

# Social media use by managers from B2B companies in the Basque Region of northern Spain

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study analyzes the opinion of business managers as to the usefulness of Social Media tools for their job, along with the specific tasks they were involved in.

**Design:** Six in-depth interviews were held with six business managers working for eight companies; seven in The Basque region in Spain and one in Germany.

**Findings:** The study shows that regardless of the particular Social Media strategy of the company where they worked, all managers had a profile on several social networking sites. The monitoring being done on SM went beyond observing what the competition was doing in relation to their specific business; it also observed the strategy that competitors, customers and suppliers implemented in the Social Media.

**Limitations:** Most of the interviewees worked for B2B companies in the Basque region of Spain.

**Practical implications:** Practitioners and managers can learn about what their colleagues are doing in the sphere of SM. This study provides an idea of how to integrate the SM strategy within the overall corporate strategy, making efficient use of these tools, and thus achieving their communication goals.

**Keywords:** professional contacts; monitoring competitors; guidelines for use; employees; B2B markets.

**JEL codes:** D83, L14, O33.

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# 有关在西班牙北部巴斯克地区企业管理层使用社交媒体的情况

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## 文章摘要

**研究目的：**本研究主要分析六位为一共八家企业的管理层人员对社交媒体工具在其工作上的用处的评价，并表述他们的具体工作任务。

**分析方法：**通过对六位在八家企业当管理层人员进行深入访问，取得研究数据。在八家企业中，七家位于巴斯克地区，一家位于德国。

**研究结论：**研究结果显示，所有专业人士，不论其企业策略如何，都在某一些社交网站上拥有其专业履历。社交媒体除了让他们关注经济动态外，同时也让他们监控网络上其他竞争对手、客户及厂家在社交媒体上所使用的商业策略及动向。

**研究限制：**大部分的受访者都是于B2B企业工作的，不是所有研究内容都能扩展至B2C企业。

**实际应用：**各领导层人员及专业人士都能通过本研究项目了解其同行在社交媒体中的活动。文章能为读者提供一些有关如何把社交媒体策略结合于其企业的商业策略的构思，让企业达到传播目标。

**关键词：**专业联系、监控同行竞争对手、使用指南、雇员、B2B市场。

**JEL 分类号：**D83, L14, O33。

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## 1. Introduction

While it is true that face-to-face communication is an optimal way of transmitting complex information, the power of transformation of the new technologies, including the platforms on WEB 2.0, have made it possible for these also to be an effective way of sharing knowledge between members of different organizations. The internal adoption of Social Media (SM) enables multi-directional communication where members of different departments can take part, which in turn encourages open innovation (Battilana, and Casciaro, 2013). Web 2.0 refers to a technological environment and when we talk about social media (SM) we refer to the set of tools or platforms that enable communication between users, possibly giving rise to social networks as a result of these connections.

The key to the link between Social Media and Web 2.0. is not in the medium, since this is changing, but in the aim, which is communication and the relationship between people that enables valuable content to be created and conversations to take place (Gersonbeltran, 2013). On the other hand, social networks have nothing to do with technology but rather with human beings, with Internet, in general, and Web 2.0 especially, being the technology that enables interaction between users, as well as ‘physical’ social networks. Thus, in this study social networks are considered to be synonymous with SM.

There are many jobs that can be done through the SM, both on exclusively professional platforms and also the more general ones, since over time these have been introducing new functionalities related to the professional world. In turn, the jobs that employees do on the social networks can improve business performance (Martin and Van Bavel, 2013, Olmstead, Cliff and Ellison, 2016). Likewise, there are various benefits that employees can bring to companies with the use of SM: reducing transaction costs (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012, Friedrichsen, 2013); improving job performance (Paniagua and Sapena, 2014; Suh and Bock, 2015); strengthening the link with employees (Sinclair and Vogus, 2011, Cao *et al.*, 2012; Chin *et al.*, 2015); improving the link and communication with customers and suppliers (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Calefato *et al.*, 2015); promoting internationalization (Batas and Liu, 2013); encouraging innovation (Mehrtens, 2013; He *et al.*, 2015) and acquiring better knowledge of the competition (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; He *et al.*, 2013; Leftheriotis and Giannakos, 2014; Rexha *et al.*, 2016).

