice, video and instant messaging communications. Skype software allows users to make calls, video calls or engage in chat over the Internet. Skype for Business allows users to connect with their co-workers or business partners in a company or around the world. This was also found to be very useful by students at university level who were able to share their skills and ideas through Skype (Gloor, Paasivaara, Schoder & Willems, 2008:01).

2.6 Security policy

Security policy defines what ‘security’ means in the context of a system. This field is strictly regulated by the South African Government through the Electronic Communications Act 36 of 2005 (ECT) and the State Information Technology Agency Act 38 of 2002. Security policy plays a significant role in the Information Communication Technology environment, in that it protects digital transfer. Furthermore, security policy protects organisations against system misuses which could also ruin the reputation of an organisation (Rabina & Johnston, 2010:181). Employees or administrators are required to provide their authentication credentials beforehand for security reasons.

2.7 Disadvantages of using social networks

Although social networks have many benefits in the business world, they also have disadvantages. These are discussed next.

2.7.1 Unmonitored or unrestricted sites

Unmonitored or unrestricted sites decrease productivity. Employees will spend time on the Internet rather than on their work and this will result in reduced productivity and a waste of company resources (Ferreira & du Plessis, 2009:4). A few Acts contain legislation and strategies that formulate the information society (Hernon & Relyea, 2003:1300). The Electronic Information Policy Act 25 of 2002, for example, governs the collection, storage and dissemination of official information within specific jurisdictions (Hernon & Relyea, 2003:1300).

2.7.2 Quality of information

Social networks affect the flow and quality of information, as well as written communication. Much of the information on social networks is subtle, nuanced and difficult to verify (Granovetter, 2005:33). Social network communication tools have made a temporary impact on the way individuals write, particularly with regard to the use of abbreviations to save time and space (Granovetter, 2005:35). The writing changes in various ways; for example, it is more concise because of the use of spelling conventions and abbreviations, while there is considerable use of slang (Granovetter, 2005:36). Poor information quality can convey a negative impression of the organisation.

2.7.3 Company reputation

Reputation refers to the degree of respect a company enjoys compared to other companies (Stobbe, 2009:57). He goes on to say that reputation has to do with the manner in which a company resolves issues to maintain its unique identity. Social networks can easily ruin a company's long-standing reputation. This can happen when offensive images are posted on the company profile, or inappropriate comments are made about the key personnel or the company's products (Crane & Pearson, 2011:457). Companies are encouraged to educate and train employees on the type of information that should and should not be shared on social networks.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, an empirical research method was applied. Empirical research is generally applied to answer research questions, to guide the conduct of the investigation, and to provide standardised ways of applying instrumental techniques (Yin, 2011:5). In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to understand the perceptions of government administrators of the use of social networks to perform their daily operational functions. Qualitative research provides an understanding of what really takes place in an organisation (Silverman, 2010:4).

Each research project is unique in its own way, hence, the need for a suitable research design. A research design is a logical plan that guides the investigator during a research project (Yin, 2011:5). It is necessary to link data (Kumar, 2011:94). Case study research is defined as a means of widening the explanation of poorly understood cases and is a good process to use when examining programmes, events, individuals or organisations (Woodside, 2010:1). It provides various methods of data collection. In this study, a case study research design was adopted. The main aim was to provide a greater understanding of what social networks actually comprise.

In a qualitative study, data has been classified as a product of interaction between the participants and the researcher (Yin, 2011:129). It serves as the foundation for a research study (Yin, 2011:129). Data was collected in this study by means of interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and an online closed-ended questionnaire. The interview approach was used to solicit data from managers. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to administrative employees. Five South African Government departments were selected for the study. Managers and administrative staff were selected by means of judgemental sampling. This type of sampling is based entirely on the judgment of the researcher, with the sample composed of elements that contain the most representative characteristics (Bless, Higson-Smith &

