

# Facebook@Work

## *The Use of Social Media for Work-related Exchange and Support*

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**Abstract:** Research on informal Social Networks such as Facebook has so far mainly focused on participants' private exchange, addressing topics like self-disclosure, self-presentation, privacy issues and so on. However, informal Social Networks, despite their more private nature, might also be used for work-related exchange and private support for workplace challenges and problems. In this paper we investigate to what extent informal Social Networks are used for work-related exchange and whether this is related to forms of social support the participants experience. To that end an online survey was conducted among users of Facebook. Results show that while work-related Facebook use is generally low, there is some potential to use Social Networks as a vehicle to build a strong support network for seeking of valuable information and advice to cope with possible work-related challenges, especially as participants showed a high willingness to extend help and support to other users.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social Networks are used by an increasing number of people worldwide for social exchange. Business networks such as LinkedIn aim at professional use, e.g. for job search and networking. Social networks such as Facebook mostly have an informal character. However, many people have personal as well as work-related contacts (e.g. colleagues, supervisors, customers) in their "friends" lists and might also discuss work-related issues here. Especially freelancers do not only use specific business networks but also more informal networks for advertisement and customer relations.

In this paper we investigate to what extent and for what purposes informal Social Networks are used for work-related exchange. We explore how participants benefit from work-related exchange in Social Networks, what they hope to gain from this kind of exchange and what obstacles might exist regarding the use of Facebook and similar networks for work-related purposes. A special focus is placed on the question whether participants actually receive social support in work-related situations from their Social Network contacts, e.g. by receiving advice, encouragement or direct help in difficult situations.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next

paragraphs related work is explored, especially regarding the use of Social Media and the role of social support for mastering work-related challenges.

In the subsequent sections the research questions and methods are introduced. The results of an analysis of Facebook profiles and an online survey among Facebook users are presented. In the concluding section, the results and their implications for research and practice are discussed.

## 2 RELATED WORK

### 2.1 Social Media at the Workplace

Social Networks provide opportunities to build and maintain relationships online. Users upload and share postings, pictures, videos, music etc. and use online forums and chats.

With more than 1.3 billion users worldwide, Facebook is still the largest and most influential Social network. More than 800 million users are claimed to be online every day, who spend an average 40 minutes on Facebook. Google+, a Social Network initiated by Google Inc., can be regarded as the second largest and also the fastest growing

Social Network worldwide with about 1.1 billion users. However, members are less active on Google+: Only about one third are active members, the average time spent online is 12 minutes per month.

The largest business-related online network is LinkedIn, with about 330 million members worldwide. About 40% of its members log on every day. XING is a smaller, European-based business network with growing international membership of about 14 million worldwide.

While networks like Facebook and Google+ have a more informal character and are mainly used for private reasons, they still provide opportunities for business. There is a growing field of research on how companies use and benefit from Social Media e.g. for customer relations, marketing (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011; Pit & Berthon, 2011) or, more recently, business-to-business relationships (Jussila, Kärkkäinen & Aramo-Immonen, 2013).

However, research on individual work-related use of Social Media so far has mainly focused on professional networks such as LinkedIn (Skeels & Grudin, 2009).

Furthermore, the private use of Social Media at the workplace – i.e. during working hours – has received some attention. In this regard researchers mostly focused on the time employees spend using Social Media during work and the relation of Social Media use and job performance (e.g. Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Sadat, Nichols & Chen, 2014, Landers & Callan, 2014).

The Work-related Social Media Questionnaire (WSMQ) developed by Landers and Callan (2014) measures beneficial and harmful behaviors in workplace-related Social Media usage. The authors identified eight dimensions of potentially beneficial behavior (e.g. Information Gathering, Customer Communication, Intra-office Communication, Organizational Reputation Management, Social Media as Technical Solution) as well as nine dimensions of harmful behavior (e.g. Creating Offensive Content, Time Theft, Diminishing Personal Reputation, Inappropriate Relationships). The surveys conducted by Landers and Callan (2014) showed that beneficial behaviors were unrelated to job performance while harmful behaviors were negatively related to job performance.

Another branch of research investigates the use of Social Media to support communication and collaboration among employees, e.g. in health care (Solomon, Duce, Harrison & Boness, 2012) or

software engineering (Storey, Singer, Cleary, Figueira Filho, Zagalsky, 2014). Other studies focused on the role of Social Media to support learning. Hrastinski and Aghaee (2012) found that college students feel that their Social Media usage is mostly unrelated to their studies. However, students do use Social Networks such as Facebook to initiate and keep up relationships with their fellow students. Likewise, a study by Madge et al. (2009) showed that Facebook is important for students to find new friends at the university as well as keep in touch with friends and family at home. The authors thus call Facebook “part of the ‘social glue’ that helped students settle into university life” (Madge et al., 2009, p. 148).

