

# Social Media Butterflies

*'Everyone is doing it, why don't you?' is not a convincing argument in a bankrupt public sector, says Helen Olsen.*

**S**ocial media never stands still long enough for anyone to actually work out its value. Take OpenSocitm, quoted in Socitm's report on social media as an example of collaboration building on the value of a conference, October's Socitm09. Well, there are 54 members. Yes, there was a flurry of posts after the event; but little since. You see, the attendees are all at the next conference, involved in the next group, using a new hashtag. In the world of social media the butterflies are always chasing The Next Big Thing.

Which is unfortunate because, in truth, there is much to recommend social media. The report rightly extols its virtues and its potential to play a role in informing decisions, nurturing participation, and giving people access to the information they need in order to make informed decisions. It highlights the importance of an organisation having a grip on social media and a comprehensive social media strategy.

However, overall, the report is not convincing. For a start, the sample base is startlingly small – 57. Secondly, there is no methodology and charts have no scale. This lack of detail and the low response rate is a shame – a solid stake in the social media ground would be useful.

Instead it tells us little more than we already know about social media – lots of people are doing it, mainly the younger generation. Lots of innovative and interesting projects are engaging with people in lots of different and interesting ways using the latest social media tools.

It tells us that the sector cannot ignore social media; that access should not be blocked; and that its potential to help in hard times is huge. Local government, we find, is most definitely behind, rather than surfing the front of, the social media wave.

Where the report fails is that it does not tell us the two key things of interest to decision makers in public sector:

1. What social media tools and channels are important for the future? (Or are they all just fast moving fads?), and
2. How do you build a business case?

The first is admittedly difficult to predict but, astonishingly, the second issue is dismissed out of hand by the report's authors. Apart from it being 'not the role of ICT managers to block access to social media' (in which case, exactly who does

have control of the on/off switch?) the report also suggests that neither is it their role to assemble the business case for using social media.

ICT managers should, instead, 'point out the technology potential, and furnish service managers with the appropriate facts about costs... but stop short of building the financial case for proceeding'.

A casual observer might argue that it is precisely ICT's role to put forward the business case for new technology within the organisation. After all, if proponents themselves can't quantify the value and return on investment, how on earth do they expect the organisation's non-technical leaders and service managers to do so?

Meanwhile, the report states the authors' belief that CIOs have a responsibility, as the organisations 'professional agent of change', to increase awareness of the business potential of social media. As professional agents of change though, surely CIOs also have a responsibility to thoroughly explore the costs involved?

The pace of change is clearly increasing exponentially. Which begs the question, what will tomorrow's fad be? Are we destined to be endlessly chasing the equivalent of the latest playground craze?

Indeed, there is a tone of playground cool in the report. As head of ICT, if you block access you risk being seen as a 'Luddite' – if you don't 'get' social media you can't be in with the in crowd. The un-hip head of IT also risks 'gaining a reputation for restricting opportunities'.

Instead, 'As an early adopter, you will get credit for engaging effectively with citizens in a cost effective way. You will reap the benefits early... you will be best placed to use the potential in order to maintain services whilst those around you suffer draconian cuts.'

Quite. But what those opportunities for the business of the organisation are is glossed over – despite dire warnings that social media 'will not go away'.

Some 90% of these organisations apparently block or restrict access to social media in some way today. The main reasons for this being concerns over security, time wasting, system or data compromise, reputational risk and bandwidth.

Curiously - given that Socitm's own IT trends report suggests that council heads



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of ICT are no nearer the top table, and thus the council top decision making team, than ever - the report suggests that 'it may well be necessary to trade off investment in buildings for investment in network infrastructure'.

It must be pointed out that the emperor in this report has no clothes: there is no evidence of any 'cost effectiveness' and certainly no evidence of being able to use the medium to maintain services.

Of course, many of us agree, social media should offer all these things. It is just that in all the enthusiasm it is disappointing – indeed becoming suspicious even – to find that no one can actually quantify the expected benefits.

Social media, or rather people, costs money. To produce anything for the web and to keep the social media engine turning requires a lot of people to do a lot of work – listening to and joining in all those conversations, analysing them, informing decision making etc. In the community you can rely on passionate volunteers. But even passionate volunteers expect to get paid at work.

Meanwhile, underperforming council websites are costing up to £132m a year nationally as users turn to more expensive alternatives according to Socitm's latest Website Takeup briefing. Local authorities, it warns, are failing to reap the benefits of investment in technology as people, unsuccessful in accessing online information and services, turn instead to other, more expensive-to-service channels like the phone or walk-in contact centres.

In the introduction the authors note that 'Social media is changing the way that traditional media functions, for example by driving local newspapers out of business'. Absolutely, however are there no lessons to be learnt? Perhaps the one that 'free' is not a business model, and if the public sector, as IT Trends has just reported, is already facing budget cuts in ICT and 'external sources of funding have dried up' where is the money to come from to run new social media operations?

As one chief executive said at Solace09, "Why should I pay for social media? The community will do it anyway."

With so many competing demands on the public sector purse, this report would do little to change that view.

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