Kagee, 2006). Qualitative data was analysed using a content approach. In addition, quantitative data was populated on an MS Excel spreadsheet for analysis using graphs to present the results.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Government administrators are employed to provide a service delivery function to the citizens of a country. One of their roles may be to communicate daily with citizens. Some departments make use of technology to distribute information quicker. Technology can thus be a useful tool to improve communication more efficiently and effectively between administrators and management. Some of the managers confirmed this: *By using social networks as our communication tool we are able to reach people faster and more widely.*

Communication is the most critical factor in government institutions. It is the core function of social networks and some employees have indicated that the use of social networks will not only improve communication practices, but also the services rendered to different stakeholders and the country's citizens at large. Some administrators mentioned that access to social networks will improve access to information and help the communication department to effectively communicate the government's programme of action. They further indicated that *Social networks create an environment of information-sharing and people are empowered through information-sharing.*

Government departments perceive the usefulness of social networks differently. Not only would the use of social networks benefit administrators, but the South African Government departments themselves. All departments could post information such as the annual and financial reports on a social network. One respondent commented, *I have little knowledge on social networks, particularly their benefit to my working environment. However, if we can be given an opportunity to learn how it works, I have a belief that it will change the ancient ways of doing things, in particular, the huge volume of paperwork we are handling on a daily basis.*

The times allocated were not adequate for employees to meet their deadlines and to work effectively. Participants visited the social sites at different times, according to the nature and the demand of their jobs. Some of the administrators had daily access to social networks, while others only had access twice a week depending on their job functions. Figure 1 indicates the frequency of which the administrator visited social network sites.

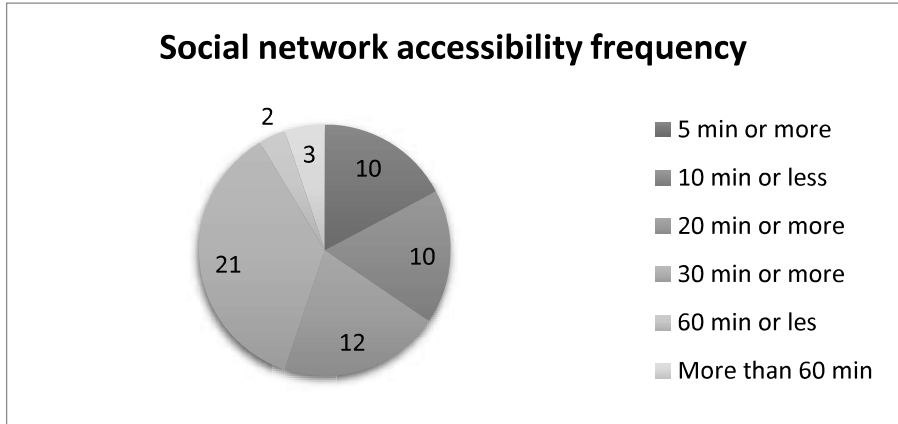


Figure 1: Social network accessibility frequency

Another factor that contributed to insufficient time being allocated to accessing social networks was the perception that the use of social networks had a negative impact on employee productivity. There are others who were not interested in this technology due to the fact that employees were perceived to be spending most of their time on social networks attending to personal matters rather than work-related items. As a result, they believe that social networks totally destroy the productivity of employees, and are costly to the department. Here are some opinions: *I don't understand how the government could waste money on implementing social networks in the workplace. I am not interested in using social networks in the workplace and I don't even have a personal account.*

I don't see how social networks can benefit me with my work because social networks themselves are a distraction to employees and a waste of money to the government.

Based on this perception, some government departments allowed only limited access to its employees. One administrator said:

Some employees spend most their time surfing the Internet and communicating on social sites for personal reasons during working hours. This has a negative impact on productivity.

Not all employees agree that social networks negatively affect employee productivity. Some managers had a different view in this regard. They perceived that sufficient access to social networks can create a productive and efficient working environment. Management can encourage employees to use social networks to empower themselves and produce the best workplace results.