Most of the studies on the use and reach of social networks focus on companies’ strategies, taking them as a unit of analysis, since most use social networks to publicize new products, launch promotions and offers; for customer service; to increase traffic to the corporate website; or to improve the brand image. Usually, these are tasks handled by the marketing department and have a communication-based focus (Moncrief *et al.*, 2015). However, there are few studies focussed on employees themselves, even though a large number of them use social networks for work purposes and using the name of the company. In this study we pay particular attention to the use of SM by employees working for a company.

Regarding the type of market that companies operate in, Toni Griñón (2014) argues that the SM strategy in B2B companies has largely been forgotten about, since in many cases talking about the SM is the same as talking about B2C, there being a great absence of content specifically geared to companies that sell to other companies. This may be one of the reasons why B2B companies have taken more time to incorporate social networks within their strategy (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). In any case, the greatest value of social networks in both markets is the possibility of approaching and interacting with the client.

The studies carried out in recent years show that both the objectives pursued and the tools used are different depending on whether we are dealing with B2B or B2C. B2B companies mainly seek to attract potential customers, followed by the acquisition of new customers and interaction with them, whereas in B2C companies, the main objectives are more focussed on brand awareness and SEO positioning (Accenture, 2011; Schuzule, 2013; CMI, 2014). In terms of platforms, LinkedIn is preferred by B2B companies; however, Facebook is more used by B2C professionals (Cruz *et al.*, 2012, Moore *et al.*, 2013, Stelzner, 2015). Moore *et al.*, (2013) state that there is a big difference between the type of sales force in B2B companies and those of B2C, particularly in researching clients, handling objections and following up after the sale.

Lashgari *et al.* (2018) argue that B2B companies should consider a differentiated SM strategy, considering several factors before issuing information through social networks. These factors would be: the objective aimed at, the target public, the depth and diversity of the content, and the specific platform. In the opinion of these authors, the target audience could be employees in technical and technological areas who seek to obtain feedback on their products or services and even provide support over the course of the sales process.

The study in which 1799 employees in the insurance sector were polled reveals that 58% of them used SM tools to observe the market and the competition, 51% to be in contact with customers, and 42.7% to contact new clients. It also states that greater use of SM for work purposes is related to better work performance (Leftheriotis and Giannakos, 2014). Mehrtens (2013), in turn, mentions the advantage of maintaining and even improving the relationship with customers and emphasizes that some of the barriers to the use of SM by professionals in B2B environments are the lack of support from management and the lack of both economic resources and time. On the same point, Jussila *et al.* (2014) state that some reasons given by this type of organization for not using the SM are the confidential nature of their projects and the lack of support from the management. Siamagka *et al.* (2015) in the 105 UK B2B organizations surveyed, conclude that the fundamental factors in adopting a SM strategy are perceived usefulness and how innovative the companies are.

## 2. The interviewees

The interviewees were six professionals who worked for eight organizations, since two of them represented positions in two different organization at the same time. Seven of the organizations operated in a B2B environment and seven were also located in the Basque Country. Only one of the companies sold to the end consumer (B2C) and only one of the locations was in Germany. In-depth interviews were conducted between January and March 2016, with a duration of between 35 and 55 minutes.

Table 1. Professionals interviewed

Professional	Position held	Company	Sector	Region	Tools used
Pedro and Gemma	Senior systems engineer/ head of Communication	A	B2B-Industrial-systems design	Spain (Basque Autonomous Community (BAC))	LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, Company Blog
Luis	ICT Director	B	B2B-Industrial-electricity	Spain (BAC)	LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Blackberry
Marta	Senior Consultant for processes and organisation	C	B2B-Computing services	Spain (BAC)	LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, personal Blog
Marta	Collaborator	D	B2B-Services	Spain (BAC)	
Leo	Marketing Director	E	B2B-Industrial-electricity	Spain (BAC)	LinkedIn
Ana	Account manager Spain and Portugal	F	B2B-Industrial-food	Germany	LinkedIn Facebook
Ana	Partner and director	G	B2C-Services-food	Spain (BAC)	
Carlos	Self-employed	H	B2B-Services-Social Media	Spain (BAC)	LinkedIn Twitter, Facebook Company blog

## 3. Revelations of the interviewees: the professionals and the social media

Regardless of the strategy in social networks adopted by the companies which the salaried interviewees worked for, and independently of the companies' codes of conduct (if any), the six professionals that we had a personal interview with were

using SM platforms to do their particular job. The specific uses were varied, depending on the particular job and the context in which they operated (B2B, B2C). All respondents were active observing what others were doing and how they were doing it, in order to adapt the SM strategy to their individual work needs. They looked at where customers and collaborators were going to on internet; which social networks, websites and forums; and started using the same platforms with the intention of being able to interact with them.

