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A Social Network within an Organisation

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Since the Victorian era, human behaviourists and sociologists have been studying and remarking upon the occurrence and importance of social networks. While the social network is not a new concept by any means, the Internet has recreated how social networks are created, developed, accessed, observed and utilised. Leaders in social networking have been organisations such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and even sites such as LinkedIn. However, thousands upon thousands of smaller and lesser known social networks have also developed, with many users opting to become part of multiple networks in an answer to the multiple facets of their own lives or interests.

A social network is comprised of units (individuals or organisations) otherwise known as "nodes." These nodes come together through appreciation or acceptance of their similarities, such as knowledge, status, interdependency (i.e., friendship), hobbies, or other commonality. These common elements that bring them together are known as the "ties." Social networks are nodes tied together in one format and location. Generally, successful social networks are developed around a focused tie, but in the case of MySpace and Facebook, as well as Twitter and other such networks, sometimes individuals are brought together without common interests outside of an appreciation and embracing of the network technology or format, itself. Those three mentioned brands don't really focus as much on certain criteria for joining the network. Instead, humanity and technology are the basic premises that originally drew the nodes together.

For organisations, internal social networks can be extremely beneficial if properly constructed and managed. They can boost organisational morale, increase membership or interest, provide low cost marketing and advertising, and strengthen the bonds between members who otherwise might not connect or gain access to one another. From a marketing standpoint, brand and image control, quick communication to masses, and surveying are added benefits that can prove quite priceless.

For an organisation considering development of a social network, there are several factors of viability to consider. First, what is the basic tie for the network? Is it the overall organisation itself, as well as its functionality and operations? Or, are you seeking to bring organisation members together in a more social or segmented manner, such as by personal interests or work department? So, initially pinpoint your organisation's social network mission, its reason for being.

Also consider whether such a network that could be utilised is already in existence. If there is one, perhaps that network (such as Facebook, for example) allows for some customisation to suit your group's needs or wants. Facebook offers applications integration to link members of organisations within the Facebook platform, but the downside could be that - despite the usability, functionality and ease of utilisation of applications, surveys, advertising, and other such add-ins - individuals from outside of your organisation will inevitably (quickly) penetrate the original group's boundaries. If you seek new "joiners," and new ties, consider using one of the worldwide-successful networks already in existence, for exposure to the optimum number of potential members.

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Next, determine if membership is optional or mandatory. Social networks can exist with required use and under certain guidelines, but the group must note that restricting interaction and mandating behaviour (outside of expected and typical societal norms, of course) will work against the success of the social media site. Try to ensure that the organisation doesn't build a social network that becomes another item of "work" to the inhabitants or members. Social networks must allow for certain freedoms, in order to be effective, successful, active, thriving, and to reach the basic goals - or purpose - for the network's being, in the first place. People have to want to interact there, in order to really do so.

Once the purpose and demographic are determined, consider the technology and structure you will use to build the network. Should it be outsourced to another company? Should you use a widely available turn-key social network platform? Or, are you seeking to bring organisation members together in a more segmented manner, such as by work departments? So, initially pinpoint your organisation's social network mission, its reason for being.

Some of the most popular platforms for building of social networks are: CollectiveX, CrowdVine, Me.com, Ning, KickApps, Haystack, GoingOn, OneSite, and People Aggregator. There are also custom developers available for hire and by contract, but they often utilise one of the above (or a similar) sites, themselves. So, if you have the internal organisational manpower and ability to dedicate time and energy toward creation of your own social network, one of the above programs might prove your best bet.

Whatever your organisational purpose for having its own social network, or the platform utilised for the end product, one thing must be remembered throughout its development: In order for a social network to succeed, the members must want to be there, and they must want to interact. If the site is not intriguing, you will be left with many man hours exerted (even for the simplest of sites), and little return on your investment. No matter how a site is marketed or utilised, for the end user, it is all about "friends".

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