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THE JOURNAL REPORT: LEADERSHIP IN HUMAN RESOURCES

Your Employee Is an Online Celebrity. Now What Do You Do?

Mixing social media and on-the-job duties can be a win-win. Or not.

By ALEXANDRA SAMUEL

Meet your newest management headache: the co-branded employee.

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A growing number of professionals are using social media to build a personal, public identity—a brand of their own—based on their work. Think of an accountant who writes a widely read blog about auditing, or a sales associate who has attracted a big following online by tweeting out his store's latest deals.

Co-branded employees may exist largely below the radar now, but that's changing fast, and employers need to start preparing for the ever-greater challenges they pose for managers, co-workers and companies. Their activities can either complement a company's own brand image or clash with it. Companies that fail to make room for co-branded employees—or worse yet, embrace them without thinking through the implications—risk alienating or losing their best employees, or confusing or even burning their corporate brand.

Part of this change is generational. Younger employees show up on the job with an existing social-media presence, which they aren't about to abandon—especially since they see their personal brands lasting longer than any single job or career.

Social-media services like LinkedIn and [Facebook](#) also encourage users to build networks and share their professional as well as personal expertise. And increasingly, companies are recognizing that these activities have a business value. When a management consultant leads a large LinkedIn group, he builds a valuable source of referrals and recruitment prospects; when a lawyer tweets the latest legal news, she positions her firm as the go-to experts in that field. How can an employer resist?



Viktor Koen

And yet, there is a downside: Co-branded employees can raise tough questions about how to contain their online activities—and how to compensate them. It also isn't easy for managers to balance responsibilities among the bloggers and nonbloggers within a team. And it takes an effort to make sure employees' brands align with the company's.

To ensure that co-branded employees benefit a company, rather than undermine it, managers need to consider these questions:

Can they tweet on the job? A management consultant with a top-ranked blog on business efficiency might sound like a tremendous asset, but colleagues slogging through work for clients may not appreciate the hours she spends online, especially since social networks like Twitter depend on round-the-clock and not just after-hours engagement.

Co-Branding Balance Sheet

Pluses and minuses of having employees with their own social-media identities



PRESTIGE The company that can claim the top-ranked blogger, tweeter or influencer on a subject will be the go-to shop for customers.

LEADS The employee who engages in regular online conversations is building relationships that can be converted into new customers.

FREE MEDIA Employees with a significant online following will get inexpensive attention for your company from journalists looking for experts.

RECRUITMENT Companies that employ social-media stars will attract other high-achieving, driven professionals.



PRIMA DONNAS A few thousand Twitter followers or LinkedIn connections can lead to inflated egos—and inflated salary expectations.

DISTRACTION Co-branded employees may devote so much time to cultivating their own global brand that they neglect their core duties.

LEAKS Employees may deliberately or accidentally use internal or client information as social-media fodder.

RESENTMENT Social-media celebrities may damage team cohesion or inspire complaints

Co-branded employees should get some workday time for activities that support the company's goals. But setting limits on those activities, along with clear expectations for what else these employees need to accomplish, can help ensure that they complete their primary work and avoid resentment from their nonblogging, nontweeting colleagues.

Where is credit due? When a tweeting travel agent thanks his colleague for pointing him to the latest great travel deal he's now sharing online, that colleague may be delighted—or annoyed that her deal has been scooped. If a professional posts information, stories or insights gleaned in part from his day-to-day-work, chances are his colleagues are indirect contributors. Setting formal guidelines for attribution, using senior executives' blogs as models and encouraging employees to ask their colleagues how to parcel out credit can all help address this challenge.

How much should brands align? It doesn't take a dramatic misfire for a co-branded employee to prove problematic. An overall focus or tone that is off brand or a single tweet that strays—seemingly innocently enough—from the company message may undermine your overall marketing and communications efforts. Even a LinkedIn profile can undercut your brand's positioning—if it focuses on an employee's cost-cutting genius, for instance, while the company brand is built on quality rather than price.

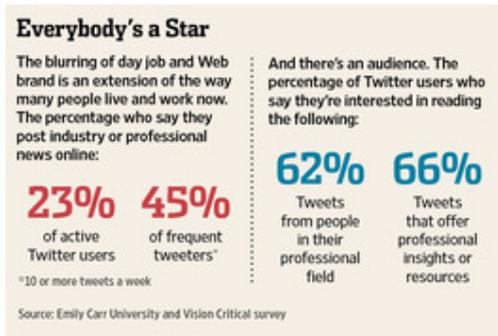
Your communications or marketing team may be able to offer basic branding or media-relations advice to employees with public social-media presence, but you will need to tread carefully to avoid discouraging or inflaming those employees.

What is a social-media presence worth? A significant online following may feed an employee's expectations of a raise or a promotion, particularly if a social network yields tangible business benefits. A pharmaceuticals sales rep whose LinkedIn network grows from 500 to 5,000 doctors and hospital administrators may ask for more zeros in her base salary, too. But providing those rewards may engender resentment in team members who aren't so prominent online.

Setting transparent guidelines for rewarding employees' social-media presence and providing

alternative advancement and bonus opportunities for social-media-shy employees can accomplish two things: encourage employees to raise their profiles online, if that's what the company wants, and make it clear that developing a personal brand isn't the only path to success.

Who owns that blog? A recruiter who builds a huge Twitter following for the advice and information she doles out on hiring and managing Generation Y may see that account as her property, even if she's done a lot of her tweeting during business hours. But for her company, that following is an asset supporting the business's branding and recruitment efforts—an asset that could walk out the door if she moves on.



Nor must an employee leave the job for the ownership of intellectual property to become an issue: An employee placing [Google Adwords](#) on a blog that features workplace-driven insights is deriving revenue from ideas that are developed at least in part between 9 and 5.

Establishing a clear understanding of who owns online content and what kind of revenue can be derived from it can help avoid awkward (and public) conflicts.

Encouraging or requiring employees to give their blog posts a Creative Commons license (so that they can be reposted by both employer and employee) may offer a partial solution, though a blog that enjoys runaway success might raise complicated questions if a book deal materializes.

Depending on your corporate culture and risk tolerance, you may want to embrace the business benefits of co-branded employees by giving them lots of latitude to build their social-media presence. Or you may opt for tight limits on work-related social-media activities, to control your brand and manage risks.

Either way, clear expectations and guidelines are essential—both to avoid problems, and to attract and retain employees who fit your corporate culture, and your brand, online and off.

Dr. Samuel is a social-media researcher in Vancouver, British Columbia, most recently as the director of the Social and Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

The Readers Weigh In: Social Networks at Work

How would you describe your at-work social-media activity—professional, personal, a mix? Here's a sampling of reader comments from a WSJ.com poll.

I am social networking for both. I love what I do and I love who I work for, and I think others should know about the awesome things we do.

-- *Marissa Nicole Bernardy*

As social media manager for our company, I, along with our CEO, fully support the employees who engage in social media at work. A lot of helpful and insightful content can be found on the various social media channels, a lot of which directly benefits the work our employees do. Colleagues share great articles and findings with one another as well.

I see a lot of creativity within social media and the more employees who see that as well, the better!

-- *Cheryl Joost*

The only way for a company to compete in this massive metamorphosis of information dispersement is to open up its social media doors. Allowing your employees to be "brand

ambassadors" on social media dramatically increases a brand's reach. Having an employee leave with their built-up following is a risk that businesses are going to have to take.

-- *Anthony Pernicka*

Companies should focus on creating the ultimate employee experience, so when/if they leave, former employees will happily market the company.

-- *Greg Odum*

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