Full length article

The relationship between social media co-worker connections and work-related attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Many people have social media connections with co-workers. An important question that arises is how such connections impact important organizational factors. This study begins to look at such impact by examining how a user's total number of co-worker social media connections and the percentage of total social media connections that are co-workers impacts perceptions of organizational support and organizational spontaneity. In a sample of 106 union members across a number of organizations it is found that percentage of co-worker social media connections has a significant positive relationship with both perceptions of organizational support and organizational spontaneity. Total co-worker social media connections was not related to either organizational support or organizational spontaneity. Implications and reasons for these results are discussed, as well as important directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

While social media sites like Facebook and Twitter were originally used for personal life, increasingly they are being used to connect professional colleagues. Weidner, Wynne, and O'Brien (2012) found that 60% of participants, and a recent Pew Research Center survey found that 58% of participants (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), had at least one Facebook "friend" who was a work colleague. Weidner et al. (2012) also found that 25% of participants were Facebook friends with their supervisor. Research suggests people are connecting to their professional networks through social media.

Despite this prevalence, research looking at social media and work-related functions and outcomes has been limited. Much of the existing research has focused on social media use from the organizational perspective such as how organizations can and do use social media for Human Resource functions such as recruitment (Carr & Walther, 2014; Chiang & Suen, 2015) selection (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Kleumper, Rosen, & Mossholder, 2012; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, & Junco, 2013), termination decisions

(O'Connor & Schmidt, 2015; Schmidt & O'Connor, 2015), and in the development of internal social media sites within an organization (Kaupins & Park, 2011; Landers & Goldberg, 2014). Less research has looked at work-related social media from the individual side. Research that has been done has focused more on reactions to how organizations use social media (Drouin, O'Connor, Schmidt, & Miller, 2015) or on the types of behaviors, comments, or photos (i.e., actual behavior) people post on social media sites (Weidner et al., 2012).

One area in significant need of research is the relationship between work-related social media connections and a person's work-related behaviors and cognitions, for example, how do colleague work connections relate to a person's actual work attitudes, feelings, and behaviors? To date little to no research has examined this issue. However, literature suggests that social media can be used as a way to help people within an organization or industry connect. For example, Schmidt and Landers (2010) suggest that social media could be used as a way for members of the field of Industrial/ Organizational Psychology to more strongly connect with each other and discuss aspects of shared identity. While this suggestion is with regard to a particular field, it could extend to other fields, industries, or organizations. This idea raises questions of what connections between co-workers mean. Do co-workers connect to each other due to connection to the organization or are such

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connections with co-workers unrelated? Do more co-worker connections on a social media site suggest a worker is more or less connected and embedded at an organization?

This research begins to examine these issues. We look at how total number of social media co-worker connections, percentage of total connections that are co-workers connection, and total number of connections relate to perceptions of organizational support and organizational spontaneity. This helps us to better determine how social media connections might relate to these important work-related cognitions and behaviors. We find very different relationships for total number of co-worker connections compared to percentage of total connections that are co-workers. It has been suggested that social media might be beneficially used by unions (Fowler & Hager, 2013). This research looks at a sample of unionized workers, which is a further contribution to the literature as no existing empirical research has looked at social media use among unionized workers. We start by reviewing the existing literature on why people use social media sites in general and then discuss how the use of social media can relate to a workplace setting and organizational outcomes. We then review our results and the implications they suggest.

1.1. Why people use social media

Research on why people use social media has suggested two major categories for use: developing/maintaining relationships and gaining or presenting information (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012; Wise, Alhabash, & Park, 2010). Social media can be used to connect people together and keep them in contact. Social media can also be used to gain information about others or to present information, such as in the case of impression management techniques. These reasons could also impact the desire of an individual to connect with work colleagues. The existing research on these two major categories for why individuals use social media is reviewed below.

Social media is often used by others to connect with people they know. A Pew Research study suggested that the primary reason for people to use social media was to stay in contact with or re-connect with family and friends (Smith, 2011). Sheldon et al. (2011) found that social media use led people to feel connected to others and that people that felt disconnected often used social media as a way to try to regain such connections.

The desire to connect to others is shown in the relationship between social media use and the development of various types of social capital. Social capital is the benefits individuals gain in support, information, and ideas from their social relationships and interactions with other people (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). There are two major types. Bonding social capital involves the ability of a person to draw on resources from closely connected others (such as family and close friends), while bridging social capital involves weaker ties to others (such as acquaintances and work colleagues) that can provide valuable information and new perspectives (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Putnam, 2000). Ellison et al. (2007) found that the Facebook usage of participants in a college student sample related to their perceptions of possessing both bonding and social capital, as well as success in maintaining such social capital. In a follow up study Ellison et al. (2011) found that Facebook use encouraged students to convert latent (potential) ties they possessed (such as friends of friends) to weak ties (such as Facebook connections) and that Facebook facilitated users making requests for information or support from others. Thus, social media connections potentially helps to strengthen personal connections to other people as well as offer a medium for requesting support from others.

Social media is also used by people to both gain information and present information (Anderson et al., 2012; Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Wilson et al., 2012; Wise et al., 2010). Bonds-Raacke and Raacke (2010), looked at reasons for using social media sites and found that in terms of information purposes they were used for sharing personal information, informing others about social activities and events, gaining academic knowledge, and posting/looking at pictures. Information seeking can be further broken down into subcategories. Wise et al. (2010) broke down information seeking into two categories: passive social browsing, where users look at information from the Facebook News Feed or other automatic social media update applications, and extractive social searching, where a user looks for specific information in another user's profile or sends a direct request for information to another user. Thus, people can gain information by just following information the site provides to them in real time, actively searching out information from previously posted content, and directly asking other users for information, both personal informational and more general factual data.

Users can also choose to share information with others. People use social media to share information they might not otherwise have an opportunity to tell others. This function enables people to carefully select the information that they share and thus social media sites are also used in impression management, as a way to illustrate positive aspects of an individual. A user can make posts that suggest competence, morality, or intelligence to create a good impression with other users. Despite this potential, much of the literature has found that people tend to be relatively accurate in their social media profiles (Back et al., 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007; Wilson et al., 2012). Research has shown, however, that when users have social media profile elements that suggest competence, or relevant job related values or skills, such information does impact evaluator perceptions of factors like perceived person-organization fit (Chiang & Suen, 2015). Thus, the potential use of social media content for impression management purposes exists.

1.2. Why people might use social media to connect with work-colleagues

Considering the reasons why people use social media there are certainly several reasons why individuals might want to connect with work colleagues in particular. Connections with co-workers offer a significant means by which to develop and maintain work relationships. So accepting or making a friend request may be a way to take a working relationship and extending it into the online realm. Social media might also be a way to strengthen existing offline relationships with colleagues. Social capital research related to social media suggests social media is a way to convert latent ties to weak ties and strengthen existing ties that may have been made offline (Ellison et al., 2011).

Social media connections to co-workers might also provide significant informational benefits. If a person has a question about what to do or how to do something relating to work co-worker connections on social media might be an informal way to ask questions, potentially of many co-workers at once. Social capital in part is having the ability to gain information or support when needed (Putnam, 2000) and social media might be a significant tool by which a person can call on their co-workers for help. For one example, a worker might have a more difficult time finding someone to cover his or her shift when people need to be contacted individually, but a Facebook status update or group instant message could find someone to help considerably quicker. Social media could offer a network of support to a worker for requests and information (Ellison et al., 2011).