Apart from these findings, the relation between Social Media use and work-related social support has received little attention so far. The role of social support to cope with workplace challenges is investigated in section 2.3.

## 2.2 Social Support

Social support has long been known to be a powerful resource for buffering work-related strains and stress (e.g. Hobfoll, 2001). Social support can be defined as a “process of interaction in relationships which improves coping, esteem, belonging, and competence through actual or perceived exchanges of physical or psychosocial resources” (Gottlieb, 2000, p. 28). According to Schaefer, Coyne and Lazarus (1981) five types of social support can be distinguished: *Emotional support* relates to an individuals affective needs, such as caring and understanding, *esteem support* aims at encouraging a persons self esteem and self-confidence, while *network support* means that an individual belongs to a group of people willing to provide helpful interactions. *Information support* is provided directly by offering information to cope with a situation, and *tangible support* relates to any kind of physical assistance.

Work-related social support may be provided by colleagues and superiors as well as by family members, friends and other personal contacts.

Social support is not limited to face-to-face interactions. For example, online support groups possess great potential for providing social support (e.g. Bambina, 2007). Many studies investigate the effects of online support, especially in the field of health care and health-related behaviors, such as coping with illness (e.g. Weiss et al., 2013, Aziz, Klein & Treur, 2011).

Several studies have specifically investigated the

role of Social Networks for fostering and maintaining social support. Oh, Ozkaya & LaRose (2014) found that the number of friends in Social Networks is positively associated with supportive interactions and perceived social support. Also, interestingly, Social Network contacts may provide social support regardless of their actual real-life relationship: In a study conducted by Rozzell et al. (2014), relationally close and non-close individuals provided equal social support online for the respondent. Thus, also co-workers who are not especially close to the respondent might provide valuable social support in work-related matters.

Only few studies have specifically investigated work-related social support through Social Media. Prost, Cahour and Détienne (2010) examined interaction structures within online forums. They identified several manifestations of social support, such as sharing experiences, giving opinions, showing emotional support, or offering implicit or direct advice. The form of social support shown depends on the way the problem is presented to the online community: So-called “drama discourses” (Prost et al., 2010, p. 342) expressing emotions in a very direct way received very rich and emphatic responses, while reactions to more distanced problem report were equally distanced and lacking emotional responses.

Burke and Kraut (2013) investigated Facebook use among people who recently lost their job. They found that especially contacts who had strong ties with the respondent were able to provide social support and also help in finding a new job. However, communicating with these “strong ties” also increased the feeling of stress among the jobless, possibly because they experienced a status loss due to their unemployment. Thus, possible status gains or losses might play an important role regarding work-related social support.

### 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

In our study we investigated how people use private, non-business networks for work-related exchange and how this is related to the amount of social support they experience. In detail, the following research questions were framed:

- To what extent are non-business networks such as Facebook deliberately used by individuals (not companies) for work-related exchange?
- What benefits are associated with such work-

related use?

- What obstacles or problems are associated with work-related use?
- How is work-related use of Facebook associated with the level of social support?

To investigate these research questions an online survey was conducted among users of Facebook in Germany. The questionnaire was distributed virally. Facebook was selected because it is the most widely used Social network and also most clearly viewed as a private, non-business network. A total of N=51 persons participated in the survey (22% female, 78% male). 49% of the participants were in the age group of 35 to 44 years, 30% of participants were younger and 21% older.

The survey was conducted as part of a larger research project concerned with support measures for people with flexible and self-designed working conditions, such as freelancers and mobile workers from a wide area of industrial sectors. Therefore a large proportion of respondents fulfilled these criteria: 63% were mobile workers who travelled at least several times a month. 42% were totally free to choose their working times as they wished, another 50% had flexible time programs. Only 8% had to work at fixed hours. 50% work in their home office frequently. 15% of respondents were freelancers.

Facebook usage was measured by means of a self-constructed questionnaire. Social support was measured with the scales Emotional Support (16 items), Practical Support (9 items) and Social Integration (13 items) of the Social Support Scale (F-SozU, Fydrich et al. 2007).

## 4 RESULTS

### General Facebook Use

44% of participants use Facebook at least once a day, another 36% several times a week. Regarding private use, 37% spend less than 1 hour per week on Facebook, 48% more than 1 but less than 7 hours per week, 15% more.

Generally, Facebook is mainly used for private reasons. 62% of respondents use Facebook for private reasons only, 34% for private and business reasons and 4% for business reasons only.

