Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Networking

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Whether you are a social network addict, a novice dabbler, or you are thinking about trying online networking, you probably have some questions about the advantages and disadvantages of social networking. For example, can it really increase one's productivity or does it just waste valuable time? How safe is it? Before you invest too heavily in online social communities, be sure to do your due diligence so you are aware of the risk versus the reward. Here's what you need to know to help you make an informed decision.

Five Advantages of Social Networking

1. Worldwide Connectivity

No matter if you are searching for that former college roommate, your first grade teacher, or an international friend, there is no easier or faster way to make a connection than via the social network. Although Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and MySpace are probably the most well known social networking communities, there are new websites popping up regularly that are dedicated to allowing people to connect and to interact via the Internet. Through such sites, individuals make new friends or business connections or extend their personal base by connecting and interacting with friends of friends and so forth.

These connections can help one with a variety of things such as:

- Finding romance
- Seeking a new job
- Locating assistance
- Getting and giving product and service referrals
- Receiving support from like-minded individuals
- Making or receiving advice on career or personal issues

In many ways, social communities are the virtual equivalent of meeting at the general store or at church socials to exchange news and get updated on friends and families. Snail mail pen pals have been replaced by virtual avatars and private messages sent via the social network.
2. Commonality of Interest

When you opt to participate in a social network community, you can pick and choose those individuals whose likes and dislikes are similar to yours and build your network around those commonalities. For instance, if you are a chess aficionado or a book lover, you can find and interact with those who share your interest. Because you are connecting digitally instead of having to physically attend meetings, you have the luxury of joining many more groups and communities. You can meet with your friends anytime you have an Internet connection and whenever you find them online.

3. Real-Time Information Sharing

Many social networking sites incorporate an instant messaging feature, which means you can exchange information in real-time via a chat. This is a great feature for teachers to use to facilitate classroom discussions. A study by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation shows these networks can be used as effective vehicles for students to pursue self-paced online learning. In addition, the Internet is the ultimate online textbook. Students no longer need to take out six library books at a time. Much of what they need to know they can find online.

School is not the only setting where this type of real-time information sharing can be beneficial. Social networking can provide a tool for managers to utilize in team meetings, for conference organizers to use to update attendees and for business people to use as a means of interacting with clients or prospects.

4. Free Advertising

Whether you are non-profit organization who needs to get the word out about your upcoming fundraiser or a business owner marketing a new product or service, there's no better way to get your message in front of millions of people 24/7. The best part is it that you can spread the word through social networking profiles for free. You can promote one product, service or idea or many because you are limited only by the amount of time you wish to invest in the endeavor.

5. Increased News Cycle Speed

Social networking has revolutionized the speed of the news cycle. Many news organizations now partner with social networking sites like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook in order to both collect and share information. One can get a sense of what is going on in the world just by watching trending topics from many of these sites. This has led to the development of a near instantaneous news cycle as millions of social networking updates rapidly spread news and information.
Five Disadvantages of Online Social Communities

1. **Face to Face Connections are endangered**

A huge advantage of these social communities has a reverse side effect that is also a big disadvantage of social networking: they reduce or eliminate face-to-face socialization. Because of the autonomy afforded by the virtual world, individuals are free to create a fantasy persona and can pretend to be someone else.

It is hard to say no, be rude, or ignore someone when you are looking them in the eye. It's incredibly easy and quick to unfriend or unfollow someone or simply block their efforts to make a connection. Just one click of the mouse and your problems are over. Unfortunately, this feature of online socialization cheats people of the opportunity to learn how to resolve conflicts in the world outside the Internet and it could retard or cripple one's social skills developments.

Tweens and teens are at higher risk because those years are when they are learning to interact with others or build and maintain relationships. A report from the National School Boards Association shows that of the children in these age groups that use a social network, 41 percent spend their time posting messages. They are not spending this time in face-to-face interactions with their peers or others nor are they developing the necessary social skills for future success.

2. **Cyber bullying and Crimes against Children**

Use of social networks can expose individuals to harassment or inappropriate contact from others. Unless parents are diligent to filter the Internet content to which their families are exposed, children could be exposed to pornography or other inappropriate content.

The Pew Center, in their Cyberbullying 2010 report, states that 93 percent of teens aged 12 to 17 use the Internet. Of that 93 percent, 63 percent of them use the Internet daily. Such high usage increases the risk of their being victims of cyberbullying or other cyber crimes.

3. **Risks of Fraud or Identity Theft**

Whether you like it or not, the information you post on the Internet is available to almost anyone who is clever enough to access it. Most thieves need just a few vital pieces of personal information to make your life a nightmare and if they successfully steal your identity, it could cost you dearly. A report on CNET reveals over 24 million Americans put their personal information at risk by posting it on public sites such as social communities.

4. **Time Waster**

A Nielsen report explains that social networking can be a big waste of time that sucks 17 percent of our Internet time down the non-productivity drain. While it is true that some of that time is likely spent in making and maintaining important business, social or professional connections, it is also true that it is easy to become distracted and end up spending valuable time on games,
chats or other non-related activities. Dorie Clark of the Huffington Post reports Facebook users spend about six hours each month on the site, while social networkers spend three times as much time on those communities as they do on other online activities like email.

5. Corporate Invasion of Privacy

Social networking invites major corporations to invade your privacy and sell your personal information. Have you ever posted a comment on Facebook, only to notice an advertisement appear with content related to your post? Facebook projects it will earn $3.8 billion in revenue in 2011. That's not bad for a free site. If Facebook and other social networking sites don't charge their members, however, how do they make so much money? They do it by selling the ability to specifically target advertisements. On social networking sites, the website isn't the product, its users are. These sites run algorithms that search for keywords, web browsing habits, and other data stored on your computer or social networking profile and provide you with advertisements targeted specifically to you. At the same time, you may be giving the site permission to share your information with outside sources unless you specifically generate settings that disallow them to do so. Participating in applications like Farmville may also be allowing outside vendors access to your private information.

Are Social Networks Harmful to Society or Not?

Because networking in online social communities is still a relatively young online trend, whether or not social networking is harmful is still unknown. Like any other type of networking or social club with which individuals become involved, it is a good idea to do your homework and make sure that you know what you are getting into. Understand the terms of use, the rules and regulations, and be clear on issues like security and privacy.

Take responsibility for your own safety and integrity and never join something just because it is trendy or all your friends are doing it. In evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of social networking, it's best to err on the side of caution and information. After all, the lack of both can have a devastating effect.