



Social career management: Social media and employability skills gap



Vladlena Benson^{a,*}, Stephanie Morgan^a, Fragkiskos Filippaios^b

^a Kingston Business School, Kingston University, Kingston Upon Thames, Surrey KT2 7LB, UK

^b Kent Business School, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7PE, UK

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ABSTRACT

Social capital theorists have established decades ago that better connected people do better in life. The emergence of online social networking sites have given a new impetus to building and exploiting connections for career management. While professionals acknowledge that social networking is essential for business and development, new graduates coming into the corporate world are not equipped with the up-to-date skill set. Through the lens of the improved employability objectives, this paper draws conclusions from a recent study of UK business graduates and their use of social networking. The paper presents for discussion an employability skill set for contemporary business professional and calls for higher education to address the skill gap. Further research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Online social networking (SN) applications have become a part of daily life for many. The popularity of social media has seen an unprecedented rise over the past decade: LinkedIn dominates the professional social networking sector with over 150 million registered members (LinkedIn About Us, 2012) with 21% aged between 18 and 21 years old (Socialnomics, 2011). Facebook is reportedly one of the top visited websites (Alexa Internet Inc., 2011), attracting over half a billion users world-wide. Twitter rapidly gained worldwide social networking and microblogging recognition with over 500 million users (Twitter, 2012). Enthusiasm for social media is yet to reach its plateau, as the most recent addition to the social media scene, Google+ showed the most rapid member gain to 101,978 in less than a year after its launch (Socialstatistics, 2012). Whether updating status on Facebook, tweeting the latest news or joining a professional community on LinkedIn, social networking has earned its place in our everyday life for both leisure and business.

Extant literature suggests that social networking has changed the way individuals communicate and associate with one another. Some research attention has been focused on how social media use is associated with social capital (e.g. Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Individual characteristics of social network members have been shown to determine the different benefits its users draw from social media by (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). They argue that lonely and unsocial individuals tend to spend more time on social media and passively exploit associations and social capital, while users

with higher leadership scores tend to provide more active social contributions and use the network for self-promotion. Recent studies focus on various dimensions of online social networks and their use in the student lifecycle, e.g. knowledge management, social capital and career management skills (e.g. Benson, Filippaios, & Morgan, 2010). Despite the potential impact of social media on trends in professional networking, social recruitment and development of relevant employability skills, there is a distinct lack of empirically derived theory in this area. Arguably Facebook is a relatively recent social phenomenon and according to Ryan and Xenos (2011) there have been limited opportunities for exploratory research. Despite the salience of a lack of professional networking skills, very little empirical research explores the relationships between social media uses and social career management, or the SN employability skill set required for current graduates that may enhance their career prospects, including the entrepreneurship opportunities offered by social media.

This study provides an insight into the changing landscape of social connections on social media in order to understand: (1) how professionals build and exploit social capital on business and leisure social networks, and (2) the extent to which future graduates need to build awareness of the social media opportunities in career management and entrepreneurship. This research addresses calls in the literature to investigate the relationship between networking and career success (Bozinelos, 2003) in the social media context, and provides insights into ways higher education may better equip its students with current employability skills. By identifying patterns of social media uses for business and leisure, this research aims to promote career management skills that may help graduates make better use of social networking connections, to build their social capital and enhance their employability prospects. In doing so, this paper extends the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: v.benson@kingston.ac.uk (V. Benson), stephanie.morgan@kingston.ac.uk (S. Morgan), F.Filippaios@kent.ac.uk (F. Filippaios).

theoretical understanding of individual social media usage, and challenges commonly held beliefs about high delineation between leisure and professional social networking.

From a quantitative study of 190 postgraduate and undergraduate students from a UK Business School, this article provides an insight on intuitive, rather than informed use of social networks by Business students to improve their employability.

While the study is part of wider research into the use of social networks by business students and graduates, data collected in 2012 have revealed an interesting insight into the way younger social networking users view opportunities of knowledge management through social media, build social capital via connections with Business School alumni and professionals, and establish their online professional presence through business networking sites. This article opens discussion into the changes of the employability skill set required for current and future Business graduates in light of the increasing role of social media in business relations. The rest of the article is structured as follows. The notion of social capital is central to online social networking research; Section 1.1 discusses the extant literature on social capital theory in relation to online SN. The novel nature of social relationships online, discussed on Section 1.2, has implications for individual skills and competencies, covered in Section 1.3, along with discussion of how successful professional networking can improve business and employability prospects. Section 2 describes the research instrument, and opens the discussion of the quantitative study of UK business graduates and trends in their use of social networking sites for business and leisure. Section 3 draws out recommendations on the new networking skill set for higher education to address, with the view of improving graduate employability in the era of the digital economy. Section 4 draws conclusions from the study and sets out the agenda for the place of social connections in graduate careers, whilst outlining future research directions.

