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The use of Social Media on board the Ship: Friend or Foe?

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Abstract. The present paper aims to analyze some of the implications of the use of social media on board the ships, from a holistic viewpoint. The widespread use of social media tools has started as a blessing, especially for seafarers, and has helped a lot in bridging the gap between family and work. However, the implications of the use of social media are only now starting to become apparent, as Internet access on board the ships has improved in the last decade, and is continuing to do so as we speak.

1. Introduction

As technology advances, our lives are impacted by the use of specialized apparatuses. In a day and age when the routine of social media is comparable to that of drinking water, it is important to understand, use, and limit the impact this type of technology has on day-to-day operations, as well as to benefit as much as possible from its advantages. It is also crucial that a Company Social Media Policy should be in place, in order to acquaint the employees with the Company's view regarding confidential information. Another important aspect to be kept in mind, when comprising an exhaustive Social Media Policy, is the use of social media in emergency situations. Even though it tends to become a widespread problem, the use of social media during an emergency should be limited, as the safety of all those involved must be a priority.

2. Day-to-day Use of Social Media

Recent technological advancements have proved to be beneficial, especially in the Maritime sector. On the one hand, seafarers' access to the labor market has significantly improved, allowing for seafarers all over the world to apply for positions with any company in the world. Applications may be downloaded with the click of a button, completed, scanned and sent to a hundred companies. This climate has allowed the recreation of the company culture, with shipping companies fighting for a high retention rate and highly qualified personnel. In this way, the standing of the brand and notoriety become an asset in a very competitive work field. This has translated to the exponential growth of the branding field, which is not just unilaterally attended by the employee, as more and more employers become more attuned to their employees' needs.

The most important process which has been improved with the help of the internet is recruiting. [1] It is now easier to select the most qualified individual for a position, however, it is also equally accessible for a potential employee to connect to people already working for a prospective employer, whether they are satisfied with the current working conditions, or looking to relocate. Along these lines, social media may be regarded as both an employer branding tool and an employee branding instrument. Functioning not only as an instrument to appeal to potential workers, but also as a way to engage "current employees [...] in the culture and the strategy of the firm," [2] employer branding is

very much present in the maritime field today. Furthermore, company branding employs other notions such as “reputation, attractiveness, image and brand equity” [3]

Even though the end goal has remained the same – hiring knowledgeable and skilled workers, the means have improved with the introduction of social media, especially social media tools, such as LinkedIn, targeted at the professional environment. The use of these instruments simplifies the employment procedure, both for the company seeking skilled laborers, and for the people searching for a company culture which they can adhere to. [3]

An equally important aspect to be kept in mind is that social media creates a more personal connection between a seafarer who is on board a vessel and his family back home, than other internet tools such as an e-mail address. Recent studies suggest that the “separation from partner and family has been found to be one of the most significant causes of stress for seafarers,” [4] Even though it is a point taken into account by seafarers, missing one’s family, in addition to the added stress that comes with the job, sometimes results in a complication. Furthermore, “separation from the family one of the most important ‘stress’ factors influencing a decision to reduce planned sea service.” [4] This translates to a poor retention rate, with more and more seafarers renouncing sea-going jobs in favor of office jobs. [5]

In fact, family pressure is the first motivation presented by most of the seafarers who renounce sea employment, due to the difficulty of starting and raising a family from a distance. According to Michael Barnett, “This major incentive to leave the sea stems from the requirements of the modern family, where it is expected that both parties will pursue a career, making the efforts of both necessary in relation to the child caring demands made by the young family. This economic development during the last forty years has resulted in a growing pressure on young seafarers with families to find a shore job.”[6] In this way, the technological advancements are not the only ones influencing the maritime field, as social changes in the last decades have left their mark on every aspect of a seafarer’s life. However, social media does provide a solid basis for communication, as it allows seafarers more personal contact with their loved ones at home. In the social situation presented above, where the parent who lives at home permanently feels overwhelmed by social and parental duties, the internet gives a helping hand, by allowing the person on board to be a part of everyday life.

