



BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY LEADERSHIP

# SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY EVERYONE WILL

**... OR AT LEAST RESPECT.  
HOW THE PROVINCE OF  
ONTARIO IS RESPONDING TO  
THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT ITS  
FACEBOOK STANCE **PAGE 16****

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**SPECIAL ISSUE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**



# Virtual value

The old “loose lips sink ships” adage doesn’t make a lot of sense in a world dominated by Facebook, Google+ and Twitter. How to effectively foster knowledge management in a social media era

By John P. Girard, Cindy Gordon and JoAnn L. Girard

**D**uring World War II, the United States launched a very successful campaign titled “loose lips sink ships.” The premise of the campaign was to remind U.S. servicemen and women, especially those serving in England awaiting the D-day invasion, that they must not share anything that might allow the enemy to learn of the Allies’ war plans. Well, it seems that 60 years later this culture of “need to know” is alive and well in many organizations. Perhaps the adage of today should be “tight lips, business slips” because we believe that failure to share frequently results in lost opportunities.

To illustrate the point, here is a short story that we included in *A Leader’s Guide to Knowledge Management*. The story is loosely based on a real company, but given we embellished a few parts to make our point, we must declare it is a fictional company. Let us call them IQ.

IQ is a well-known brand that for many years operated with a divisional organization structure. Once a year, each of the divisional vice presidents was afforded the opportunity to brief the board of directors on their plans for the future. This rare occasion was seen to be a time when senior executives could describe the next big thing that would provide IQ with a competitive advantage.

One year, the printer division’s

vice president was extremely excited about his time with the board. He was sure the directors would agree that his new idea, a printer that could also scan, would be a history-making innovative product, a must-have for many small businesses. The R&D arm of the printer division had been working secretly on the project for some time. After investing considerable resources, their prototype was ready to be showcased to the board. They were very proud of their clandestine operation; it was quite a coup that none of the technology press had picked up on their work.

Finally, the big day arrived. The vice president was waiting patiently in the anteroom reviewing his presentation. Suddenly, an unprecedented level of applause from inside the boardroom interrupted his thoughts. Shortly afterward the vice president of the scanner division emerged, smiling, and clearly happy with her performance in the room. The printer executive politely asked his colleague why the board erupted into applause. After a short pause, she replied, “I just showed the board our prototype for the next big thing . . . a scanner that can also print.” Needless to say, the printer executive was no longer excited about briefing the board.

The moral of the story is that a “need to know” culture, which is commonplace in many technology companies, does not facilitate knowledge sharing. Here is a case where senior executives did not share, let

alone collaborate on the project. Imagine if the two divisions shared resources and knowledge to design the printer scanner. Regrettably, many organizations fall victim to the organizational malady because they do not foster a collaborative environment with a need to share philosophy.

Of course we are not recommending that organizational leaders haphazardly tell the competition everything, nor are we encouraging employees to deliberately sabotage companies by releasing critical information. However, somewhere between “need to know” and “give everything to WikiLeaks,” there is an organizational culture that encourages and rewards responsible sharing.

Many people would agree that the “need to know” philosophy is a common trait of the so-called Baby Boomer Generation, those born between about 1946 and 1964. Well, if the Baby Boomers are the need to know generation, then it might be said that the Millennial Generation, those born between about 1980

and 2000, might be the need to share generation.

This is the generation that grew up digital, hardwired to everything; in other words, they are the group of children who had access to technology at a very young age. We are not generally huge fans of the labels that are attached to various age groups; these labels are loaded with assumptions.

For example, when we generalize by saying the millennials grew up digital, that ignores the fact that many millennials grew up in homes where technology was considered a luxury and not universally available—often referred to as the digital divide.

Understanding that we must be careful not to generalize, it is true to say that many of the millennials did grow up digital and many have adopted a culture where they openly share. Frequently, we hear educators, parents, and other stakeholders comment that the youth of today share too much and that they will regret their openness in the future. We have all heard stories of high school students sharing pictures or stories on social media sites that are inappropriate and have career implications downstream or moments of embarrassment that cannot be erased from the permanent web. We are not necessarily convinced this inappropriate sharing is unique to the millennials, as we have often read of much more “mature” people falling into the same trap. The difference might be that for the millennials sharing is a natural trait, whereas for the others it might be a learned trait.

There is research that sup-



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ports that different age groups share at different levels. Returning to the Forrester research that resulted in groundswell, we can see some compelling evidence. For example, using the creator category of the Social Technographic ladder as an example, we see a distinct difference by age. Based on Forrester's most recent research that was conducted in early 2010 and included 26,913 respondents, we learned that different age groups of creators share more frequently. Recall that creators are those adult Internet users who write or upload video, music, or text, in other words share what they know. The following is a breakdown by age group and the percentage of each age group that create content (share):

- 46% of 18– 24 year olds create and share content
- 32% of 25– 34 year olds create and share content
- 23% of 35– 44 year olds create and share content
- 19% of 45– 54 year olds create and share content
- 12% of those 55 or older create and share content

Perhaps the time is right to stop the debate on the merits of sharing and instead harness the power of the desire to share. Is there a way that your organization can benefit from the desire of the younger people to share what they know? Is there a way that you can develop cross-generational teams that combine the sharing talents of the 18– 24-year-olds with the vast organizational knowledge of the 55 and older group? Explore how to infuse the uniqueness of each generation into a corporate culture that embraces collaboration and knowledge sharing leveraging as the preferred working styles, as not everyone will want to use solutions like Yammer for microblogging or wikis for shared document cocreation. Let's also not forget the importance of real authentic voice-to-voice conversations and the art of effective discourse or dialogue. Dialogue is essential online or offline to solve the large problems of a multicultural or global society. Finding a way that allows humans to talk, think, and act together makes it possible to talk across our differences and invent new directions. To have successful collaboration outcomes, dialogue is a key competency that cannot be overlooked.

Dr. William Isaacs is the pioneer in this area. "Effective dialogue is often

the missing link that frees people to take a quantum leap in vision and action," he says. "If everybody got the idea that there's a different way to talk and think together, the seed of a very new kind of interaction could begin to sprout." Isaacs, who in 1990 cofounded MIT's Organizational Learning Center, is now a lecturer at the Sloan School of Management and is director of the Institute's Dialogue Project. People who think and talk together effectively possess the following qualities:

- **Listening.** We must listen not only to others but to ourselves, dropping our assumptions, resistance and reactions.
- **Respecting.** We must allow rather than try to change people with a different viewpoint.
- **Suspending.** We must suspend our opinions, step back, change direction, and see with new eyes.
- **Voicing.** We must speak our own voice. Find our own authority, giving up the need to dominate.

One of the key factors we need to ensure we appreciate as we undergo this social 24/7 connected transition is to understand that the Internet may also be an attempt of our isolated culture to somehow return to community values. People seem to imagine that if we are digitally connected, then we would all be in touch, and the great malaise of the age—the isolation and disconnection many of us feel— would be allayed.

But so far, the digital revolution is giving us connection but not necessarily human contact with its richest senses of touch. As the future unfolds and simulated touch and smell is integrated into the networks and web experiences, it will be more difficult for us to tell what is real or artificial. We can send more information to each other via social networking solutions, but we are not necessarily any more capable of sharing understanding, insight, wisdom, or our hearts. Learning to talk and think together in honest and effective ways is an essential element to true human connectedness. Let's ensure as the communication means evolve, we also not forget what it is to be uniquely human. 

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*–Lloyd Bryant, Vice President and General Manager, Hp Canada*

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