In general, they perceived major potential for some of the individual tasks they performed. Although they did not have a written protocol or guidelines for use, all professionals were using SM platforms in a more or less 'official' way for their job. One of the professionals interviewed affirmed that he used an informal social network from home to obtain information about the topic of the project that he was involved in, since he understood that he could not connect up to internet during working hours.

In one of the cases, although the company which the interviewee worked for did not have an identity in the social media, due to management policy, the interviewee was aware that many employees used some platform for work purposes and on behalf of the company.

### 3.1. The first contact and later communication with the relevant professionals

All the interviewees considered that one of the advantages or functionalities of the networks was that they enabled contact with unknown professionals. Even so, only two of them admitted having used this 'cold call' option. The others, on the other hand, claimed to have added professionals who they already 'knew' as a contact, although not necessarily face to face. They also attempted to add to their network people they had met up with at some event or who they had common contacts with. Occasionally, they had used their first-line contacts to access other second-line contacts (professionals who they had no direct relationship with, but rather people that the interviewers themselves knew). Lacoste (2016) in interviews with 22 account managers, found that they used LinkedIn and Viadeo to build up relationships with clients, competitors and collaborators, and emphasized that social networks were effective in better understanding key customers and increasing their commitment to them.

This was the case of Pedro, who had not used LinkedIn to contact professionals he had not met beforehand: *"I only ask for an invitation if I have previously met the person through someone else, or if I have met them at a conference, but I don't like to contact people through a 'cold call', although there are other people who have done that to me. At the most, I have looked at the profile of some people that interested me, although afterwards I know that they will be able to see who has seen their profile"*.

In contrast, Ana got her new contacts using the direct contacts that she already had. However, to maintain communication with them, she preferred to use email.

Luis confirmed that he had used LinkedIn to make contacts with professionals that he had not had any prior relationship with, using a 'cold call', the reason for contacting that person being the interest that their work had sparked off.

To make more progress, in Luis's case, for example, once the first contact had been made via social networks: *"The next step is to have a face to face meeting"*. Marta told us: *"the social networks and email are going to complement each other because at the end of the day there is a kind of interaction that the social network does not enable. For some things I still prefer email, or if not, using tools such as Dropbox to share files, or whatever. I think they complement each other a bit."*

All the interviewees, once they had made contact through internet, preferred to use other more personal methods to communicate, such as email or phone. Historically, email was the tool that Carlos had used both to make initial contact, as well as to maintain the relationship once established. For communication, both with his clients and his collaborators, he used email, the phone and personal visits. He considered this of vital importance: *"I believe that email and social networks will continue to operate independently since they are different tools; in an email the text is paramount, there is more possibility of composing a message; a conversation can be initiated, etc., whereas in the social networks communication is more immediate"*. This was also the case of Marta, who, when looking for people, considered that social networks have the disadvantage that many people who contacted her were not of any interest to her, so she had to screen them and devote time to that. *"When we were looking for partners for the project, some respondents were very interesting, but others, most of them in fact, were not"*. Pedro, for example, in addition to email, had also maintained communication with a client through LinkedIn. On this point, Luis said: *"Email is for more formal communication, while the social networks are for more immediate and informal communication."*

### 3.2. Monitoring and benchmarking the competition

The monitoring that goes on through the SM goes beyond observing what the competition is doing for its business. The strategy that competitors, customers and suppliers follow in the social networks was also observed. So, on the one hand, these tools were being used as a traditional competitive monitoring tool, and, on the other, they were serving to learn from the strategies that other companies use in social networks. In the opinion of He *et al.* (2015), the SM are an efficient tool to monitor the competition.

The use of social networks by companies and employees is currently growing: *"The active listening that I have been doing in social networks this past year is helping me to define the strategy of company H, since the use I made of them before was, let us say, just an initial stage. I was not using the client's language, sometimes because I did not know exactly who they were, however now, thanks to Web 2.0 tools, I have identified my clients and I can target them with a customized message,*

*and, so - now that I am defining a strategy - I can use the social networks in a more commercial way*". This information came from Carlos, for whom active listening – in addition to what others did in the social networks - served to complete his service to clients, as it enabled him to add certain content to his own blog.

