# Round-table discussion: Effective social networking in the public sector

## Purpose

Social networking has gained enormous traction in recent years, changing business models and the ways humans interact.

However, social networking is more than just using a particular tool or medium. This roundtable discussion held at the CPA Australia International Public Sector Convention on 21st February 2013 aimed to discuss the long-term value of online social networking and explore how it can be applied to generate lasting benefits across the public sector.

> *…people are still not entirely sure what exactly online social networking is, and whether it is 'too risky' or not.*

The facilitator was Micheal Axelsen, of Applied Insight Pty Ltd, and the participants were representatives from the public sector. This discussion took place at the Brisbane Convention Centre.

## Funny toy or useful?

It was apparent from our discussion that people are still not entirely sure what exactly online social networking is, and whether it is 'too risky' or not.



It was noted that collaboration is easily done using tools such as Facebook in comparison with the sometimes-slow bureaucratic processes for developing internet sites.

We did note some benefits – for example, we can keep in touch with people by 'loose connections' rather than lose touch when people change jobs.

Online social networking replaces chat groups or email lists, in many ways. Online social networking though is faster and more immediate.

Risks that may arise from the use of online social networking include:

- Legal
- Reputation
- Cyber
- Privacy and identity theft
- Records management
- Technology

Although we recognised those risks, awareness of the risks when online social networking is important to ensuring effective social networking.

## Risky business?

Online social networking – the younger generation just 'gets it'. But they too can be lax and not think through all the risks.

Users do need to be 'savvy and sophisticated' users. Not all people in all places are aware of what they can and can't do with material on online social networking. A nightmare for auditors!

It's not the tool that is evil, though - it is how the tool is used. The opportunity for fraud exists and the means by which online social networking can be used can be 'really mind-boggling' – particularly the social media tools. People still are not aware of the risk of fraud that can occur through social media.

## Change for the better?

There are still definite benefits. Online social networking can be a real tool for finding out information.

One participant noted that they now find out more information from Facebook and Twitter than they do from television. For instance – weather awareness and information that more traditional channels are 'slower' to distribute.

So as an information awareness tool and gathering tool, online social networking has real benefits. Particularly product search and product help is a definite positive of online social networking.

For example, obtaining very quick recommendations for a service or product via twitter or Facebook can result very quickly, and if you receive 15 recommendations for the one service (for example, a restaurant), then you probably have had your choice made for you.

Sometimes participants felt that they have had quicker and better responses online to problems with products, although this varied between organisations.

We did consider though whether there may be a 'regression to the mean' in relation to how companies deal with issues raised through social media.

It may soon be only those Facebook posts with 300 likes that get a company's attention, and then later only posts with 1,000 likes. Eventually, the extra resource expended on customer monitoring on online social networking will become part of 'business as usual' and the response will return to long-term trends.

k @aditrik                                          6h
@TransLink your bus driver just pulled over in the middle of his route to buy something from corner store #fail

Unlike a phone call or a letter, however, we did note that, with online social networking, complaints and discussions take place in a public place. For that reason organisations will likely place a higher priority on that for some time to come.

We recognised that online social networking is another channel, and this complicates our communication channels. The world is more complex than a PO Box

and a phone, and this complexity means that agencies need to respond. Unfortunately, the 'simple' world of the past has most likely disappeared.

In twenty years' time, online social networking will continue on, it will be the new norm. But new technologies will be developed, and the technologies will mature.

The need to critically appraise the information and comments made on online social networking by users is important. People need to assess quickly the credibility of the source making the comment, and also consider the number and sources of information. There are trolls on the internet but there are self-correcting mechanisms to filter these things out. It is an 'ongoing war' and the 'wisdom of the crowds' can help with this. Nevertheless, this takes time and effort to sort through the 'chaff', and some 'walled off' communities can be credible resources.

For example, LinkedIn makes a considerable effort to ensure the credibility of participants in conversations through moderated membership of groups.

Government agencies can use online social networking to access the communities that they deal with. Facebook pages, for example, allow an agency to talk one on one with their community, and obtain immediacy in their response.

This capability is used to varying effect. Some agencies have had fairly aggressive relationships with their communities whereas others have had more positive experiences. Monitoring online social networking can be used to provide information for policy development, particularly with respect to the targeted communities.

For example, overall the Queensland

Police Service presence on Facebook has been considered a major success in their sometimes-difficult dealings with the public. This was a focussed and strategic use of social media.
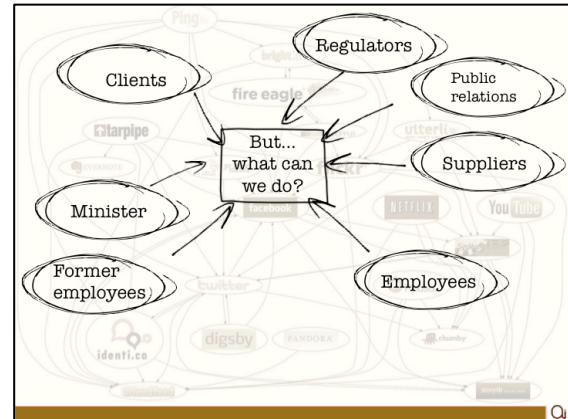


Brand recognition on twitter and the maintenance of the brand is important. However, you have to understand the risks and mitigate the risks – you have many more stakeholders. Brand recognition will be important for agencies that need to self-promote to obtain their funding.

Targeted delivery of information via online social networking can be more effective, as well. For example, Generation Y (or perhaps the younger Generation X) that are heavily into social media can be accessed through social media rather than the traditional media. Engagement through traditional media may be diminishing.

Social media is just another channel to communicate; whereas people from one generation might write a letter to the editor, those from another generation might tweet about the issue or use activist sites such as 'GetUp!'.

As generational change happens, agencies and organisations will need to educate and adapt to meet the needs of their communities.

There are opportunities to keep in touch with organisational alumni – particularly for the recruitment of new staff - but

unfortunately not much is being done in this area at the moment. There is a lot of untapped potential there

LinkedIn offers some potential there, although some agencies also create Facebook groups for their alumni.

## Concluding thoughts

People are still not entirely sure of online social networking, and whether its risks are worthwhile. Some benefits can be obtained by using online social networking in the public sector, but by no means has it been universally adopted.

Participants felt that the public sector is definitely lagging behind in the use of online social networking compared to the private sector. As generational change occurs, particularly for health, change will be needed.

Although our discussion centred on risks, several themes did emerge, including:

- More understanding of what online social networking is still required.
- User awareness of the risks of participating in online social networking still needs to mature.
- Agency communities (for example, QPS Media on Facebook) can increase community engagement, but they might just as equally cause difficulties with the community.

- Maturity will reduce this complexity, and as the novelty diminishes the tools will be embedded.
- Targeted delivery via online social networking of information can be more effective and engaging than traditional media.
- Informing policy response via community engagement can be particularly helpful for public sector agencies.

In the long term, the world has changed to be more complex.

### *'Promising, but beware the risks!*

Overall the discussion was lively and the risks and benefits were debated intelligently and in an informed way. Online social networking clearly has a long way to go in terms of maturing across the public sector, but the potential perhaps can be summarised as 'promising, but beware the risks!'

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