Being digital

Keeping up-to-date using online networking

1: Introduction

People are often the most important source of information at work and your colleagues may be your first port of call when finding out the latest. However, online tools increasingly play a useful role in enabling you to tap into others' knowledge and expertise. They can also help you when developing your career.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this activity you should:

- know how online networks can help you keep up-to-date

- be able to choose an appropriate network for your needs.

2: Which network?

In this section, you will find examples of some of the online tools available to help you network successfully at work and outside it.

Which ones you decide to use will depend on your specific workplace context and type of job.

It will also depend on the attitude of your employer towards social networking sites, for example, whether you are permitted to use these sites during working hours. All the examples mentioned here can be used on a computer or mobile device.

All services are freely available, but in some cases a subscription will buy you extra functionality.

- Read through the examples below, and make a mental note of any that seem particularly relevant.

A: Professional contacts and communities

LinkedIn is about creating professional contacts and communities. It allows you to set up a profile which is like a mix of an online business card and a CV. You can link to others to form groups with shared professional / occupational interests and aims. You can also rate or write recommendations for those in your network. LinkedIn is used by members to obtain information about present or potential employees and employers. In certain professions, it is a key way of finding a job.

As with any introduction site on the internet, take care to check out proposed connections or collaborations to confirm they are reliable and safe. LinkedIn has a policy of only enabling connections between people who already know each other in real life. However, once you are connected with someone, their connections will then be available to you.

B: Online address books

Services such as Plaxo or Google contacts enable you to bring together all your contacts across different devices, whether email, phone or social networks.

Both of these monitor your contacts and proactively suggest updates.

C: Short message networks

Tools like Twitter are a cut down version of social networking and allow you to post short 140 character messages to be seen by anyone who follows you. This is known as "microblogging". Messages appear as a chronological list, though you can also access an archive of everything you've posted.

Twitter has various tools you can use to manage and fine-tune your presence. For example:

- Tweetdeck offers different ways of viewing messages

- bitly enables you to shorten URLs so you make the most of the 140 character limit

- You can easily post images onto Twitter, either by uploading them from your computer or phone, or by taking a photo using the camera function in Twitter

D: Networking to manage projects

As well as traditional products like MSProject, there are other options which bundle together different tools like file share/storage, calendar and timeline tracking with online chat and forums into a complete project management package. Many offer small size versions as free initial trials to help you decide exactly what you need.

These services are accessible anywhere you have an internet connection and make possible team-working across different locations and time-zones.

Examples include Google Docs, but there are other alternatives also freely available.

E: Real-time online networking

Applications like Facebook etc. include a text-to-text real time chat option so you can "talk" by text to others online at the same time.

Other programmes add video and/or voice to this to enable you to talk face-to-face in real time.

Yahoo Messenger is part of Yahoo mail and also allows you to chat with friends on Facebook and Windows Live. Other more sophisticated video-conferencing services charge a fee.

Skype is a part free/part pay internet text, video and phone service.

3: Evaluating online networking tools

So far you have looked at several different sorts of online tools to help you connect and network with others:

- Professional contacts and communities

- Online address books

- Short message networks

- Networking to manage projects

- Real-time online networking

Exercise

- Now it is time to evaluate their relevance to your own situation.

- Consider the pros and cons of each

- Which type of network are you most likely to use, and why?

- Make some notes for yourself, and then read through the feedback in section 4, to see what we thought.

4: Exercise Feedback

A: Professional contacts and communities

Good for?

Networks of professional contacts such as LinkedIn can help you to showcase your professional CV and connect with others in your field of interest. Increasingly, employers are making use of LinkedIn to find potential job candidates and job-seekers are using LinkedIn to find out about employers and positions on offer. This is more relevant to some kinds of jobs than others. However, if your work involves any kind of online presence or communication, consider LinkedIn as a key place to build your professional profile.

Downsides?

The free version of LinkedIn only gives you access to some features, for example, if you want to send a direct message to someone (known as 'Inmail'), or see their expanded profile, you will need to take out a paid subscription.

B: Online address books

Good for?

Online address books are worth considering if you have a large number of contacts who use different means of communication and networks (for example, landline, mobile, email and Facebook) and want to bring them all together into one online list. They are also very handy if you lose your paper address book.

Downsides?

For smaller numbers of contacts you may not feel it is worth the trouble to set up a system like this. As with all these services, you do need an Internet connection to get access.

C: Short message networks

Good for?

Opinions are divided on the usefulness of services such as Twitter. On the one hand, they enable you to have quick and easy contact with a wide range of people both within and outside your organisation. Breaking news sometimes appears on Twitter first, and if you have interesting information to communicate, this can be a quick and easy way of getting it out there.

Downsides?

It is easy to get distracted by irrelevant postings. You need to manage your time wisely and from time to time, filter the list of people you follow and who follow you. It can take time to build up your Twitter network, so the payback may not be immediate. You also need to remember that what you put on Twitter is publicly available, and exercise caution about work-related information.

D: Networking to manage projects

Good for?

In a global economy, it is possible you will need to work with people in other locations and perhaps even in different time zones. Being able to use online tools to collaborate on and manage projects can save both money and travelling time.

Downsides?

It can be hard to establish relationships with people online if you do not know them in real life and misunderstandings can creep in. In practice, online project management tools probably need supplementing with some face-to-face or telephone contact. You might need to check your company policy before storing any sensitive documents outside the usual internal servers.

E: Real-time online networking

Good for?

Instant messaging and online video conferencing can be a great way of making direct contact with people you do not see face-to-face. They allow you to discuss things there and then, and to reach a decision, thus cutting down on long email exchanges. Services such as Skype can be used free of charge.

Downsides?

You need to think carefully about what you want to achieve - for example, if you want to hold a meeting in which you can see a large number of other participants, Skype may not be the right tool. Sound and picture quality may also be variable.

5: Summary

In this activity you have been introduced to a number of different types of online networks. Through these networks you can:

- highlight your expertise and experience

- communicate with others

- work together on projects

- keep track of your contacts.

You have had the opportunity to consider the relevance of these networks to your own situation and think about some of their benefits and drawbacks.

Putting it into practice

- Are there any networks you already use which you might exploit to greater advantage?

- Which networks could you start to use to help you work more effectively with others online?

Appendix 1, on pages 8-12, sets out the pros and cons of online networking tools. You will find this useful when evaluating which online tools will be most effective for you. There is a page for each tool, with space below the tables for you to write your own notes, should you wish to print the pages out.

References

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Appendix 1: Evaluating online networking tools

A: Professional contacts and communities

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