In company E, although company policy was to have the least possible presence in the media, in general, and therefore in social networks in particular, what they did was to consult what customers, suppliers and the competition posted on a number of platforms: "Iberdrola, who is our client as well as our competitor, is very active on the social media but, above all, it directs information towards its final consumer, not so much to suppliers". Another company, in the same environment as company E, was also a competitor as well as a customer in some markets: "they have different profiles created for several different accounts. They are on Twitter, they have LinkedIn, they do a lot more than us. They're much more active. They have a practice that is different from ours; they post much more in the media; they're more active in general. They are listed on the stock market. These are different profiles. It really depends on your own particular environment - there are some that are more active than others. Also, we don't only look at companies here, we also look at the ones in the United States, Mexico, Brazil and we know this is progressing: the social media are being increasingly used, but the fact that others do it does not mean that you do the same thing: our profile is not about appearing in the social media."

In general, Pedro and his colleagues used a number of platforms such as corporate websites, blogs, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to 'listen' to what the competition was saying and doing, and other companies in the sector. To acquire competitive intelligence, in addition to Twitter, Carlos also used blogs, RSS and some other reader, although to a lesser extent than Twitter.

Killian and McManus (2015) affirm that Twitter is beneficial for managers and directors in the task of sharing important news and updated information which, in turn, is relevant for customers.

### 3.3. Looking for information and sharing ideas

The search for information of professional interest is one of the most common tasks in social networks. Respondents also agreed on the usefulness of these tools for sharing knowledge and professional experiences; and to access information related to specialized topics, as well as for disseminating information to specific professional groups.

For Marta, the networks served to see how other government departments manage housing policy, which was the subject of the project she was involved in. In addition, she had been able to exchange ideas related to the association she belonged to within the groups she had formed on some platforms: "the response was incredible. In the different groups I am in, in LinkedIn, we have found a lot of people, with related projects and initiatives we are involved in, and it's very interesting because

you exchange ideas, you put out feelers a little to find out if our project is being run in other regions ... it's really helping me very much". To run the search for information, she takes part in discussion and discussion groups: "I use networks for discussion groups a great deal because it enables me to contrast what I'm doing. It's not a real business but it's good - it enables me to run it as if it were real, to compare my project model with others".

Pedro, thanks to the use of these platforms, had obtained information that had enabled him to find out more about the viability of a project: "we look to see what other companies are doing; For example, if we are considering a new market, we research into whether it is feasible or not and if we could enter it; or if we decide to start up a business, we look at where else in the world this business is being run. We also try to compare what we do with what others may be doing to see whether we are 'on the right track' or not".

On the other hand, this professional believed that the social media could be very useful for researching into and trying to solve problems they came up against but, for reasons of confidentiality, they did not do this, however he recognized that in other countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, they were more advanced and shared and published information through the SM. Projects being developed by industrial companies, most of the time involve a high degree of confidentiality, which supposes a restriction on the publication of information in the social networks: "normally we run projects for other companies that have clauses of confidentiality, so we can't say much about what we are doing. We can't even talk about everything amongst our colleagues, far less outside the company." This, in addition, makes it difficult to talk about and ask about the technical problems which they come up against, despite the fact that Pedro believed that the social media were suitable for that: "There are people who do talk about it, but we lack some guidelines; a particular style to address those issues on Twitter or LinkedIn, for example."

Luis, for his part, considered that it was difficult to establish links with customers through the SM, due to the type of industrial company that company B was and the sector where it operated, with a small number of customers and where all the interest groups knew each other. However, he believed that they could be useful to find an expert in a specific area, for example, through LinkedIn.

### **3.4. Recruiting staff**

The growth of technology, the internet and other technological instruments that fall directly within the HR sector has opened up significant opportunities for companies to make integration processes faster and smoother for their staff (Castro *et al.*, 2016).

Company B was the only company which confirmed that they were using LinkedIn in an official way for the recruitment and selection of personnel. In the words of Luis: "Where we are using LinkedIn, definitely in a formal way, is in the process of

recruitment and personnel selection, from human capital. Also, today our business and our staff our outside the borders we live within, so they are looking for lots of candidates in selection processes through social networks.”

