

# Social Networking in Government: Opportunities & Challenges



## Executive Summary



# Social Networking in Government: Opportunities & Challenges

## Executive Summary

Social networking (SN) has become the new online rage. Blogs, wikis, RSS feeds and social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn have provided creative ways to recruit, engage, connect and retain employees. They have also provided an opportunity to facilitate strategic knowledge sharing across organizations and government agencies.

Most SN tools are Web-based and provide a variety of ways for users who share interests and/or activities to interact. Users can share best practices and build communities of practice. These tools provide email and instant messaging services — constant connectivity. SN tools can help with the current challenges facing today's government agencies such as *brain drain* from a retiring workforce, the need to create inter-agency knowledge sharing and an increased need to imbed talent tools where the work is getting done.

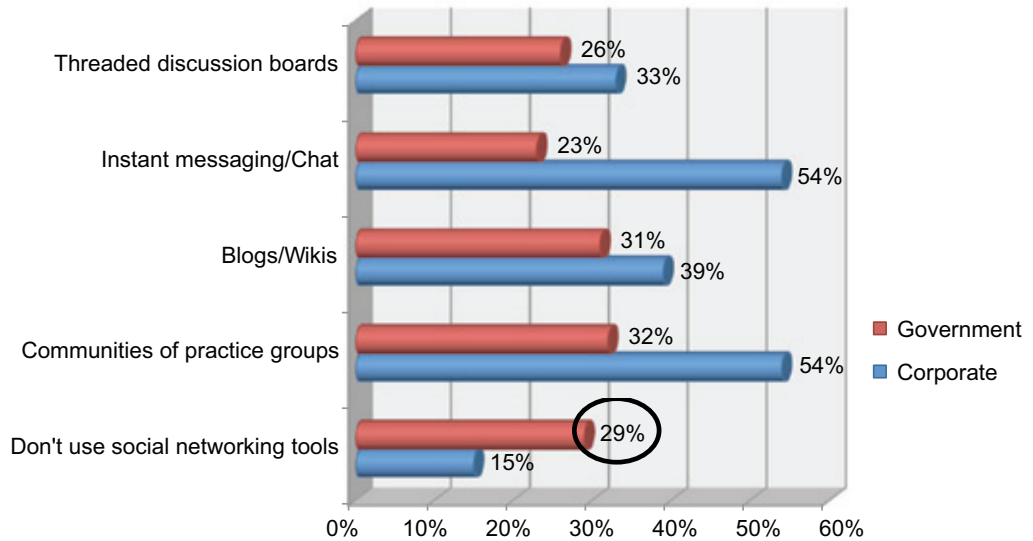
The Human Capital Institute (HCI) and Saba partnered to better understand the use and potential of SN tools in the government workplace. The goal was to learn what SN tools are being used in government today, the effectiveness of SN for doing government work, future expectations and barriers for its use, and how agency type affects the use and opinions of SN.

To discover the answers, a Web-based survey was completed by 607 respondents from federal, state and county/municipal government agencies. Despite the growing consensus that social networking tools can improve talent management, performance and service to customers (or, for government agencies, the affected public), recent studies by HCI and others show that, in general, government agencies lag behind the private sector in their adoption of SN tools — see **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Organizations Using Various Social Networking Tools**

Private sector results from Fall 2008 study. Public sector results from current Summer 2009 study.

\*\*Note: in the current survey of government agency use of SN tools, respondents were asked if they used threaded discussion boards, message boards and/or discussion threads. Since some respondents may not differentiate between these three types of tools, the results are combined — meaning that the 26 percent may be an overestimate of government use of threaded discussion boards and the actual gap between private and public sector use may be even greater.



n=192 (private sector); n=607 (government)

## Major Study Findings:

### Overall Use of SN Tools in Government

- Sixty-six (66) percent of government workplaces use some type of SN tool — and sixty-five (65) percent of those are using more than one tool.
- These tools are used for a variety of internal and external-facing goals — with employee training and public relations the work functions SN tools are most frequently used for.
- Communities of practice and blogs are the most frequently used SN functions.
- LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are the most frequently used SN Web sites — highlighting the value that many organizations find in leveraging already existing tools for their own purposes.
- The most used SN functions build capabilities in collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- The most used SN Web sites also aid collaboration and the building of professional networks.
- Overall, SN tools are perceived as most effective at handling information and communication in **internal processes and goals** such as management functions. Public communications and recruiting functions are in the mid-range of effectiveness, while the use of SN tools for managing work trails behind.
- Federal agencies (defense and non-defense) lead the way in using SN tools for project planning (an internal process) — while state government agencies lag.
- State government agencies are significantly less likely to use SN tools than either county/municipal or federal agencies — possibly a result of variation among states in having the budget and expertise to implement social networking.

- County/municipal government agencies lead the way in using SN tools in providing service to the public (an external process) — while the Defense Department lags.
- People involved in training and development are the most likely group to use threaded discussion boards and threads than other groups — highlighting the usefulness of these functions in talent development.
- Recruiters are most likely to use Facebook and LinkedIn — showing that these sites are useful for talent acquisition in the public sector, just as they have shown to be in the private sector.

