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## Facebook website not all fun and games

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*On the Cutting Edge/Brian Bowman*

HAVE you joined the social networking website Facebook yet?

The power of Facebook and the manner in which it is revolutionizing the way people communicate with each other should not be underestimated.

Facebook allows users to easily create online profiles that generally contain photos and itemized lists of personalized interests. It also allows users to join groups of "friends" to exchange private or public messages to selected groups. The ability for someone to view your Facebook profile is managed by you and restricted to users of a group of individuals that you select to be in your network.

Facebook allows for the quick and efficient mass publication of content to those individuals that you have selected to be in your network. Those selected individuals can, in turn, post content on your Facebook profile.

According to Wikipedia, Facebook is the 18th-most-visited website in the world and the No. 1 website for photos in the United States, with more than 8.5 million photos uploaded daily. And users spend an average of 19 minutes a day on Facebook.

Social-networking websites such as Facebook present risks that individuals and, as more users register, businesses should carefully consider.

The most obvious risk is that many employees are spending an inordinate amount of time on Facebook during work hours. As a result, businesses should consider whether it makes sense to block access to the website. In fact, the Ontario government and the Toronto-Dominion Bank recently blocked access to Facebook for their employees.

The other risk, which I think is even greater, is that Facebook can facilitate the flow of information in a viral manner. This really is the power of the medium and why Facebook has become so popular.

A user who posts his or her employer's confidential information, or who posts defamatory statements about someone else, has the power to spread the message to a selected network of individuals at lightning speed. The potential for serious harm to an individual or business is, therefore, extreme to say the least.

This potential harm is exacerbated by the semi-public nature of Facebook. It seems that many users are often willing to add almost anyone they know to their Facebook profile. In doing so, users may not be giving enough thought to the potential consequences of having individuals from different "real world" networks being part of the same online network.

Let's say that you invite all of your closest friends and family members to join your Facebook profile. Perhaps you even invite your work colleagues, including your boss. What if one of your closest friends then posts an embarrassing photo of you on your Facebook profile? What if one of your family members comments on how much you do not like your job or your boss?

Individuals should consider what they post on Facebook and the people that they choose to be part of their online network.

Businesses should consider blocking the website and providing employees with the policies and training to mitigate the loss of confidential information or the posting of defamatory content, regardless of whether it is posted during or after work hours. Progressive businesses should even consider how they can leverage the power of Facebook to their advantage.

At the end of the day, social-networking websites are here to stay. The sooner that individuals and businesses deal with these issues the better.

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