In company A, Pedro preferred that they sometimes offered a job on LinkedIn and, at the same time, they looked at the profile of the person they were interested in on this platform. However, he had seen no evidence that the profiles of those interested had been looked at on other networks.

Leo, in turn, was aware that in the marketing department they looked for information about candidates for a job when thinking about interviews, looking in advance at their profiles on the social networks.

Marta, although she did not know whether company C where she worked, had ever posted a job on the social networks, she had tried herself to find people for the project run by the association she collaborated with: “At the time we were looking for partners through LinkedIn and the response was massive, I mean, we could just could not cope.”

### 3.5. The Social Media strategy of the company and the employees

Some companies have a strategy in social networks, others are currently developing one, and others are not interested at the moment. In any case, these strategies are put into practice from the area of marketing or communication, and do not take into account the interaction that employees already have in the social sphere, both internally and externally.

In the area of Marketing, Gemma, head of company A, said she used SM tools to post events and do advertising, that is, to spread information. At that moment, they were not following up on the comments received. The lack of content to post, she said, was a handicap for B2B companies when defining a strategy in social networks. Normally, their projects were large-scale and long-term, where the news was usually the completion of the project. However, this long duration for projects had the result of making really postable content scarce and very spaced out over time. This clashed with the nature of social networks, which require constant updating. Some of the testimonies that reflect these perceptions were Pedro’s: “*When you get something it’s easy to post it, but when you have a problem, although you could consult them, it’s harder for us to talk about problems. If it’s hard enough to talk about the achievements, imagine talking about the problems*” and Leo’s: “*if we don’t give out any news, that is the problem, the basis is not right. In the end, with everything in communication, if the content doesn’t work, the strategy doesn’t either. In our case we are not content creators, or we do not allocate many resources to that. If you have nothing to say or you have little to say, then how do you define a strategy in social networks?*”

Although company G did not yet have a well-defined SM strategy, its intention was to implement it: “*at the moment I do not have a page created for the store,*

*because I want to wait to see what acceptance there is of what I'm doing on internet, to then know what I am going to do. I think it is very important to give adequate guidance to both the website and the social media strategy from the beginning.*" Ana, like many other professionals, was using the social media with a degree of caution, with the intention of creating a strategy based on the experience she had acquired.

Company C had a profile created on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube platforms, where it often posted general news: *"I imagine it will be the marketing people that handle it. The news they publish is all very general about technology...I don't know... For example, I think they posted the news that electronic invoicing started today, that is, very general things. I think they use internet but they don't take advantage of it either, with all its possibilities."* Marta, although she did not know what use was being made of internet in the field of marketing, in her specific project, she saw the sense of implementing a strategy in social networks for commercial prospecting issues and eventually, resolving doubts at a technical level. But she did not know how the social media was used in the other departments. Although company C had a global network strategy, it was not used at the level of each individual employee.

Leo, however, told us that in company E, at that moment, they had not detected the need to have to be actively in social media because of the type of company in question and the well-known environment which they operated in. In turn, however, he told us that they were well aware that the profile of the employees was changing, both of the company itself and the clients, who were mostly engineers: *"If up till now they were 50-year-old men, now they are getting younger and there are more women. Younger people come with the culture of social networks, since they are accustomed to using them on a personal level, and this can mean a change in the way they relate to other professional interest groups outside the company"*. They therefore did not rule out that at some point they might have to create an SM strategy, as well as guidelines for its use by employees. The authors Moncrief *et al.*, (2015) in their study of SM as a factor of change in the sales force of companies, found that younger sales people were reluctant to use the telephone to contact customers because they preferred the SM platforms which they were accustomed to, while the older ones used the SM occasionally and only for certain tasks.

Nevertheless, although company E did not have a presence in social networks as a company, because its policy was to appear as little as possible in the media, several employees in the group were using internet for work purposes and on behalf of the company. Basically, these employees had LinkedIn profiles. In addition, LinkedIn had created the profile of company E, since it created groups on behalf of companies after a certain number of employees had signed up. On the other hand, the management was not interested in having profiles on internet: *"We have not created a company page on LinkedIn because we were aware that opening a profile means maintaining it, that is, posting, and that was just what we do not do"*. Leo was clear, as we have already said, that the potential that social tools had for employees, for the benefit of the company, was independent of the strategy that the company

could define in social networks. In this case, we found that, although the company strove not to be present at the corporate level in the LinkedIn network, the natural actions of its employees gave rise to that profile, beyond the control of the marketing department.