#### **Current Effectiveness/Future Importance of SN Tools**

- Fifty-five (55) percent of government workers are uncertain about the future use of SN tools.
- Between fifty-two (52) percent and sixty-seven (67) percent of respondents expect to achieve at least one benefit (and usually many more) from the use of specific SN tools in the future — highlighting a major opportunity for future expansion.
- Only eleven (11) percent of agencies believe that the influx of a younger generation of workers will not influence their future decisions about SN use.

#### **Using SN Tools for Learning and Development**

- Functions aligned with knowledge sharing and informal learning and development are the most likely to be effectively conducted via SN tools.
- Regardless of government agency type, workplaces are far more likely to use SN tools for *informal* rather than *formal* learning and development.
- There is low satisfaction with the usefulness of currently used SN tools to improve learning and development — *highlighting the major opportunity for improvement in the future.*

#### **The Future of SN Tools in the Government Workplace**

- Security restrictions — chiefly due to loss of confidential information — is the most important barrier to future implementation of SN tools. Many workplaces simply bar all SN tools, while others place restrictions on what SN tools can be used or the employees who are allowed to use them.
- For workplaces willing/able to overcome security concerns, there are high expectations for the improvement in talent management and performance that SN tools can achieve.

#### **Examples of Social Networks and Government Today**

Several government agencies are taking advantage of these Web 2.0 tools for recruiting and talent management, as well as improving job performance.<sup>1</sup> For example, the CIA leverages Facebook as a method of attracting college students to apply for internships or jobs. The Environmental Protection Agency created a Facebook network for employees to achieve better talent management — as a way to share knowledge, build collaboration and improve employee engagement.

Other agencies are using public social networking Web sites as models for their own sites. NASA's CoLab program involved building its own collaborative workspace site to develop and support both online and offline groups and communities of practice. This allows its own internal groups to form a collaboration network and link to non-NASA groups of like-minded, technologically knowledgeable people and tap into the expertise of non-NASA scientists and engineers.

Using social networking tools is not limited to U.S. federal agencies. State, county and municipal governments are also getting into the act of leveraging these tools to carry out important functions. During summer 2009, adjoining counties in Texas — Grayson, Collin and Cooke — have started their own Facebook and Twitter sites to make it easier for the public to access important information — such as that provided by the counties' emergency management offices.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Guide to Managing U.S. Government Web Sites, Social Networking and Government* from Webcontent.gov, accessed 6/22/09.

**Recommended Action Plans:**

The results of this study lead to several key recommendations for action by those thinking about or planning the implementation or expansion of SN tool use in their workplace:

- **Security concerns** are the #1 barrier to future expansion in government and need to be dealt with through **implementing** a combination of **practical guidelines for the secure use** of SN tools, the **improvement** of the **safety** of existing Web sites and SN tools and the focused use of SN tools that **limit security concerns** (e.g., internal discussion boards, wikis, etc.) — see table below.
- The **current strengths** of various levels of government (e.g., Defense Department’s use of SN tools for project planning and state government agencies’ use of SN tools for public communication) should be **encouraged** and **enhanced**.
- Information about **successful uses** of SN tools should be **widely distributed** to encourage leadership buy-in of SN tools enhancement for underutilized functions.
- The **success of communities of practice** (the leading SN function in our survey) should be **leveraged by using it as a model** for increased use of SN tools.
- **Increased communication** between various functional groups about what SN tools they use, how they use them and the successes they have is necessary — e.g., Operations is lagging behind HR in the use of SN tools and needs to hear success stories and see models of best practices.
- **Training and Development groups** need to take the **lead to leverage** the success of SN tools for *informal training and development* to enhance the use of these tools in *formal training and development programs*.

Breaking Down Barriers to the Use of SN Tools in Government Three Common Approaches (as told to us by respondents)		
Block All Social Networking Tools	Limiting Access to a Selected SN Tools or for a Few Functions	Limit Who Can Access SN Tools to Selected Individuals
<p>“We are blocked from accessing social networking tools and Web sites.”</p> <p>— <i>Operations Practitioner in U.S. Federal Government Agency</i></p>	<p>“The agency has limited use of some tools such as MySpace and Facebook. We just recently provided access to YouTube and there are other sites/tools that are blocked due to a filter and our firewall. Most tools are available.”</p> <p>— <i>Senior Manager at a U.S. Federal Agency</i></p>	<p>“We just started using social networks as an agency. The organization has authorized one department to use it to impart company information to our customers. ... Agencies need to develop policies that discuss the consequences for false or confidential information being shared on a social networking site.”</p> <p>— <i>Training and Development Director at Federal Agency</i></p>

<sup>2</sup>Many local government agencies now on Twitter and Facebook, available at: <<http://www.kxii.com/news/headlines/51938567.html>> (posted July 28, 2009).