

The corporate digital footprint: exactly who owns and controls it? The emergence of the digital director

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Given the number of "baby boomers" still holding many of today's top management positions, it may seem reasonable to accept younger managers' plaintive cries that they are having to operate in a pre-millennium IT landscape. Yet it's not that these senior managers, those we often refer to as digital Immigrants, have necessarily failed to keep up with changes in technology; in many cases it's simply that some of the changes have been so rapid that there has been little time to analyze their strategic relevance.

Strategically upgrading digital technology and delivery platforms to successfully compete in an increasingly complex and volatile business environment can be a challenging task, made even more so by balancing internal demands with those of external stakeholders and customers.

In a recent global survey by management consultants, McKinsey, 68 percent of respondents said that digital marketing and social tools are a top corporate priority on their organizations' strategic agendas (McKinsey, 2012). Whilst many senior executives expect that the changes in digital technologies will reshape the way they do business, many also admit their companies are far from prepared in meeting new challenges. With social media, an area that is advancing at a far greater pace than any other corporate issue, there is a lack of understanding of exactly how social media impacts on the organization to expand product and brand recognition, increase sales and profitability, and generate customer loyalty.

Although the explosion of social media networks has created major opportunities for companies and employees alike, many senior executives don't fully understand how to harness its power or, indeed, how to maintain control of it. Despite the potential benefits and risks of social media, a study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management found that more than 70 percent of organizations do not have clear objectives or strategies for their social media activities (Ployhart, 2012).

Within some organizations, employees in key positions are often encouraged by management to flourish as thought leaders and entrepreneurs and to develop their professional networks. Even though this has a number of very strong positives, it also has some concerning negatives! With the unprecedented reach of the social networks, members of the social media community can develop a loyal following, their readers tracking them wherever they go. For all organizations, irrespective of size, profession or industry, that can be a major problem should the employee leave (Extanz, 2009).

Although social media networks are well established at a personal level, at the corporate level social media is still in its nascent stages. Mastering the social media tools and creating a significant digital footprint can produce huge financial benefits for companies, enhancing relationships with customers and creating significant value. But to whom does this digital footprint belong and who, ultimately, has control of it? This issue is important because people who use social networks do so to converse with other people, not to communicate with brands.

To understand who should control the corporate digital footprint, a good starting point might be to look at who within the organization is the predominant user of social media. Since consumers are increasingly going online to discuss and seek advice on products, brands and services, sales and marketing would be expected to be high on the list. But they're not the only ones. In its Research Spotlight paper "Social Media in Business Strategy and Operations", the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reported that Marketing (35 percent), Information Technology (17 percent) HR (14 percent) and Management (Corporate/Senior - 14 percent) were the main groups most likely to use social media activities (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012).

Even though Marketing is the predominant user of the social media highway to connect and communicate with consumers, it doesn't necessarily mean that they also have control over the corporate digital footprint. The SHRM research data suggest that Human Resources is primarily responsible for creating and enforcing corporate social media policy (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012). Yet, surprisingly, 69 percent don't track employee use of social media on company owned computers or handheld devices, although 43 percent do block access to social media sites.

Certainly amongst Digital Natives, many will have an established social network presence long before their organizations and they continue to be much more active in their use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, with the increasing use of personal technology in the working environment, in addition to flexible working hours and home working, it is strategically essential for organizations to consider how best to leverage and secure the personal digital footprints of their employees, while ensuring that their brands' digital footprints grow proportionally to those they employ.

The use of social networking creates challenges for managing risks to individual and organizational reputations alike. In our discussions with senior executives across a broad range of global industries, the responsibility for managing a company's digital footprint tends to lie equally with HR and the Chief Information Officer or Chief Technology Officer. Human Resources (with input from Legal) sets the rules for social media use in the organization whilst IT is responsible for technological connectivity and maintenance. Neither provides an ideal management solution for all concerned with using the social networks.

Not only does corporate social media encompass areas such as marketing, sales and recruitment channels, it also includes rapidly developing internal communications. Gartner, a leading information technology research and advisory company, has predicted that by 2014, social networking services will replace e-mail as the primary vehicle for interpersonal communications for 20 percent of business users (Gartner Inc., 2010). Company executives can no longer view social media simply as an activity run predominantly by marketing and public relations managers. It is becoming more apparent that what is required today to manage the corporate digital footprint is a different set of competencies and business-related expertise not normally associated with either HR or sales and marketing.

Chief Executive Officers are beginning to realize that in order to take advantage on the digital evolution; they need someone who can capitalize on the robust and dynamic flow of data, knowledge and information across all business interests and through social media streams. The concept of the Digital Director is now emerging; the social media gatekeeper who will be Head of Digital Strategy and have ultimate control of the corporate digital agenda and be accountable for the organization's digital identity, both on a corporate and an individual level. The Digital Director should also be responsible for controlling and monitoring all content, ensuring the corporate values and strategies are maintained, in addition to securing the knowledge-based connections created throughout the business environment for corporate benefit.

With many emerging market opportunities, organizations will often anticipate a three to five year window for strategic delivery. However, with the investment in digital directorship, senior directors must consider a much shorter time frame for strategic delivery due to the speed at which technology and the use of social media are changing. By developing a digital ecosystem, the Digital Director will be able to alleviate senior management's fear of

loss of control, at the same time increasing employees' awareness and acceptance, transitioning this through culture change dynamics to create an enabled, empowered workforce. Employees who blog regularly can promote their company's products, give the firm a human face in the eyes of the customer and encourage professional networking, all of which will lead to improved corporate performance.

Social networking connections generated during employment will remain long after an individual leaves the company. Despite contracts of employment that may prohibit individuals from making direct approaches to the organization's clients and staff following termination of employment, people remain highly visible, connected and accessible via social media connections. Therefore, it will be a key responsibility of the Digital Director to fully harness the skills of employees in utilizing social media to communicate to a wider audience, even if this means drawing a greater following for the employees. If the digital footprints of both sides can be leveraged successfully, then it's a benefit for all concerned.

Successful Digital Directors will be those who are perceptive, emotionally intelligent and intuitive, able to communicate a vision, harness internal knowledge and cooperation while delivering excellence in digital credibility. They will also possess the ability and experience to articulate a compelling story of digital evolution, cross-cultural transitions and territorial capture. Those who have the ability to combine what exists today with a vision for the future position of the company on the digital highway will become increasingly in demand.

A further prediction by Gartner; by 2015, 20 percent of enterprises that employ social media beyond marketing will lead their industries in revenue growth.

The message to CEOs? *Carpe diem!*

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About the author

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