



Who owns your network?



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Increasingly, Web 2.0 solutions are making inroads into the enterprise. However, both employers and employees still have to discover what are the mutual rights, obligations and associated risks.

Business as usual

A couple of weeks ago, the London High Court ordered a former Hays employee to disclose business contacts added to his [LinkedIn](#) account before leaving the company. It is just one more example of the delicate balancing act that is often needed while introducing so-called "social solutions" into the enterprise.



According to the employee, [Hays](#), a recruitment firm currently operating in some 27 countries, had encouraged his use of LinkedIn as a business tool. Since contacts who accepted the invitation to join his network were visible to other contacts, these contacts could not be considered as being company confidential.

Well, these might be valid claims. On the other hand, there also is the reality that this employee, after leaving Hays, started his own recruitment boutique. So, this also touches more traditional issues of business ethics and non-compete clauses in contracts.

Nevertheless, it also raises the challenging question where we will have to draw the line.

Who owns your network?

Similar to the issue we already discussed in "[Who owns your opinion?](#)", there does not seem to be a perfect solution.

Of course, companies can protect their rights by having clear contractual terms and internet-use policies that are up-to-date with the latest technological and social evolutions. However, this does not solve all problems for all parties.

What about your current network when you move to a new employer? What are your rights and obligations? Even if the company imposes the use of separate business-only accounts, it cannot be avoided that there is potential overlap. Do you have to delete the links with your old friends?

What about being linked/connected to colleagues, business partners or customers? It seems a very natural thing to do. But is this a personal matter or a company matter? As we have seen in above example, as long as all goes well, it is not really an issue. What if...

In addition, remember the [controversy](#) about Robert Scoble who was banned from [Facebook](#) for exporting the name, email address and birthday information of his 5000+ friends on Facebook into another social network, [Plaxo](#).

Who owns the network information? The employee, the employer or the social network platform?

Today, this complexity only starts to emerge. Neither the end-user, nor the organisation can correctly assess what might be the potential pitfalls. While the benefits of using social solutions are increasingly clear, it is still unknown where this path will lead us to.

Will it be a world of more openness and collaboration? Or will it be a world of more control and restrictions? We don't know either, but it is clear that there is a growing disconnect between the wishes and the ambitions of the employees versus the business-as-usual thinking of the traditional organisational structures.


Time for a change...

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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