Regarding their general impression of Facebook, respondents take a mildly positive view. On a Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), Facebook *ease of use* was rated an average 3.3 (SD=1.3). Respondents mainly valued the possibility to spread information quickly via Facebook (M=3.7, SD=1.5, with 46% of respondents

saying that they “totally agree”) or Facebook Groups, respectively (M=3.3, SD=1.5). Many respondents feel insecure about how Facebook uses their data (totally agree: 31%; M=3.0, SD=1.7).

**Work-related Facebook Use**

As noted above, Facebook is mainly used for private reasons. This is also reflected in work-related usage times: 81% use Facebook for an hour per week or less, only 19% between 1 and 7 hours a week.

20% of respondents communicate with business contacts via Facebook several times a month or more often, another 8% do so occasionally. 72% state that they never use Facebook for business communication. Regarding communication with customers, there is a similar picture: About 17% communicate with customers via Facebook regularly, 10% do so occasionally. 73% do not use Facebook for communication with customers.

Table 1: Engagement in work-related Facebook activities.

I use Facebook...	yes	plan to	would like to	don't like to	not at all
to keep informed about work-related matters.	28%	0%	6%	18%	48%
for work-related exchange of experiences.	25%	2%	2%	15%	56%
for work-related exchange of information.	29%	2%	4%	12%	53%
to present working results.	14%	2%	8%	6%	70%
to seek work-related advice.	12%	2%	12%	6%	68%
for advertising.	26%	0%	2%	4%	68%
to inform customers.	25%	0%	2%	8%	65%
to talk about my work situation.	12%	2%	2%	14%	70%
chat functions for work-related issues.	12%	2%	0%	6%	80%
to help others in work-related matters.	29%	6%	8%	6%	51%
to improve my working situation with information I get there.	24%	10%	10%	0%	56%
I am friends with some of my colleagues on FB.	66%	4%	6%	14%	10%
I am member of at least one work-related FB group.	27%	2%	14%	0%	57%

The respondents were asked whether they engaged in certain work-related activities on Facebook or would like to do so in the future. The results are summarized in table 1.

As can be seen from table 1, the majority of respondents do not presently engage in any of these work-related activities on Facebook, nor do they plan to do so in the future.

Nevertheless, there is some mixture of private and work-related issue: Two thirds of respondents are friends with colleagues at Facebook, another 10% plan to or would like to, respectively. Only 10% have no colleagues at all in their friends list, 14% dislike adding colleagues as friends.

The most widespread activities (about 25-30% of respondents) are related to information gathering, such as using Facebook to keep informed about work-related matters, exchanging information or keeping customers informed.

Table 2: Assessment of work-related Facebook activities.

Item	M	SD	% who totally disagree
I find it easy to detect work-related groups on Facebook.	2.5	1.5	38%
I quickly receive an answer to work-related questions on Facebook.	2.2	1.1	42%
I believe my Facebook friends to be competent regarding work-related issues.	2.3	1.4	44%
Answers to work-related questions on Facebook are satisfactory.	2.3	1.3	44%
I know my work-related Facebook friends well enough to assess their comments.	2.7	1.5	33%
I expect work-related advantages from my Facebook use.	2.1	1.4	57%
Support I received via Facebook has helped me with work-related issues.	2.0	1.2	57%
The time I spend on Facebook regarding work-related activities is worthwhile.	2.2	1.3	50%
Facebook friends help me with work-related problems.	1.9	1.2	57%
My work-related Facebook activities have been successful.	1.9	1.2	59%
I keep monitoring Facebook activities of other people who work in similar field like I do.	2.5	1.7	51%

Furthermore, it is interesting to see that respondents do support others (or would be willing

to do so) in work-related matters on Facebook, but only very few persons talk about their own work situation or seek work-related advice themselves.

The limited work-related usage is also reflected in the *assessment* of work-related Facebook activities. Most work-related Facebook activities are rated negatively, with a large proportion of respondents saying that they “totally disagree” (see table 2).

Persons who use Facebook for work-related matters do so rather globally, engaging in a wide range of activities. This is shown by high intercorrelations of Facebook-related items (Spearman’s Rho,  $\rho=.35$  to  $.86$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Likewise, more frequent Facebook use is positively correlated with a wide range of work-related Facebook activities (Spearman’s Rho,  $\rho=.30$  to  $.75$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). There are no notable differences between men and women or different age groups, respectively. Also, persons with high and low levels of home office and teleworking did not differ regarding their Facebook use.

#### Facebook Use and Social Support

Overall, respondents report a high level of social support (table 3). There are high intercorrelations between the three social support scales (Spearman’s Rho,  $.58$  to  $.70$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Table 3: Social Support measures.

