

Professional Benefits of Online Social Networking

by Madeline Kriescher

Online social networking has become a fairly common way to keep in touch with friends and family, and it holds equal promise for building business and professional relationships. Networking, as a general concept, has always been important for business professionals, whether it entails trading business cards at a conference, exchanging war stories at a cocktail party, or meeting prospective clients or colleagues on the golf course. Networking is particularly important to legal professionals, not only to generate new clients, but also to build an arsenal of topical expertise and professional courtesy.

This article discusses online social networks and the ever-growing importance they hold in the business and professional world. Included in this article is an explanation about the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking, as well as examples of different types of applications and tools that can be especially useful for lawyers.

Defining Online Social Networks

Online social networks are relationships that develop out of computer-facilitated discussions about shared ideas or common interests. Online social networking continues to move into the mainstream through personal and professional computer use, with hundreds of millions of hits per month on a variety of sites. Frequently used sites among the general public, such as Facebook,¹ MySpace,² Bebo,³ Orkut,⁴ and Zude,⁵ are gaining popularity among businesses, and are gaining widespread use in academic libraries, law firms, and government agencies to promote events, offer tutorials and training, facilitate discussions, and post useful information. As more professionals use social networking sites for business-related purposes, more sites that cater to specific professional groups are being developed.

Social Networking in the Business World

Trampoline Systems (TS), a provider of enterprise social intelligence tools, studied enterprise social networking, surveying 111 businesses (including law firms and law-related organizations) in the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶ According to survey results, 88 percent of businesses are eager to start using social networking primarily to advance business functionality. Similarly, 84 percent of businesses reported that social networking could be used to share knowledge and expertise with colleagues across both large and small organizations. Additionally, 69 percent of those surveyed are eager to open connections and interact with colleagues whom they don't already personally know—which is something social networking tools make possible.

According to the TS survey, the top concern of businesses is that social networks are not integrated or interactive with other information technology systems. Often, too much time is expended entering personal information as opposed to business information, thus distracting employees from their work.⁷ Some organizations have chosen to block employee access to online social networking tools, so businesses may need to consult with internal information technology (IT) departments to make sure that online social networks are compatible with existing IT systems.

A new survey of 650 attorneys jointly commissioned by Lexis Nexis® and Martindale.com® indicates that almost 50 percent of U.S. attorneys are members of online social networks and more than 40 percent of attorneys believe that professional networking has the potential to change the practice of law over the next five years.⁸ However, less than 10 percent of responding attorneys said they can rely on their current business network to help them work more efficiently, and more than half said it was hard to stay connected to peers and colleagues from their workplace.⁹ More than 40 percent



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of the 650 attorneys surveyed said they would join an online social network designed specifically for the legal profession.¹⁰

Real-World Functionality

Today's global business marketplace requires a method of communication that is simultaneously fast, interconnected yet private, and easy to manage. Too, the faltering and unpredictable economy highlights the need for alternatives to in-person meetings and conferences with costly attributes. This is where an online social network can shine.

When created by an organization for internal use, an online social network can become an integral resource for collecting and disseminating shared knowledge. For example, attorneys and support staff could use an internal social network to house information on firm-wide policies and procedures that otherwise might be hard to find.

Networking technologies that nobody uses are of no value to either the business or the employee. To develop a successful internal online social network, an organization must understand the needs of potential users, develop a certain level of technological expertise, and be prepared to put that expertise to use. The success of networking is self-generating: the more users, the better the odds for productive connections.¹¹

Widespread Idea Exchange

Large law firms that are geographically diverse could benefit from an internal social networking system that allows for more effective and efficient collaboration, communication, and exchange of ideas. Corporate social networks may help minimize inbox clutter, reducing the amount of time spent answering and deleting e-mails, thus allowing employees to make real-time connections and get almost immediate answers to business-related questions.

E-mails can be disruptive, intrusive, and annoying, whereas social networks allow people to choose what they want to read, use, and discuss. In an age when we are bombarded by information, having the option to pick and choose what is most useful and expeditious can be a welcome relief.

Recruitment and Hiring

Many law firms already are using online social networking sites to recruit new associates, as well as to check the "online persona" of prospective new hires. With some thoughtful planning and knowledgeable implementation, online social networks could enable a law firm to enhance relationships among geographically distant offices. These networks also can provide an ongoing context for knowledge exchange; attune lawyers and support staff to each other's needs; and multiply intellectual capital by the power of social capital, thus increasing social cohesion, amplifying innovation, and creating a collective memory and a place to store and share knowledge and ideas.