Another issue reported was that employees were not following correct protocols when communicating with the public, as mentioned by one of the managers: *Currently there is a challenge on uniformity when communicating on social sites.*

With regard to the use of social networks for administrative functions, departments used social networks for a variety of reasons. Although not all administrative duties and responsibilities can be carried out using social networks, the study focused only on those duties that are possible to perform using this technology. Most administrators used social networks for training, and information-sharing and knowledge transfer, such as publishing general information. See Figure 2.

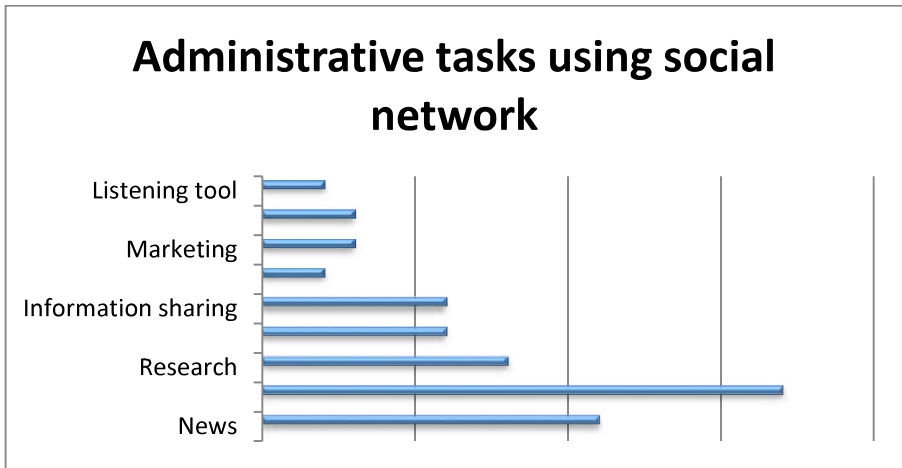


Figure 2: Administrative uses of social networks

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 General perceptions of government administrators on using social networks

There was a perception that sufficient access to social networks can create a productive and efficient working environment for all government employees. However, there were a few issues that required resolution by the government department prior to social networks working effectively. Firstly, training in professional writing is needed, so that the institution's reputation will not be ruined. The second major concern involved the limited time allocated, which was not sufficient enough for administrators to perform their daily operational functions. Sharing information and constant global communication will manifest itself in knowledge-sharing and effective service delivery. Figure 3 indicates the findings regarding the general perception of utilising social networks for their operational functions.

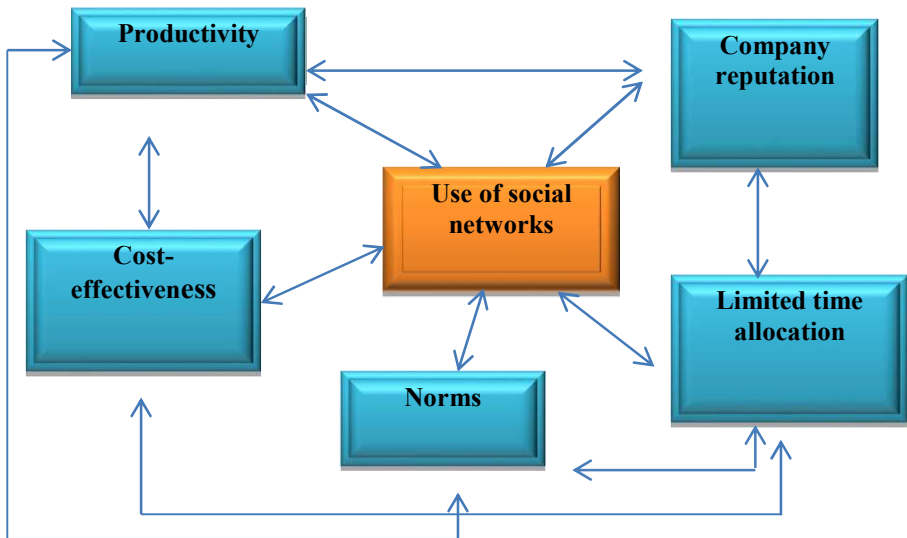


Figure 3: The general perception of administrators

5.1.1 Productivity

One of the major concerns that was raised was productivity. Employees were perceived to spend time on the Internet rather than on their work and this was anticipated to result in reduced productivity and a waste of company resources. *Some employees spend most their time surfing the Internet and communicating on social sites for personal reasons during working hours. This has a negative impact on productivity.*