Scale	M	SD
Practical Support	4.2	0.6
Emotional Support	4.5	.05
Social Integration	3.9	0.6

Note: 5-point Likert scale with 5 indicating the highest level

There are no significant correlations between social support and Facebook usage and activities. Likewise, neither men and women nor persons from different age groups, respectively, show significant differences regarding social support levels.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

In this study we investigated the use of non-business networks such as Facebook for work-related exchange and its relation to social support my means of an online survey.

Results show that while Facebook is increasingly popular among companies for advertisement and customer relations (Chan, 2011; Maurer & Wiegmann, 2011), employees still regard Facebook as a ‘private’ network. Even though most

respondents have colleagues as Facebook ‘friends’, the majority does not deliberately engage in work-related activities, such as sharing work-related experiences, talking about their work situation or seeking support for work-related matters, and also assess these kinds of activities negatively. This might, after all, be good news for companies: Despite anecdotic reports of employees posting confidential business information or ranting and raving at their colleagues and bosses online, most people seem to be rather reluctant to share work-related issues online.

The biggest benefits seem to be associated with gathering and exchanging work-related information on Facebook. Information-related activities are most widely used among our respondents. Also, joining existing work-related Facebook groups seems to be a rather promising activity.

On the other hand, people seem to be careful and reluctant when it comes to disclosing personal information and especially problems they might have at work. While many respondents are willing to help others on Facebook, they are reluctant to talk about their own work situations and seek advice. One explanation might be that people strive for a positive self-presentation via Social Media (Kim & Lee, 2011; Oh, Ozkaya & LaRose, 2014) and thus generally restrain themselves from posting information that might shed a negative light on them. This might be especially true regarding career matters, when your colleagues – or possibly competitors – are only a few clicks away.

Furthermore, privacy-related concerns might play a role regarding the negative assessment of Facebook activities: People who feel uncomfortable with Facebook’s privacy policy might prefer ‘passive’ modes of usage, like reading other’s posts to keep in touch but not posting too much information to protect one’s own privacy.

Another explanation comes from Boundary theory (e.g. Clark, 2000). Following this theoretical approach, individuals prefer to separate work and home by creating and maintaining some sort of psychological, physical, or behavioral impermeable boundaries around their life domains (Park, Jex & Fritz, 2011). Accordingly, an employee’s preference for work-home segmentation follows a “don’t mix business and pleasure”-perspective in order to recover from work-related stress and to achieve a state of psychological detachment (Sonnentag & Krueger, 2006). For example, a study conducted by Park and colleagues (2011) indicated that a preference for segmentation was not only positively associated with psychological detachment from

work. Moreover, the study's results suggest that technology use at home for work-related matters was negatively related to psychological detachment from work during non-working time. These findings could explain why engagement in work-related Facebook activities was rather low in our study.

In our study we found no relation between Facebook use and the reported level of social support. However, respondents generally experienced very high levels of social support, so variance in the data was low. More heterogeneous samples might reveal more insights how social support is affected by online communication.

Overall, about 20-30% of respondents use Facebook for a wide range of work-related issues. Another 5-15% would like to do so in the future. Judging from this, there is some potential to use Social Networks like Facebook as a vehicle to build oneself a strong support network for seeking all kinds of valuable information and advice to cope with possible work-related challenges. This applies especially to persons who already use Facebook heavily and extensively. Furthermore, almost one third of the respondents in our study stated that they help other Facebook users with work-related issues. This supporting behavior, which might function as a compensatory strategy, should be further investigated, especially in view of possible positive outcomes like higher general self-efficacy or even psychological empowerment (Wang & Lee, 2009).

In our research project we will draw on these results to explore further what strategies and actions might be helpful to build such a network. For example, people might be encouraged to ask for support among their Social Network contacts when they are in need of help, as the willingness to help others seems to be quite high.

Our study has several shortcomings. First of all, the sample size is small. We found it surprisingly difficult to motivate people to participate in the online survey. A possible explanation might be that since work-related Facebook use is obviously low, many people felt that the survey was not relevant for them. Due to the small sample size, also a number of more detailed analyses (e.g. regarding different businesses and industry sectors or employees vs. freelancers) were not possible. Furthermore, to keep the survey reasonably small, other important variables regarding job conditions and satisfaction were not included. Thirdly, we focused on Facebook in this first step, while other networks like Google+ were not included.

We are currently preparing a larger online panel to address these issues. This will also allow us to

include people from a wider range of different professions and working conditions and compare them regarding their work-related use of Social Media.

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