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Social media and mental health at work: Recommendations for managers

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Executive Summary

In the H-WORK project, a review has been performed with the aim of developing recommendations about digital technologies related to workplace mental health. In this domain, social media stand as a relevant topic. This policy brief addresses the impact of social media on workplace mental health. Social media have become pervasive in professional lives, providing a platform for communication, collaboration, and community-building. However, it brings inherent challenges, such as blurred work-life boundaries, feelings of being "always on," and potential distractions that can decrease productivity and contribute to burnout. The influence of social media can exacerbate stress and anxiety, particularly through cyberbullying and the pressure to maintain a perfect professional image. Information overload and constant exposure to narratives of success can lead individuals to doubt their own accomplishments. Moreover, the trend towards hybrid work jeopardises the right to disconnect. On the positive side, social media can facilitate access to support and services, foster a sense of community, and encourage open dialogue on mental health. It enables organisations to share resources and information on mental health and can serve as a platform for highlighting the achievements and contributions of employees. This policy brief presents seven recommendations for organisations to leverage the positive aspects of social media and mitigate its potential negative impacts. Thus, the document links to the recent European Commission's communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health (2023), which highlights not only the need to tackle psychosocial risks at work in face of an increasingly digitalised world of work.

Introduction

The **increased use of social media in our professional lives** has significantly reshaped the way we communicate, share information, and connect with others. Social media platforms, encompassing both group communication tools and internet-based information strategies, have permeated the workplace due to their potential to facilitate communication, collaboration, and community-building. Employees use social media at work for a variety of purposes, including **networking, professional development, and collaboration** on team projects. The use of social media in a professional context can significantly enhance the quality of intra-employee communication and information dissemination, ultimately impacting overall workplace productivity (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014). Social media can represent a helpful resource when working remotely is inevitable. During COVID-19, levels of social media communication at work increased work engagement (Oksa et al., 2021).

However, the increased use of social media at work also brings challenges. The boundary between personal and professional life can become blurred, impacting on work-life balance and the feeling of being "always switched on." Also, the overuse or misuse of social media can lead to distractions, decreased productivity, and potential job burnout.

Social Media and Mental Health in the Workplace

The use of social media for work can have differential outcomes, as this could lead to either engagement or exhaustion (van Zoonen et al., 2017). **Workplaces need to establish clear guidelines and best practices for the use of social media to harness its benefits while minimising potential downsides.** There are advantages and challenges in using social media in the work environment.

Exacerbating anxiety

Social media can **exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression** (Karim et al., 2020; Uvi et al., 2022). Employees may feel pressured to maintain a "perfect" professional image online, leading to increased self-scrutiny and comparison with others. This can also blur the boundaries between work and personal life, making it difficult for employees to disconnect and relax. **Fear of missing out (FoMO)** and **phubbing** are two other consequences of using social media at work. FoMO is a persistent anxiety employee experience during work hours about being absent from socially rewarding experiences others may be sharing on social media. Phubbing is the social exclusion facilitated by the use of the smartphone and may lead to increased exhaustion and lower creativity (Tandon et al., 2022). This can increase disrespectful, or rude behaviours in the workplace that violate norms of respect (e.g., ignoring or belittling someone's opinions or contributions, making derogatory comments, spreading gossip about a coworker, interrupting someone when

they're speaking). **Cyberbullying** can also have a significant impact on the mental well-being of individuals. The constant exposure to social media platforms during working hours can lead to decreased productivity and focus. The allure of **scrolling through endless feeds** and engaging in online conversations can easily distract workers from their tasks.

Information overload

With the constant stream of updates, notifications, and messages, employees may find themselves overwhelmed and unable to effectively prioritise their work (Chen & Wei, 2019). This can increase stress levels and make difficult to manage time and resources efficiently.

Additionally, social media platforms often perpetuate unrealistic standards of success and achievement, creating a breeding ground for **imposter syndrome** and feelings of inadequacy. Constant exposure to carefully curated profiles and highlight reels of others' accomplishments can make individuals question their own abilities and worth, leading to a decline in self-esteem and confidence.

The right to disconnect

Hybrid work, facilitated by readily available electronic devices like computers and smartphones coupled with internet connectivity, enables employees to work from home - and virtually any location worldwide. However, it also blurs the line between work and personal life.

When messaging applications such as WhatsApp and

Telegram are used for work-related communication outside of agreed working hours, they may compromise the

Negative Impact Social Media Overuse and Burnout

- Han et al. (2020) found there was a significant positive correlation between the use of social media and job burnout in a working population. This suggests social media usage might drain personal resources such as time and energy, increasing the likelihood of experiencing burnout.
- Social comparison explained this relationship. Heavy social media users might experience greater burnout because they engage in greater social comparison, both upwardly or downwardly (i.e., comparing oneself against someone superior or inferior for working and living conditions). Those who engage in downward comparison, as opposed as upward, are more likely to feel job burnout.
- This study suggests that regulating and controlling social comparisons, as well as avoiding excessive use of social media, may be effective in reducing job burnout.



worker's right to disconnect, giving rise to the perception of a continuous on-call status. Employees may struggle to truly disconnect from work, exacerbating potential for burnout.

Starting from 2021, various Member States (France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Netherlands, Portugal, Ireland) have enacted or proposed legislative initiatives regarding the **Right to Disconnect**. This right aims to protect the quality of life at work by avoiding any intrusion into employees' private lives by specifying periods when devices should be switched off.

Facilitating access

Social media **facilitate access to support and services** (Meske et al., 2019). Many organisations use social media to share resources, such as articles on managing stress, information about employee assistance programs, or even inspirational stories that help to destigmatise mental health issues.