Security Concerns

Online social networks are not without pitfalls. The online medium can harbor hidden dangers for lawyers and law firms, because social networking sites and their users are not immune from hacking and other forms of online exploitation. Many online social networks contain features that are necessary to create the kind of open environment that is critical for the network to function at

its best; however, these features may create some structural security issues.

Security concerns cited by professionals include the inability to verify someone's identity on a social networking site as one of the biggest risks.¹² Other security issues include hacking a system and running malicious code or exploiting trusted websites that may be embedded within a social networking site.

Law firms can combat these security issues by removing links to external content; limiting plug-ins or applications that require access to the Internet to function; requiring separate e-mail verification for use of the social network; and establishing strict security guidelines and policies. Firms also can choose to limit the online social network to internal access only, thus controlling who is granted access in the first place. Of course, implementing any or all of these security measures depends on the nature of the social network and what the firm has deemed its ultimate goal or purpose.¹³

Samples of Existing Online Networking Sites

The following are examples of some of the general and specialized online social networking sites that exist. Included in this list are social networking tools and applications that can be useful for enhancing communication and collaboration within an organization.¹⁴ Also, *see* the accompanying sidebar for a list of resources dealing with online social networking.

Blogs and Microblogs

Blogs (an abbreviation for the term "Web log") are maintained sites with regular entries of commentary or news on various topics. Many blogs function as personal online diaries, but blogs also can focus on current events, history, travel, and politics. "Niche blogs," such as law or legal blogs (also called "blawgs"), allow legal professionals to connect, collaborate, and communicate externally with the legal community or internally within an organization or firm. Some good examples of blawg resources include Blawg-search,¹⁵ Law Professor Blogs,¹⁶ and the American Bar Association's Top 100 Blawg List.¹⁷

Helpful Social Networking References
<p>Interested in learning more about online social networking? Below are four articles that provide helpful information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Cohen, "Keeping Secrets: Strong Internal Policies Can Allow Firms To Reap the Benefits of Blogs—and Avoid Getting Burned," <i>The American Lawyer</i> (June 2007). ➤ Dykstra, "Practice Online Social Networking Safely" (Oct. 13, 2008), available at www.law.com/jsp/legaltechnology/PubArticleFriendlyLT.jsp?id=1202425202281. ➤ Kimball and Rheingold, "How Online Social Networks Benefit Organizations" (March–April 2008), available at www.rheingold.com/Associates/onlinenetworks.html. ➤ Rubin, "Structure Your Schmooze (Online Social Networking)," <i>New Jersey Law Journal</i> (March 3, 2008), available at www.theedventuresgroup.com/NJ_Law.pdf.

Blogging through the use of multimedia text updates is known as “microblogging.” Microblogging may occur via short message service (SMS) or multimedia message service (MMS) text messaging, instant messaging (IM), MP3, e-mail, or the Internet. Generally, microblogs are limited to 140 characters. The abbreviated nature of microblogs makes them particularly useful for business and professional communication, because the posts tend to be more topically focused and relevant to the needs and interests of the user.

Usually, microblogs are targeted to a specific user group or network, sometimes within a corporation or law firm. This way, posts can be kept pertinent, as well as private and confidential. Many businesses use microblogs to disseminate business-related news items and event announcements, build knowledge networks, and collaborate within an established network of peers. Some active microblogging sites are: Twitter,¹⁸ Jaiku,¹⁹ Pownce,²⁰ Tumblr,²¹ and Plurk.²²

Social Bookmarking Tools

Social bookmarks allow users to post a list of favorite websites, or “bookmarks,” for others to search and view. Bookmarks can be tagged with metadata and shared publicly. They also can be kept private or shared only inside certain networks. Social library sites such as GoodReads²³ and LibraryThing²⁴ allow users to keep track of books, share collections, and give or receive recommendations.

Social citation services, such as Connotea²⁵ and CiteULike,²⁶ offer online reference management aimed at scientists and re-

searchers. Some of the more popular social bookmarking sites available include: Delicious,²⁷ Furl,²⁸ Digg,²⁹ StumbleUpon,³⁰ Reddit,³¹ Mixx,³² and Diigo.³³

Business and Professional Tools

Below are sites that cater specifically to professionals for use in a place of business.

➤ LinkedIn³⁴ is a business-oriented social networking site used primarily to make professional connections. Connections can be made within a certain profession, business-to-business, or simply by establishing contact with other “professional” individuals. LinkedIn can be used to find jobs, to make or obtain professional referrals and recommendations, or to get in touch with former classmates or colleagues.

➤ Advogato³⁵ is an online community site dedicated to free software development.

➤ Cake Financial³⁶ is a financial services social network that lets individual investors share portfolio information.