Luis told us that in company B, although initially they did not see industrial manufacturing companies obtaining a direct income through social platforms: *“Instead, we did perceive an indirect benefit, so in 2013 we decided to run a project of internal analysis to find out how a strategy in social networks could fit in an industrial company in the Basque Country, where innovation was more focussed on the process and the product than on what the focus of communications was to be”*. The communication department was responsible for this project, and the IT department, led by Luis, was involved by giving their opinion and setting down a number of criteria: *“In order to set up these platforms, we were aware that a change in the culture of the employees was needed, to encourage sharing information and turn some of the employees into ambassadors of what was said on these platforms on behalf of the company”* In a first phase of the implementation, the objective was to first promote the tools internally, to subsequently reinforce the message towards the outside environment.

### 3.6. Guidelines on company use of the Social Media

None of the interviewees were aware that their company was restricting, or even prohibiting, the use of the social networks, although one interviewee told us that it was assumed that they could not be used during working hours.

Two of the companies interviewed already had or were writing a guide aimed at employees for the use of SM. Another of the companies also had a number of guidelines, although they were not actually in written form, since they had a policy of not appearing in the media, or at least, appearing as little as possible. Company B was one of the companies that was developing guidelines on the use of social networks by employees, since they were concerned about personal and professional use of social media on behalf of the company by employees (using their personal profiles). Therefore, it appeared to be important to them to decide on the information that, for example, a former employee could keep in their personal profiles. These guidelines also dealt with topics such as not being disrespectful to anyone, posting a real photo of the person, etc. Company C had a style guide, although Marta said she did not have an in-depth knowledge of it, as she assumed that during working hours employees were not allowed to go on social media - not so in the case of Yammer, the platform they used internally and which served as a social network, Marta took on the task of creating a number of guidelines: *“I created some rules for documentation because I will have to post the manuals of the applications, for example. You have to post a few internal communication issues, for example, summaries of meetings on internal follow-up on the team, things of that type; how to post, etc. It doesn't*

*have to be super serious, nor should it be too light and jokey. You have to provide information - but up to a limit”.*

As we said in the previous section, since company E follows a policy of not appearing in the media, at that point in time they did not have, nor were they considering developing written guidelines on the use of social networks by employees, since they adhere to a policy of not appearing in the media, however they did not rule out doing so in the future, as younger employees have the culture of routine use of social tools.

Company A had not considered a code of conduct for employees up to that point: *“Which does not mean that we will not do so in the future. This will depend on the use of networks by employees to be able to do their work,”* Pedro told us. Sometimes they wrote in the forums: *“In our case, more than social networks, we use forums to raise some technical issues but we have never had complaints that they have been used in an inappropriate manner”.*

#### **4. Conclusions**

In the five companies that Pedro, Luis, Ana, Marta and Leo worked for, in cases where there was a strategy for SM, we were able to see how it was at the level of communication and marketing. That is, a strategy based on the publication of news and creation of content focussed on the client and other audiences of interest, both on the corporate website and / or blog and in the profiles that companies had created in social networks. However, on the other hand, there was the use of the SM by employees. These professionals exchanged information through the social networks, albeit in an unofficial way, with other professionals of interest, to be able to do their work in the company.

This was the case in the five companies where these employees were working. These five companies operated in a B2B setting. Of these, four were industrial (A, B, E and F), and one was service-based (C). This suggests that the use of SM by employees for their work did not yet form part of a corporate strategy, although a large number of employees in each company used them. Cases such as company E exemplified the fact that you cannot fence off communication and that social networks were gradually becoming present in company business, whether or not there was a strategy behind this. Some companies were in the process of drafting out a code of conduct because they were concerned about the image of the company that employees could transmit in their comments on social networks.

To a greater or lesser extent, all the interviewees used SM tools to search for information and to monitor the competition, a strategy followed by other companies and professionals in social networks. These were projects being implemented by the competition, finding experts in specific subjects and solving technical problems. However, on this point, some were still reluctant to expose their ‘issues’ or information that they considered confidential. In general, they considered SM to be a

valuable source of information to find out what competitors were doing, as well as customers and suppliers. In almost all cases, the employees interviewed were cautious when it came to creating profiles on internet and providing them with content.