Social media platforms also provide **virtual spaces for employees to connect** and share their experiences, which can foster a sense of community and support.

Furthermore, social media can act as a **conduit for mental health awareness campaigns** within the workplace, encouraging dialogue and understanding around these topics.

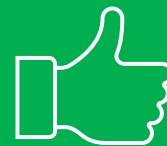
Open conversation

Social media in the workplace can break down barriers and **encourage open conversations about mental health**. Through dedicated groups or forums, employees can **share their struggles, seek advice, and offer support to one**

Positive Impact

Building connection and reducing stress

- With the rise of remote work, social media has played a positive role in helping employers create ecosystems of connection and build communities that include co-workers, clients, and stakeholders. Through social media, organisations can be more inclusive and transparent.
- Social media can help reduce isolation by keeping them informed and connected to their coworkers. Moreover, it can enhance the sense of community and connection within the workplace, especially in a remote work context (Forbes, 2023).
- Small and medium-sized enterprises can harness the power of social media to reduce stress among employees and facilitate the reintegration of individuals with mental health issues into the workforce. For instance, private online support groups where employees can openly discuss their stressors and mental health concerns in a safe and anonymous space play a crucial role in helping individuals cope with work-related stress (Twomey et al., 2015).



another. This virtual support system can be especially beneficial for individuals who may feel hesitant or uncomfortable discussing their mental health concerns in traditional settings. By fostering a culture of understanding and empathy, social media can contribute to reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues.

Social media allows organisations to reach a **wider audience** and disseminate valuable resources and information on mental health. They can share articles, infographics, and videos that provide guidance on stress management techniques, self-care practices, and strategies for maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Such content can empower employees with the knowledge and tools necessary to prioritise their mental well-being.

Social media platforms offer a unique opportunity for employers to showcase their commitment to employee mental health. By actively promoting and sharing mental health initiatives, workshops, and resources, organisations can demonstrate their dedication to creating a supportive work environment. This can enhance employee morale, job satisfaction, and loyalty.

Employees as ambassadors

Social media can also serve as a **platform for recognition and celebration of employees' achievements and contributions.** Public acknowledgement of their accomplishments and milestones not only boosts their self-esteem but also fosters a sense of appreciation and motivation. This recognition can be shared via posts, shout-outs, or virtual ceremonies, creating a positive and uplifting atmosphere in the workplace.

Organisations are implementing digital communication strategies that engage employees in sharing their work experiences. Research demonstrates that organisations that actively engage employees in mental health initiatives experience improved workplace morale, decreased absenteeism, and enhanced productivity (World Health Organisation, 2022). By involving employees in the creation and implementation of these initiatives, their commitment to the cause naturally increases due to the creation of a sense of ownership.

Workers, acting as ambassadors, can contribute to building a mentally healthy workplace by **identifying early signs of mental distress among colleagues** and by promoting available support resources. Moreover, **peer influence** is a powerful tool in **dismantling the stigma associated with mental health.** Employee involvement in the company's narrative on social media, when active and voluntary, can significantly enhance their sense of trust and affiliation with the organisation. This turns employees into ambassadors, as they take part in telling the organisation's story.

Recommendations for Managers in Organisations

- **Recommendation 1. Set boundaries with a clear social media policy.** A well-defined social media policy eliminates ambiguity, sets expectations for online behaviour, and provides a clear code of conduct concerning the use of social media during work hours or on behalf of the company.
- **Recommendation 2. Foster confidence with social media literacy training.** It is equally crucial to provide social media literacy training. This approach not only ensures adherence to the policy but also empowers employees to represent the organisation confidently and responsibly online.
- **Recommendation 3. Promote healthy engagement.** Encouraging employees to engage, connect, and share relevant content creates a healthier online experience. A company might encourage employees to participate in discussions or share their own relevant thoughts and experiences. Additionally, promoting authenticity over idealised online personas can foster a more positive digital presence. An organization might lead the way by sharing both successes and challenges, thus inspiring employees to do the same and creating spaces where they feel safe to share their real experiences.
- **Recommendation 4. Open communication channels and raise awareness.** By raising awareness through company-wide initiatives, and detailing available support and services, organisations can foster a culture of ongoing dialogue about employee health. Some examples are regular newsletters highlighting available support services (like Employee Assistance Programs) or sharing tips for managing stress and stories from employees who've benefited from these resources. Additionally, one organisation can create a section on the company's internal network specifically dedicated to health and wellness resources, where employees can seek information about available support services, health and wellness tips, upcoming workshops.
- **Recommendation 5. Implement "Digital Detox".** It can be beneficial to encourage regular intervals or periods of disconnection from social media. By incorporating such initiatives into the workplace culture, organisations can support a balanced approach to social media use that prioritises productivity and mental health.
- **Recommendation 6. Uphold the "Right to Disconnect".** Acknowledging and enforcing the right of employees to disconnect after working hours is vital. It's important to ensure that employees feel comfortable disconnecting from work-related communications and social media outside of their working hours. This can be facilitated by setting when and how often employees should be available for work-related communication outside regular hours or

establishing quiet hours policies, response time expectations, or rotational on-call schedule, in case your business requires round-the-clock availability.

- **Recommendation 7. Empower employees as ambassadors in mental health initiatives.** Employees can play a pivotal role as advocates and influencers. By involving employees in the planning and execution of mental health programs, their perspectives are acknowledged and their commitment to these initiatives is enhanced. Training employees to recognise signs of distress among colleagues, providing them with resources to offer peer support, or even establishing a voluntary mental health ambassador program could foster a supportive work environment.

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