Unproductive employees can cost the organisation money. The misuse of organisational resources has a negative impact on the return on investment. In some cases, employees used social network platforms as search engines for jobs, as one manager noted: *You cannot guarantee that employees are using social networks for work-related purposes. Sometimes when I walk around, I can see some people on Gumtree searching for jobs.*

5.1.2 Company reputation

The second issue that was raised was that social networks affect the flow and quality of information, as well as communication in writing. Most of the information on social networks was reported to be subtle, nuanced and difficult to verify. Hence this was mentioned by one manager: *There is no uniformity of writing, especially when employees were communicating with citizens.* Employees tended to use abbreviations to save time and space, and to use different spelling conventions and slang, which led to confusion and poor information quality, conveying a negative image of the organisation. Furthermore, offensive images can be posted on the company profile, or offensive comments made about the employers if the employees are given unlimited access to social network sites.

5.1.3 Limited time allocation

The limited time allocated for administrators to access social networks constrains those who are, in fact, interested in exploring the benefits of such technologies in the interest of improving job efficiency. However, it could negatively impact on the lack of interest shown by conservative employees who could benefit from such technological services. One participant noted: *The majority of us have access to social networks on a daily basis with 60-minutes maximum per day. After that, the systems automatically lock you out which leaves insufficient time to perform our roles and responsibilities.*

5.1.4 Cost-effectiveness

The concept of cost-effectiveness applies to the planning and management functions of an organisation. Social networks were perceived to be costly to the government due to tight budget constraints. Some administrators mentioned the topic of cost-effectiveness: *I don't understand how the government could waste money on implementing social networks in the workplace. I am not interested in using social networks in the workplace and I don't even have a personal account.* It was for this reason that management

allocated specific timeframes for employees to visit social network sites daily.

5.1.5 Norms

The purpose of these norms and standards is to provide a set of criteria against which the quality of social networks services can be measured. Without proper norms and standards in place to restrict employees on the use of social networks, employees could misuse social technology for personal gain. It is therefore critical for the organisation always to implement proper norms and procedures on the use of technology, especially on the use of social networks.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants in this study were clearly of the perception that social networks enhance productivity and encourage knowledge-sharing. Assessing their attitudes, it became apparent that they understood the value of social networks. The utility and benefits of social networks were perceived and understood differently depending on individual interest, and were influenced by a lack of knowledge and training about how these technologies can benefit departments. Some administrators and managers perceived the use of social networks as a negative contribution to employee productivity. The data analysis indicated that employees seemed to spend most of their time on social networks for personal use rather than the tasks or jobs they were assigned to execute. On the other hand, the benefits of social networks tend to be enjoyed by administrators and managers who have unlimited access in their respective departments.

Although participants had diverse perceptions, the majority complimented social networks as a great tool for effective communication in the organisation. It can be concluded that social networks have the ability to positively affect the productivity of administrators. However, control of employees on how this technology should be used, is essential.

Though technological services such as social networks can enhance the way tasks are carried out, not all administrative tasks can be performed using such platforms. However, those tasks that can be carried out by using social networks will enhance the efficacy of administrators in their respective environments. Sound regulatory policies governing the use of technology should be in place as it is crucial to formulating standardised policies.

6.1 Recommendations

Innovative technologies such as social networks have been revealed to play a significant role in how effectively government administrators execute their roles and responsibilities.

Prior to this research study, a number of participants were not aware of the extent and implications of utilising technologies such as social networks in their environments. Therefore, this research has created an awareness among both administrators and managers concerning the benefits of using social networks, and recommends the need for policy implementation, as well as the importance of monitoring the usefulness of these technologies in their departments.

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