In general, they were watching out for the consequences of every small step they took in the social media, observing carefully what competitors, suppliers and other agents were doing in order to develop the most appropriate internet strategy for the company. It seemed evident that this approach would bring as a consequence the need to develop codes of conduct in social networks for employees.

As the use of social networks by employees is increasing, it would be advisable for companies to create usage guidelines for their employees and incorporate them into the company's SM strategy for better overall management of the company. These guidelines should be created not only with a restrictive approach or for protection against the comments of employees, but should also encourage correct use of the SM by developing guidelines on: a) how to ask about technical problems or doubts while respecting the terms of confidentiality, b) how to create content in industrial companies (this will be essential to interact with other companies in the sector and generate feedback. To get back you must first give); c) how to contact professionals of interest etc. Companies need to define an SM strategy for active employees on internet, integrating this within the corporate strategy. We also consider it fundamental that the company's corporate strategy integrates the use of email with the use of SM, since both will continue to coexist in the daily communication of employees.

We believe that companies should not miss the opportunity offered by SM tools: contacting people of interest professionally, maintaining communication with the public of interest to them, publicizing events, and participating in discussion groups, etc. These opportunities translated into the possibility of expanding a company at a low cost and accessing new business options. For all these reasons, in addition to integrating the strategy of employee networks within the company SM strategy, these companies should promote use by employees, since all this contributes to the best performance of the company. To achieve this goal, the commitment of the managers and leaders of the organization is necessary, since the benefit will have a knock-on effect on the entire organization.

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## **Appendix: the interviewees**

### **Pedro and Gemma - Company A**

Pedro was a senior systems engineer and had worked with embedded systems for the industry for more than two decades. He was the founder of A, a company he worked for at the time of interviewing. Some of the functions he had performed were: project management, architecture and design solutions and system verification and validation. At the time of writing, he was responsible for the Software Verification & Validation line.

During the interview, Pedro was accompanied by Gemma, head of marketing for the company.

### **Luis - Company B**

Luis was head of the Information Technology Department of company B, where he had held various different positions: programming and analysis in different languages, head of projects, head of the Systems Department and the management of outsourcing contracts.

### **Marta - Company C and D**

Marta worked as a processes and organization consultant in company C, her special areas being: entrepreneurship, management of grants and subsidies, electronic administration and process analysis. Within the group interviewed, Marta was one of the most active in the use of social networks, which she used both personally and professionally.

Company C is one of the leading service companies in Information Technology (ICT) in the Spanish market. Created in 1973, its activity focuses on the following areas: ICT consulting, infrastructure services, integration of information systems and outsourcing and implementation of integrated business management solutions. In addition, the company has an in-depth knowledge of the sectors it offers specific solutions for: finance, insurance, public administration, health, education, services, industry and telecommunications.

Previously, Marta had been the founder of company D, a company specializing in managing grants and public policies. Due to personal and professional concerns, at the time of interviewing she was part of an association that wanted to promote active citizenship and entrepreneurial spirit. The association was working to take part in the European Erasmus + course, which required Marta to make intensive use of social networks in this project which came outside the bounds of her job in company C.

### **Leo - Company E**

Leo was head of marketing for company E, where half of the marketing budget was allocated to events of different types: meetings, technical seminars, conferences, visits, fairs, etc. In the market they operated in, major importance was attached to the physical presence of professionals in meetings of this type.

The main profiles of its clients were companies who belonged to the electricity sector: power companies and integrators or contractors who worked for them. In some cases, certain customers were also competitors. This is a closed environment with a limited number of players, an area in which everyone knows each other and, normally, they easily identify each other in different forums.

### **Ana - Company F and G**

Ana worked professionally in Company F and G. In the first of these, she held the position of account manager for Spain and Portugal, and some of the tasks she performed were: identifying new clients and business opportunities, identifying the needs of clients, as well as finding the optimal way in which her company could meet those needs, building relationships with customers of new accounts and offering customer service. In the second (G), a fair-trade food and cosmetics store, Ana was partner and manager.

### **Carlos - Company H**

Carlos worked as a freelancer in his own company, which was also the brand with which he ran content marketing projects for both companies and individual professionals. His work was to help companies and freelancers in the development of a SM strategy consistent with the objectives pursued and to translate this into a content plan that provided value to customers in social networks.

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