

Trends

Social Networking: Has It's Time Come?

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In the summer issue of AIR, I questioned the future of classrooms as we know them and postulated the “virtual” classroom. In this issue I focus on the astonishing increase in the use of social networking by students, professionals, and faculty. All instructors are no doubt aware that most students use social networking extensively. They are also aware that fewer students take advantage of office hours and use email to communicate questions.

According to a recent article in USA Today, almost half the time people spend on computer is on social networking, games, and email. In the past year, social networking has gained 43 percent. Today there are 500 million Facebook users. What may surprise you is that accounting and finance professionals are heavy users of social media. A survey by Mergis Group as reported in September 2010, revealed that 88 percent of these professionals use Facebook, and 20 percent use Twitter but for work 72 percent use LinkedIn.

Most professors use social media too. In fact, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that a survey of more than 1,000 professors revealed that more than 80 percent of them use social media and more than half use tools like video, blogs, pod casts, and wikis in their classes. Fifty-nine percent have more than one social network account and more than 25 percent have four or more social network accounts.

I conclude from these surveys that social media have reached a critical mass and will become more prevalent in the future among groups important to accounting instructors, students, peers, and professionals. However, when it comes to using social media in education, only about one-third of the professors who do use them employ them to communicate with peers and students. If they are not being used, it raises the questions of why are they not being used more even by those who now have accounts and how should they be used? Let us initially address the issue of why professors do not use social media at work.

First, the word “social” in social media implies that it is only for use in non-professional settings, that is, for communication with family and friends. This is a false assumption. Major social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn allow categorization of contacts. Thus, every contact can be put in the relevant group. Second, many faculty members are wed to email which has the major limitation in that it is basically a one-on-one communication. Of course, it is possible to form email groups, but it is awkward because it is hard to anticipate what the groups are or they are constantly changing. For instance, when one student asks a question, other students might benefit by the question and the answer, but a blast email to all students may not be appropriate. Some instructors overcome this problem by using discussion boards and/or groups on Blackboard or

similar course organization software provided by their college or university. A problem some instructors have encountered is that some students resist using Blackboard and form groups on other media outside Blackboard.

It is perhaps too early to tell the full significance of social media for you as an accounting educator, but there are at least three potential ways you could consider using social media to improve your teaching and also to enhance your relationships with colleagues and professionals. First, you can use social media to communicate with students. More importantly, students may be engaged in a dialogue of the give and take of question and answers that would improve their learning at crucial times in their study process. Further, it would serve as an early warning system for concepts and techniques that may not be clearly understood by the class. Second, you could use social media to collaborate with peers about teaching and research. For instance, instructors teaching the same course at their college or even at other colleges could share ideas, assignments, successes and failures. One excellent place for sharing ideas with instructors from across the country is the Commons of the American Accounting Association (www.vcommon.aaahq.org). Third, you could use social media to maintain professional relationships. Given the number of professionals who use LinkedIn, this would seem to be an ideal media to maintain contacts with recruiters, former students, and other professionals.

Regardless of where you stand now with regard to use of social media now, it is with us and is growing among those who are most important to us as educators. As with all new technologies, it takes time to learn and adjust. If we are to be most effective, we must adapt to and make the best use of these new social media technologies.