

## The Next Generation of Social Media in the Office

**Author :** Matt Palmquist

**Date :** November 23, 2015



*Bottom Line: Email is still the king of office communications, but company-hosted social networking platforms are gaining in popularity, especially among younger workers.*

When you need to get a message to a colleague, what's your preferred mode of communication? Do you dash off an email, pick up the phone, or maybe send an instant message via the company's intranet? A lot has changed since the era of interoffice memos, and how you choose to communicate could well be a generational choice. According to a new [study](#) from **Peter W. Cardon** at the University of Southern California and **Bryan Marshall** at **Georgia College**, age differences increasingly result in sharp divergences in how employees connect and correspond with one another. And these differences present a challenge for businesses seeking to implement advances in communication methods while still extracting value from the knowledge-sharing activities of employees from all age groups and with varying levels of technical proficiency.

Email still reigns supreme in the workplace, the authors found, but **social** media networks are poised to take over. Thus, companies should start thinking about integrating new technological platforms, indoctrinating older workers into newer communication streams, and establishing guidelines for how employees interact with one another. Although **social** networking sites were first embraced solely by the younger generation in the early 2000s, they've since become mainstream. As of 2014, 74 percent of adults in the U.S. — and half of those older than 65 — [use](#) public **social** networking platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

As the use of public **social** networking sites has grown, so, too, have company-**designed** platforms, hosted on the corporate intranet and **designed** for better workplace communication. Several major software vendors — including **Microsoft**, **Oracle**, and **SAP** — produce **social** network platforms for companies, which include instant messaging programs, file-sharing sites, **Facebook**-esque interfaces, and RSS feeds. But what does it mean for the office if discussions around the watercooler have been supplanted by in-house blogs, message boards, and wikis?

A wealth of analysis exists about the technical challenges of implementing **social** networks, but researchers have yet to compare the value of these new communication platforms with that of traditional channels. Aiming to fill the gap, the researchers surveyed a wide cross-section of business professionals about the frequency with which they use traditional channels versus Web 2.0 platforms, the effectiveness of various communication formats, and their attitudes

about using **social** media for team interaction.

The authors grouped participants into three generations: gen Y (21- to 30-year-olds), gen X (31- to 50-year-olds), and baby boomers (51- to 65-year-olds). Employees at companies that host dedicated **social** networks are much more likely to use nontraditional modes of communication, the authors found, and tend to share documents through wikis, send instant messages, and post to in-house message boards far more frequently than their colleagues at firms without a **social** networking infrastructure. This is especially true of the gen Y group: About 71 percent reported using wikis or document-sharing sites regularly, and 57 percent communicated with colleagues via instant messaging daily.

But workplace **social** media platforms still face an uphill climb. Although exposure to corporate **social** networking engenders optimism about its future, most employees remain wary of it. Even among the most enthusiastic demographics — gen X and gen Y employees with access to company-wide **social** networks — only half expected it to become the prevailing form of communication, and most didn't think it improved their work or interaction with colleagues.

In fact, the authors conclude, even if firms implement new communication platforms, that doesn't mean they can close down the conference room or eliminate landlines. Overall, the study found, employees and managers of all ages still regard traditional methods — such as face-to-face conversations, phone calls, and email — as the most effective means of communication, regardless of whether they had company-wide **social** networks available to them.

And for the next few years at least, email in the workplace will remain king. More than 85 percent of employees with access to **social** networks still used email hourly, and 83 percent considered it effective. Even 90 percent of gen X and gen Y professionals said they preferred email, whereas only 42 percent considered texting or instant messaging to be effective for communicating with team members.

That said, it won't take much to push workplace **social** media platforms further into the mainstream. The technology is still nascent — only 26 percent of the survey participants worked at firms with **social** networking infrastructure — but the number of employees who express enthusiasm about the benefits of team communication could herald a major shift. The authors speculate that Web 2.0 channels could overtake email within the next decade.

As the number of younger professionals in the workforce swells, using instant messaging or posting to a message board could be as commonplace as sending an email or drafting a memo. The challenge for companies is to keep their employees on the same (wiki) page and ensure that all sections of the workforce can communicate in effective, efficient ways — no matter what the technological platform.

Source: "[The Hype and Reality of Social Media Use for Work Collaboration and Team Communication](#)," by Peter W. Cardon (University of Southern California) and Bryan Marshall (Georgia College), *International Journal of Business Communication*, July 2015, vol. 52, no. 3

//