

Chapter 7

Would You Accept a Facebook Friend Request from Your Boss? Examining Generational Differences

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ABSTRACT

Because Millennials and Generation X tend to desire close relationships with their leaders, expect frequent and open communication, and integrate their personal and professional contacts via social media, it was predicted they would be more likely than Baby Boomers to accept a Facebook friend request from their boss. Although no main effect was found for generational differences, a significant interaction between self-disclosure and generation was found, such that self-disclosure was positively related to acceptance of a friend request from one's boss for Baby Boomers and Generation X, but negatively related for Millennials. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

With the ever-increasing popularity of social media, employees are interacting more with their coworkers, supervisors, and other professional contacts in online social networks such as Facebook (McDonald & Thompson, 2016; O'Connor & Schmidt, 2015). A recent study indicated that 60 percent of employees report having one or more co-worker "friends" on Facebook, and 25 percent of employees reported they were Facebook friends with their supervisor (Weidner, Wynne, & O'Brien, 2012). Likewise, a study of over 300 full-time professionals found that over 90 percent had accepted Facebook friend requests from their co-workers (Frampton & Child, 2013). While such social media connections between employees and their professional contacts results in greater sharing of information and builds social capital, they may also present concerns with regard to privacy and professionalism (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013).

The challenge lies in carefully balancing what is disclosed to whom. Without visual or setting cues, social network users may forget to self-monitor what they post (Nguyen, Bin & Campbell, 2012). In addition, individuals do not have total control over what is posted about them since personal contacts have the ability to disclose information that may be viewed as inappropriate or unprofessional. It is also important to note that not all professional relationships may be the same and that the level of concern about what is disclosed via social networks and by who will differ depending on the type of relationship (Karl & Peluchette, 2011; Peluchette, Karl, Coustasse, & Emmett, 2012). Probably one of the most valued professional relationships that individuals have is with their immediate supervisor/boss and the question of whether one should connect with one's boss via social media has received considerable attention in the popular press in recent years. From "Request denied: Reasons not to friend your boss on Facebook" to "5 Reasons to Friend Your Boss on Facebook," there are literally thousands of online articles dealing with this issue.

However, the academic literature examining workplace social media connections has been slow to emerge and, to date, research shows rather mixed findings. Some studies indicate that respondents are supportive of such connections with supervisors, seeing it as an opportunity to build networking and enhance one's career. For example, Karl and Peluchette (2011) surveyed undergraduate students in the U.S. and found that most (84%) would accept the request, although 33 percent indicated they would have reservations about doing so. Similarly, a study of healthcare providers found that 72 percent would accept a friend request from their boss, although 24 percent would have reservations about this (Peluchette, Karl, Coustasse & Emmett, 2012). In addition, a study of 765 librarians found that only 19 percent would not accept requests from their supervisor (Del Bosque, 2013).

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