

# Social Media & Business Productivity

Steve Matthews | October 2009

The lines in the sand seem firmly drawn when it comes to social media blocking. Some firms have taken the view that accessing websites such as Facebook during work hours is an attack on business productivity, and have locked down access. Detractors identify the fact that any personal smart phone can access these sites, and that blocking is not only ineffective, but is taking young lawyers 'off-grid' and restricting their ability to communicate with peers and business contacts.

So who's right? Unfortunately, the answer may be everyone.

## The Case for Lockdown

Let's start this piece by facing facts. Having worked in-house up until two years ago, and having confirmed this with network administrators at a number of other firms, I can say that without question, the rise of Facebook network traffic has become a big issue. It's not uncommon for firms who don't block these websites to have Facebook traffic exceed Google.

Traffic alone is not the issue, mind you, but rather how it is impacting business efficiency. It's a simple question: Are we wasting time? Most of us have heard stories about the stereotypical 20-something spending half their day on Facebook (If you haven't, ask a coworker over 50). But then again, we don't need stories, or to be over-50, to know that we can't spend half our day on social media websites.

It's a very paternal approach, but the rationale is there. A number of years back, I heard a lawyer ask if it was possible to block sports-related websites because he was wasting too many hours, and couldn't seem to self-police his behavior. It was possible, but that lawyer ultimately decided against it. On a wider scale however, any time a website becomes a productivity problem for multiple-members of the firm, and impacts operations, the temptation to block access will remain – because it is technologically feasible.

## The Case for Access

There are many who will sing the virtues of social media, including myself, but that alone is not enough to justify not blocking when a firm is having productivity issues. A better approach is to view these tools as a communication device, like email, and to identify which *people* or *groups* have a business need for access.

Take associates as an example. If firms expect their associates to build a book of business, and the majority of those individuals are between ages 25 and 40, blocking access is a big barrier to that expectation. This is a

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group that actively uses social media to communicate with business peers. This is also a group that has always had productivity targets; and it is well known they won't be around long-term if they don't meet those expectations.

The same could also be said about anyone internal who is tasked with improving operations. The best free advice for practice management has always come from inter-firm online groups. First listservs, then closed communities, and now these conversations are evolving toward public facing web-groups (aka Social Media). Do you want your employees to be careful about participation? Of course, but blocking those same employees from viewing these conversations is like putting up a brick wall.

### Being Practical

As we said in the beginning, opinions on this issue are polarized. The problem though, is that neither side is being practical about the problem or finding an appropriate solution.

**Group One says:** If a group of employees isn't executing their job, and you can clearly see 'where' they are spending their less productive time, then of course you will engage the available solution – ie. blocking – to remedy the problem. It's too easy not to; terminating a mass group of employees because they can't self-police their own behavior isn't an option.

**Group Two says:** Equally impractical is global blocking. These tools are what you make of them – simple communication like the phone or email. If firms have no accountability for employee productivity, then *that's* the issue, not the tools. As soon as the Internet became integrated with your computer desktop, it became both a time waster and facilitator of smarter business. Blocking is a lazy solution to a complex problem. And firms, consider yourself warned... Lack of trust in the workplace is a killer for both retention and recruiting efforts.

There's a touch of truth to both positions.

### Possible Solutions

Each firm will create its own direction, but I'd hate to write an article like this without noting some of the possible compromises. Consider the following:

- Time-based restrictions – Not everyone is aware that proxy server blocking can be automated to open or close accessibility depending on the time of day. How about a 2-hour window around mid-day for lunch hour? Before 8AM and after 5PM? Restricting by time can tell people that the activity is frowned upon during business hours, but that the firm understands the need for access.
- Restricting by group affiliation – Office networks classify users into different role-based groups, and this extends to website blocking. When a group clearly has a business need, they can (and should) have different access permissions. At the very least, forcing each group to make a business case for access will help identify acceptable use

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- Identify the abusers – Proxy servers can also isolate who the top users of any website are. In some places of work, you must sign an acknowledgement that your online activity may be monitored. This seems like overkill, but some may find it preferable to individual site-restrictions. Getting employees to sign an online code of conduct is another related policy alternative.
- Review each website individually – Painting with broad brush never helps. If firms need to block Facebook, that shouldn't mean LinkedIn suffers the same fate. If a website has business development benefits – get a firm lawyer who actually does business development to evaluate it. The IT department should never make that decision arbitrarily.
- Clarify productivity expectations – This helps for the 'old-school' time wasters in your office too — crosswords, readers of the newspaper, and fiction! Spell out what milestones are required for success at work. If billable work isn't available, what are the project priorities for non-billable work?

### Conclusion

I sit on the fence on this issue, perhaps more than most would expect. While I see an incredible amount of value to social media, I also understand how critical it is to maintain balance. That's one of the reasons my network of contacts will see me online frequently, and then I disappear for days at a time.

Personal productivity is a learned skill – knowing when to hide, stick your head down and just get the work done. I don't think you learn work *ethic* by taking away temptation, and micromanaging behavior is rarely a great solution. For those reasons, I'm not a fan of global blocking of any website by law firms.

I do believe, however, that there are situations when selective blocking may help, and that there is a 'middle ground' of alternative solutions available. Both time and role based restrictions seem to make a lot more sense, especially when we make exceptions for those with a business need.

One last point: A significant number of web tools start with a 'fun' or social purpose, before evolving for business use. And few remain in the form for which they were originally envisioned. Law firms would do well to leave themselves an open door to re-evaluate blocking decisions. The site you blocked two years ago may be an unforeseen opportunity in the future.

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