Opinion – Human Resources

Policing social media isn't a smart policy

Companies should start identifying how they can leverage social media to engage with their own employees better and address the 'real' problems by doing a root-cause analysis.

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The phenomenon of consumers going public with disenchantments about a product/service of a company is quite common. But, of late, companies are coming face to face with a new reality — that of their employees (internal customers) peppering social media platforms with their dislike and disapproval of their workplaces, and companies seem to be clueless on how to handle this disenchantment which is going digitally public.

Should employees criticising their organisations or employers on social networking sites be seen as a problem or symptom to a bigger problem? Infosys, for instance, is reportedly contemplating a social media policy. This policy, a first of its kind in India, will impose restrictions on its employees' tweets, blogs and other social media messages. The defaulters face warnings, or even termination. But the question is: Will this quell employees' voices on the social media? Incidentally, Infosys' net profits have dipped by 2.4 per cent in the first quarter ended June 30 and the attrition rate has peaked to 15.8 per cent during the June quarter, the highest the firm has seen in the last two years.

Gag the voices?

Again, in the age of ubiquitisation of social media, can such restrictions really make a difference? Should companies try to gag such voices or should they make an attempt at finding out the reasons behind such disenchantment?

About a year back, Kimberley Swann, a 16-year-old was fired from Ivell Marketing & Logistics, a product development and sourcing company, for describing her job as 'boring' on Facebook. Miss Swann working as an office administrator found her job of filing, stapling, shredding hole-punches and scanning paper as wasteful and monotonous and so she let out steam by sharing the same with her friends on Facebook. She was given marching orders from the Ivell premises.

Did such a measures help? Were Miss Swann's comments a problem or was the problem with the job-design? And would Ivell's fortunes change by firing Swann? Confidentiality

Social media policies are often shrouded under the cover of confidentiality. But isn't that already one of the clauses of employment in the first place, for every employee? Then why need for another policy to restrict propagation of confidential information?

Social media networking has just made word-of-mouth electronic and widespread. The 'word', positive or negative, was always there and so will it be in the future.

According to a recent survey by global Internet content security provider Trend Micro, the percentage of employees visiting social networking sites at the workplace globally rose to 24 per cent this year from just 18 per cent in 2008, even as more companies are restricting access to such Web sites.

The same social media, which is becoming a cause of concern for some employers unable to contain the voices of dissention of their employees, could become a strength for them if the word 'spread' changed to positive.

'Unique entity'

Management wizard, the late C.K Prahalad's n=1 strategy of serving customers also works for firm in terms of treating its employees.

It implies treating every employee group as a 'unique entity' and not trying to fit everyone to the same size.

If a video on YouTube has made a local taxi-driver of Varanasi a celebrity, and if an engaging Facebook account has made some popular foreign (Starbucks, Coca-Cola, Skittles) and Indian (Vodafone Zoo Zoos, Fastrack, Tata Docomo) brands garner a huge following, then there must be more to social media than being a negative publicity tool.

So its time that companies started identifying how they can leverage social media to connect and better engage with their own employees. Also, companies must try to address 'real' problems by doing a root-cause analysis, rather than quell dissent on the social media. Additionally, they must also provide for internal communicable platforms that allow for a dialogue between the firm and its employee constituents.

The content generated from such platforms can then be used as a feedback tool to better internal processes. It would bode well for companies to look at social media as an opportunity rather than a threat.

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