

Social anxiety: The mix of personal branding and the internet can challenge HR departments

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Jessica Levin, president of Seven Degrees Communications, helps businesses with social media consulting. - (PHOTO BY AARON HOUSTON)

Jessica Levin, president of Seven Degrees Communications, has an experiment that satisfyingly conveys the importance of personal branding:

Who is your accountant?

“Almost everyone is going to answer that question with a particular person — not the name of the firm he or she works for,” Levin said. “That’s probably also going to be true for legal and maybe even financial, insurance or medical professionals.”

Levin, who does social media consulting through her **Woodbridge-based business strategy agency**, said the impact of building a personal brand through social media channels is something she has even experienced herself.

“I really walk the talk on this, as I can personally track clients that I’ve gotten to my online presence,” she said. “Sharing successes, keeping people updated if I’m doing something cool or different — these things I’m able to directly plot to business I later received.”

Remote work, a remote possibility for most

Human resources departments and the executives they answer to are being dragged kicking and screaming into allowing work-from-home arrangements for employees, said Laurie Murphy of HR planning firm PeopleAreKey Inc.

“There’s still more resistance than acceptance of it,” she said. “It has been more discussed in the past couple of years, as employers have lost good talent over this. And although some have learned to embrace it, there are many others still holding out.”

Remote working was largely pushed for by millennials at companies at first, Murphy said, but now it’s something that’s advocated across all generations of workers.

Murphy said the reason the adoption of the policy has been slow and rather limited comes down to a steadfast

argument from employers: If I can't see you, I don't know what you're doing.

Murphy sees this as tilting at windmills and only crippling opportunities for recruitment and retention.

"It's just totally ridiculous ... because if you can't identify the results that your employees have achieved, you're not doing something right," she said. "It's also setting up an expectation that's negative — that people need to be watched and, if they're not, then they won't be doing their job.

"It doesn't make people feel good about the place they work, and you can expect to lose talent to companies open to it."

"I've had so many people say, 'Hey, I've been watching you on social media.' I know it might sound a little creepy, but there are a lot of people who you don't think are paying attention, but are — and they'll come to you when they need you."

So there's cause for encouraging employees to be brand evangelists in the social media sphere, and those who often oversee employee activity — a company's human resources function — have a key role in it. But not all HR leaders are excelling in this regard.

"HR departments need to be proactive about the way employees use social media, not punitive if they didn't like something after the fact," Levin said.

It's a new enough dynamic in the workplace that no one seems to have all the answers.

And the question of the proper way to allow an employee to build his or her brand online is complicated by the medium's tendency to fuse the personal and professional.

Brett Harris has noticed it through her own use of social media.

"I remember a time when there was a big difference between life at work and home," said Harris, a business, nonprofit and technology attorney at **Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer**. "I see the way we use technology in our lives and how (because of it) the line between personal and professional life is getting blurred. It has empowered us in workplace but changed the nature of business."



Brett Harris, business, nonprofit and technology attorney at Wilentz, Goldman & Spitzer.

Harris has tried to stay active on platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn, and mainly sticks to professional interactions. She finds it helpful in some regard — but it doesn't often yield immediate results.

"I don't think it's realistic to expect that one post or Tweet will land a great client or change the direction of your career, but nothing is isolated," she said. "It's incremental, just like handing out business cards or something like that would be."

She said she's always conscious of what is appropriate as an attorney to disclose on social media platforms. For instance, she said, posting a message about negotiating a big deal in a Tweet with geotagging (which reveals the name of your location), would not serve her well.

Brian Clark, an employee at M&T Bank, said he has to be aware of similar pitfalls in the world of banking.

Generally, he's found a shoe leather approach to networking to be far more suitable to the industry he's in.

The latest in HR education

Up-to-the-minute shifts in social media and technology rollouts force Stephen Bear, a professor who teaches human resources-related courses at Fairleigh Dickinson University, to change his curriculum.

Such changes come at a surprising frequency — in fact, there hasn't been a course he's done recently that hasn't been updated from the year before.

"The HR profession and the world in general is changing so rapidly," Bear added. "Probably the most interesting thing that's new is that companies are beginning to use artificial intelligence in the HR process. There are companies promoting products to ask and to respond to interviewee questions and automate the interview process.

"There's even platforms that will analyze writing of an individual and make a personality assessment. ... These are just a few of the things didn't exist a few years ago and now they're part of the curriculum."

It fits within a general theme of teaching that's not unique to HR.

"Learning for young people today is a lifelong commitment," he said. "You don't just go to school and get a degree and you're done. You have to stay current on new tools in your profession for the rest of your life."

"Banking is a business in which you learn a lot by sitting across the table with someone or walking through their company's location," he said. "Networking is a one-on-one business that social media has become a part of, but certainly not replaced."

On top of industry-specific concerns, Levin said that there's just less value in personal branding in certain nonprofessional services industries.

"But that doesn't mean that someone selling printers who has mastered personal branding doesn't also have a competitive advantage," Levin said.

Besides HR heads being able to use social media themselves for recruitment, Levin hopes that they are promoting its proper use to employees, too; in short:

"HR shouldn't be keeping employees from being social online — and why would you want to? You should train them on how to do it in the best way for the company, because it can really pay off," Levin said.