➤ Ryze³⁷ is a business-oriented social networking site aimed specifically at new entrepreneurs.

➤ Yelp³⁸ combines the Internet “Yellow Pages” with a social networking site.

➤ YoungFeds³⁹ is a social networking site geared toward young professionals in the federal government.

➤ Plaxo⁴⁰ is a multifaceted tool for managing, tracking, and networking with contacts across multiple platforms.

► Ning⁴¹ is an online service that allows a user to create a customized social network.

Some online applications that are specific to legal professionals include: LegalAdda,⁴² LegalRow,⁴³ Lawyrs,⁴⁴ CasemakerX,⁴⁵ and the Virtual Legal Professionals Network on Ning.⁴⁶

Other Tools

Flickr⁴⁷ is a photo and video sharing site owned by Yahoo, and was one of the first 2.0 applications on the Web. Flickr allows users to “tag” photos and videos with metadata for easy storage and retrieval. The social networking aspects of Flickr have developed over time, and users are now able to join groups and share media. Libraries are increasingly using Flickr to create, store, and disseminate tutorials and training materials. Flickr’s URLs are unique and can be posted on and linked to other sites for increased sharing. Importantly for law firms, Flickr includes privacy settings, so photos and videos can be shared publicly, within certain networks, or not at all.

DiffDaff⁴⁸ is a free utility that enables a direct comparison between two files, folders, or websites, and shows the differences line by line. This online collaboration tool could help facilitate information exchange among remote offices or two or more attorneys working on the same case.

Conclusion

The sites listed in this article represent only a handful of the social networking tools and applications that are available on the Internet. As interest in and use of these online tools increase, more choices will become available. Organizations, especially law firms, can benefit from the growing trend in online niche resources. By exploring options and implementing and integrating new technologies, lawyers can avoid being outdone by better-connected, hyper-networked colleagues and competitors. Online social networks can facilitate valuable connections and be the fuel for future online networking advances.

Notes

1. See www.facebook.com.
2. See www.myspace.com.
3. See www.bebo.com.
4. See www.orkut.com.
5. See www.zude.com (in Beta only; now closed).
6. “Global Research from Trampoline Systems Reveals 88 Percent of Businesses Ready to Deploy Enterprise Social Networking” (June 24, 2008), available at www.trampolinesystems.com/news/press+release/14.
7. Hane, “Social Networking and Collaboration Platforms Lead the News,” *Information Today* (Sept. 2008).
8. “Survey Reveals Growth in Online Professional Networking Among Legal Professionals, Appetite for Lawyer-Specific Network-

ing Solutions” (July 10, 2008), available at www.pr-inside.com/print696738.htm.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. Jardin, “Online Social Networks Go to Work” (2008), available at www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5488683.

12. Dykstra, “Practice Online Social Networking Safely” (2006), available at www.law.com/jsp/legaltechnology/PubArticleFriendlyLT.jsp?id=1202425202281.

13. For examples of sites offering frequently asked questions and general information about security measures, see www.us-cert.gov/cas/tips/ST06-003.html or web2.blogtells.com/2008/04/10/basic-net-work-security-measures-part-1.

14. The networking tools mentioned in this article are not meant to indicate a preference or promotion by the author.

15. See blawgsearch.justia.com.

16. See www.lawprofessorblogs.com.

17. See abajournal.com/magazine/aba_journal_blawg_100.

18. See www.twitter.com.

19. See www.jaiku.com.

20. The pownce.com site shut down on Dec. 15, 2008, after the blogging company merged with another software company. See www.readwriteweb.com/archives/sixapart_hires_pownce_founders.php.

21. See www.tumblr.com.

22. See www.plurk.com.

23. See www.goodreads.com.

24. See www.librarything.com.

25. See www.connotea.org.

26. See www.citeulike.org.

27. See delicious.com.

28. See www.furl.net.

29. See digg.com.

30. See www.stumbleupon.com.

31. See www.reddit.com.

32. See www.mixx.com.

33. See www.diigo.com.

34. See www.linkedin.com.

35. See www.advogato.org.

36. See www.cakefinancial.com.

37. See www.ryze.com.

38. See www.yelp.com.

39. See youngfeds.org.

40. See www.plaxo.com.

41. See www.ning.com.

42. See www.legaladda.com.

43. See connect.legalrow.com.

44. See www.lawyrs.net.

45. See www.casemakerx.com/home.php. See article in the *ABA Journal* on CasemakerX, available at abajournal.com/news/casemakerx_new_social_network_for_law_students.

46. See vlpnetwork.ning.com.

47. See www.flickr.com.

48. See at www.diffdaff.com. ■