1.1. Social connections: Knowledge and social capital repository

Social networks seamlessly enable existing relations and facilitate building new ones in leisure and professional domains alike. In his seminal work Coleman (1990) associates social capital not with 'a single entity, but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist in some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors within the structure' (p. 98). Relationships or ties, as they are popularized in the literature, play a significant role in the academic interpretation of social capital. Strong ties are characteristic of family or friendship bonds, while weak ties represent relationships in formal networks, such as organizations and communities. Being formed by individuals from heterogeneous backgrounds and intentions are characteristic of the networks linked by weak ties. Interestingly enough, the notion of social capital is often linked to 'structural components' or nodes in social networks. Extant literature (Brehm & Rahn, 1997) distinguishes social capital entwined in strong ties of a network as *bonding social capital*, while the weak ties yield a network with *bridging and linking social capital*. As Granovetter (1973) points out in his seminal work, 'Whatever is to be diffused can reach a larger number of people, and travel greater social distance... when passed through weak ties rather than strong' (p. 1366). In this article the social capital metaphor is viewed through the lens of what assets can be 'reached' and what resources can be 'passed' through the weak ties network.

Putnam (1995) refers to social capital as characteristic 'social life-networks' which enable members of the network to achieve collective objectives. For Putnam shared norms and trust facilitate cooperative goal attainment. From the perspective of the individual actor, Bourdieu articulates the characteristics of the social

capital in terms of size and quality of the network. While the overall quality of the existing network in which an individual is a member also counts, the benefits are drawn from the number of connections a node can 'effectively mobilize' in order to achieve a goal (Bourdieu, 1986). In Bourdieu's view actors are seen as individual nodes striving to improve their positions by drawing upon their social capital within the larger social environment.

1.2. Social network resources and career success

The notion of career success occupies an important place in social capital theory. In line with Loury (1977) and Coleman (1990) mentoring, job partnering, and mutual support have been advocated to have a positive connection to success in education. Relationships in social networks, including professional ties, constitute an important facet of social capital (Bozionelos, 2003; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). While social capital is seen as the outcome or product of connections between nodes in a network, access to a wealth of resources is what makes a relationship significant to an individual. These assets are even more valuable the more extensive the network and stronger the ties. These resources comprise job or professional information, power influence, professional solidarity (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1990), which would not be accessible to an individual who is not a member of the social network. Earlier research (Lin, 1999) shows the contribution of social capital to career success through priority access to information on a job opening which an individual can obtain through connections, or other nodes in a network can favorably influence a promotion decision.

The density of the social network of connections is another determinant of career success (Bozionelos, 2003; Seibert et al., 2001). Research assessing differences in the outcomes of different elements of social capital, such as mentoring relationships and network resources indicate that in western societies, network resources have an impact beyond mentoring on both extrinsic (promotions and salary increases) and intrinsic (job satisfaction and respect) elements of career success (Bozionelos, 2003). However cultural differences have been found (Wang & Bozionelos, 2007) and must be taken into consideration, particularly in Eastern organisations. Network resources have also been categorized into instrumental (functions to advance career interests through for example access to senior managers, influencing decisions on assignments) and expressive (offering socio-emotional support such as friendship). It is not yet clear whether these distinctions remain with online social networks.

1.3. The changing nature of employability skills

The literature indicates (Archer & Davison, 2008) that employers of new graduates increasingly consider social skills (particularly communication and team working) and personality as more important than the degree qualification. Key hard skills include literacy and numeracy, with satisfaction in these areas low. Satisfaction rates for commercial awareness, communication, literacy, analysis and decision-making skills, 'passion' and relevant work experience are very low. An Institute of Directors report (Graduate Employability Skills., 2007) also emphasised work ethic as important, including being hard working, reliable, able to meet deadlines, and punctual. Although some of these aspects such as personality and work-ethic are likely to come with maturity (and could be viewed as hard to modify), there are things that can be built-into the University learning experience that can encourage the required behaviours (and related personality 'traits'). ICT and social media skills are viewed as increasingly important, particularly in marketing related work, with employers expecting graduates to be well-versed in the use of online social media. At the

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