3. Use of social media in an emergency situation

As previously mentioned, the use of social media in an emergency situation should be discouraged, as the safety and security of all people involved must be a priority. In addition, there are a number of factors that should be considered in an emergency situation, including, but not limited to missing seafarers or people injured in accidents, or even the general state of confusion.

Current research advocates that “social media sites are the fourth most popular source to access emergency information, [...] used by individuals and communities to warn others of unsafe areas or situations, inform friends and family that someone is safe, and raise funds for disaster relief.” [6] What this implies is that, over the years, gradually, people’s preferred source of news has changed, from classic media to the internet and social media.

This usage of social media during disasters has two main directions: a passive dissemination of information, and an emergency management tool.[7] Both of these categories may indeed prove very helpful, as the spreading of information may be done in a preemptive manner, and an emergency broadcast is much more effective when it reaches more people; however, malevolent resolve should also be taken into consideration when dealing with pieces of information which may be difficult to confirm.

During emergencies, social media acts as an informal channel of communication, bringing together individuals who ask for information and people who have the information. As such, companies should work together with public officials, in order to determine the best course of action: “In disaster situations, responders can no longer ignore the medium; they must understand how to best utilize it to further enhance disaster response and recovery efforts.” [8]

Another point to be taken into account is that the public tends to view social media as an unbiased supplier of information, unlike the government, for instance. It is also the case during the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, when “respondents trusted the news media more for information about the spill than the government or BP” [9] This particular research emphasizes the public’s participation, especially in issues of this magnitude. What is more, in the case of the 2010 BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, the public proved to be interested in learning about the technical part of the issue, by researching technical problems online. [10]

As more and more people become aware of the importance of engaging social media in a methodical way, in case of a disaster, the true face of social media becomes more apparent. It is obvious that companies, as well as emergency responders, should learn to use social media as an aide in important situations, without prejudicing people’s lives and safety. It should also be mentioned that social media provides people unlimited access to information which may become sensible during a disaster such as an oil spill.

4. Company Social Media Policy

Considering the above information, a Company Social Media Policy should be in place, in order to prevent such things from happening. Without prejudicing freedom of speech, a Company Social Media Policy should consider all social media tools and their applicability to the Company’s situation. For instance, if the Company’s intent is to communicate with the public, a restrictive social media policy, which eliminates external comments, would be somewhat ineffective. In order to avoid such unnecessary restraints, the Company should ask input from the legal team, the safety and security team, as well as human resources.

This would provide the Company with a holistic and comprehensive policy, which would benefit from a shared effort on behalf of a multifunctional team. It is also easier to take existing rules and regulations from other procedures and reuse them in a social media policy, than it is to create a whole set of guidelines. It is also essential to discuss discrepancies between the proposed regulations and the Company’s existing rules. In addition, it would be recommendable to have a social media policy enforcer, a designated person who would handle social media accounts and oversee comments.

It is important to consider account management, in order to keep track of all information posted on behalf of the company, as there should be a clear distinction between personal, professional and official use of social media. For example, “the US Air Force encourages its members to think of themselves as on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week when it comes to social media use.” [11] This suggests that people should always be aware of what they post online and how this can affect the reputation of the Company. This is very important to consider, seeing that most companies already have a set of guidelines regarding employee conduct, and it can easily be modified to accommodate the use of social media.

It is also in the interest of the company to browse content related to organizational issues. Some type of content management should also be considered, in order to ensure the accuracy of the published data. Furthermore, legal matters and sensitive subjects ought to be taken into account; including problems such as posting on social media during a disaster, a fact that the social media policy should strictly regulate.

5. Conclusion

The emergence of new patterns of communication, such as the use of social media, has changed the way in which individuals communicate on a daily basis. This translates to a change that is becoming obvious in all aspects of life, from advertising or searching for a job, up to and including communication during a disaster. From a maritime perspective, the use of social media on board a ship, as well as in a shore office, should be regulated through a company social media policy, which would guide the employees to understand what is in everybody’s best interest. In addition, the company’s social media presence should seek, among other things, to increase the company’s reputation, in order to attract qualified staff. In this regard, work still needs to be done in establishing

guidelines for best practices, but the maritime world is closer to reaching a consensus in relation to the widespread use of social media.

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