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Social Networking

MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Nexopia, Hi5, Skyrock and Friendster are common examples of online communities or 'social networking' websites. They enable you to build connections to people who share your interests and provide communication methods like instant messaging, message boards and status messages.

This kind of electronic group communication is nothing new - in fact local computer bulletin board systems existed in the 1970s. However, today's social networking sites have become another vital component of online life for many people, sometimes regarded as important as e-mail. This is due to many factors, including:

- 1) Their ease of access, as computers and high speed internet are now expected in most homes and businesses;
- 2) Their integration with other media components such as photos (which can often be uploaded directly from a compatible mobile phone camera) and videos (e.g. YouTube site video links);
- 3) Their 'instant' communication feeds, where you can see the new status messages of all of your friends on one screen.

These technology components have a universal appeal across a wide range of ages – whether you are sharing homework tips with your school friends, keeping in touch about overseas travel adventures or sharing stories about your children or grandchildren.

But unless you have everything set to 'private', beware what information you post that other people can view. Apart from obvious sensitive personal information (such as your address or phone number), other things that you say on your profile page can also get you into trouble. Many employers and prospective employers use the internet as a research tool, so don't announce that you are looking for a new job if you don't want that to be made public. Even if your boss can't see your message, someone else may decide to give your boss a call and let them know. There have also been many examples where disciplinary action has been taken because someone has posted negative comments about a named customer, or has raved about their great day when they had called in sick.

There is a strong debate about whether access to these websites should be allowed 'on work time'. People naturally want to communicate and build friendships, so banning these sites can be seen as tyrannical. In some industries such as recruitment, a social networking presence is encouraged, as it helps to build a pool of possible candidates. It's also argued that team works together better (especially teams with members in multiple locations), if the members have an opportunity to learn about others likes, dislikes and interests outside of the workplace. However, work productivity is a concern for employers, so technology measures that restrict or monitor the usage of these sites can be helpful when combined with 'acceptable usage' guidelines.

If you would like to learn more about the risks of social networking websites, talk to your local Computer Troubleshooter.

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