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December 2010

Communications professionals observe social media risks in Finland

Social media is here to stay, even though a quarter of communications people have considered deactivating their profile in social network services – this is one of the findings of a recent survey conducted among Finnish communications professionals.

ProCom – Finnish Association of Communication Professionals has carried out a Social Media Pulse survey among its members together with the market research house Taloustutkimus. The survey was carried out in October and the questionnaire was answered by one out of four members invited to participate (25.3 %). The association has over 2,000 members. The survey investigated, among other things, how communications people and their background communities utilize social media and what kind of risks they see in it. The majority (77 %) of the communications professionals belonging to the association use social media in their work and almost all (90 %) use it during their leisure time. Those who do not use social media in their work (23 %) said it is either prohibited in the work community, social media is not essential for the company's operations or they are not familiar enough with it.

Almost all (93%) respondents consider social media networks important for their own work. Almost all (96%) believe that social media is here to stay. The most popular and frequently used media are Facebook (used by 85 % of respondents) and LinkedIn (60 %). Some also use Twitter (36 %) and Suomi24 (16 %). Other services, such as IRC-Galleria (4 %) or MySpace (2 %) are far less used. However, communication professionals know well various social networks and use them according to their needs. The respondents mentioned, for example, YouTube, Dopplr, Flickr, SlideShare, Yammer, wikis and Moodle.

Communications people most often use social media in their work “by being present in a social media network as a company or a community” (78 % of respondents). Many (47 %) also try to activate user groups in social network services and some (33 %) also conduct active marketing communications or advertising in them.

No guidelines

The majority (59 %) of communications professionals do not have guidelines concerning social media at their workplace. Slightly under half do, however. Such guidelines are considered very important. Even those who do not have any guidelines think that they are necessary (94 %). The lack of guidelines in Finnish companies is, in most cases, due to the fact that companies trust the judgement of their employees. In some companies, such guidelines are in the process of being drawn up. On the other hand, according to one respondent, no guidelines are necessary in communication companies employing just a few people.

A high number of respondents (65 %) have participated in training on the topic to receive more information on drawing up the guidelines, for example. Many training organizations provide training, especially one-day courses. More than half of the respondents wish to receive additional information by other means than through training. They expect their union to provide research reports, publications and panels, among other things.

Increasing risks

Over half of the respondents have encountered work-related risks in social media. The survey shows that even those who have not encountered any risks believe that there are risks, in particular with regard to working life.

One particular risk factor identified was that an employee might unintentionally share information that is not meant to be public to the outside world. Employees might, for example, carelessly leak information that could affect share prices. Employees might, also in good faith, be guilty of hidden advertising or share information about the company's future plans, which is of interest to competitors.

Reputation management in particular is perceived as difficult in social media. There is always a risk of defamation. Criticism, even minor and with no harm meant, may grow out of proportion.

No distinct line between private and public sphere

None of the respondents believes that their use of social media in their work life will decrease in the future. On the contrary, most (78 %) believe it will increase, as the current behavior will remain more or less the same during leisure time, according to the majority of the respondents. In fact, social media is used, above all, during leisure time (90%). This leads to the conclusion that people have mostly learned to use social media in their free time and out of personal interest.

Almost every second respondent has encountered risks concerning their private life in social media. Slightly more than half (53 %) have encountered none. Despite the hidden risks, only around a quarter (23%) have considered deactivating their personal profile. For them, one alternative is to stop using social media altogether.

Drawing the line between private and public spheres is perceived as the most difficult aspect of social media. For many, interactions on Facebook lie somewhere between these two spheres. Some have had second thoughts about some of the things they have shared on Facebook. Photos ending up in the wrong hands and unpleasant contacts are mentioned as particular problems.

Those who have considered deactivating their profile believe Facebook invades their privacy. Identity theft is also identified as grounds for deactivating a profile. Some respondents feel that time spent in social media is time wasted. The majority (75 %) of the respondents have not, however, considered deactivating their personal profile.

Benefits of social media

Overall, communications professionals in Finland believe that the benefits of social media outweigh the hidden risks. Many believe that the use of other services alongside Facebook will increase. They also believe that the use of social media will become more and more a part of everyday life.

Many respondents are of the opinion that social media increases social interaction and openness or expands one's circle of friends. Social media is also perceived as an important tool in brand and reputation building. It allows selected target groups to be reached easily, quickly and cost-efficiently.

In the longer term, social media is believed to make interaction more shallow. On the other hand, people feel that it facilitates keeping in contact with faraway friends and maintaining international business relationships. Communications professionals feel that the most serious drawback of social media is the lack of time. Many feel that the days just fly by when you are trying to keep track of moronic status updates and "liking". Some respondents therefore believe that the use of social media during leisure time can no longer increase on its current level. Because there is life also beyond it. -EM

Read the whole survey report (in Finnish) at: <http://www.procom.fi/procom/mita-me-teemme/tutkimustoiminta/>.