

Chapter 10

Should Employees Accept Their Boss's Facebook 'Friend' Request?

Examining Gender and Cultural Differences

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ABSTRACT

This study examines gender and cultural differences in reactions and responses to a Facebook 'friend' request from the boss. The authors found respondents were more likely to have positive (e.g., pleased, honored) reactions followed by questionable reactions (e.g., worried, suspicious) and least likely to have negative reactions (e.g., disgusted, offended). Although most respondents would accept the request, many would have reservations about doing so. Contrary to expectations, no gender differences were found. Significant cultural differences were found such that U.S. respondents were more likely than German respondents to have negative and questionable reactions and German respondents were more likely than U.S. respondents to have positive reactions. Implications and suggestions for future research are then discussed.

INTRODUCTION

"Help! My boss wants to be my 'friend' on Facebook, what do I do? Should I 'ignore' the request and if so, how might that affect our relationship on the job? Or, should I accept the request but only

allow him or her limited access to my profile?" As the popularity of Facebook has exploded around the globe, more and more users are facing this online social networking dilemma. As of January 2010, Facebook had 400 million active users with over 150 million new members added in

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2009 alone, making it the world's largest social networking site ("Facebook Press Room," 2010). Membership gains have been particularly strong in Europe, increasing by 10 million in 2009 and comprising about one third of Facebook's active monthly users (Eldon, 2009). The college student age group that the site originally aimed to serve (18 to 24 year-olds) is arguably having the hardest time getting used to sharing what used to be their exclusive virtual domain. Due to the widespread use of Facebook, the original younger users are finding that they are sharing the same virtual space with their elders (e.g., their parents, grandparents, other relatives) or other individuals whom they are typically more conscious about how they present themselves (e.g., their boss, professor, some co-workers).

The situation becomes even more complex when individuals may be confronted with a 'friend' request from one of these sources. For example, Kimberley Swann, a teenager in the U.K., indicated on her Facebook page that she thought her job was boring and was subsequently sent a termination notice from her boss via Facebook (Morgan, 2009). Another U.K. woman regrets that she added her boss as a 'friend' after posting a complaint about him on her Facebook page. The boss responded with "Hi... I guess you forgot about adding me on here?... Don't bother coming in tomorrow" (Kelly, 2009). An additional example is a bank intern who emailed his boss late in the day of Halloween, informing him he could not be at work because of a family emergency. The next day, his boss found a photo of him at a Halloween party dressed in a fairy costume holding a wand and a can of beer. His boss then e-mailed the intern with the message "nice wand" and blind copied the entire office. Within hours, the embarrassing photo and email messages were all over the internet (Waller, 2007).

The scenarios mentioned above are all examples of uncomfortable or difficult situations that employees have experienced as a result of having their boss as part of their Facebook 'friend' network. As noted earlier, the receipt of a 'friend'

request from one's boss may present a particularly challenging dilemma for Facebook users since the employment relationship may be at stake. If a subordinate accepts the boss's 'friend' request, the boss can have access to personal information which the subordinate may not want the boss to see. If the subordinate ignores the request, the boss may feel snubbed and retaliate in some way that is harmful or damaging to the "real-life" relationship that the subordinate has with the boss. The purpose of this study is to examine how individuals indicate that they would react and respond to 'friend' requests from their boss and how gender and culture impact these reactions and responses. Drawing from the self-presentation literature, we provide a rationale for possible reactions and responses, as well as provide recommendations for Facebook use in the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

According to Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, we are all actors who stage daily performances in an attempt to manage the impressions of our audience. Although we have the ability to choose our stage, props, and costume to suit the situation, our main goal is to maintain coherence from one situation to another. When in a public or professional setting, individuals are typically "onstage" and actively engaged in managing the impressions of their audience. In contrast, "backstage" is a place where actors tend to be themselves, loosening some of their self-imposed restrictions. Access to backstage is usually limited to a very select and small group of people. This separation helps actors maintain their onstage personas or facades. For many individuals, co-workers are different and separate from non-work friends; both of those groups are different and separate from family members.

In the physical world, we use time and space to separate the incompatible aspects of our lives and may even organize our activities to prevent overlap (Donath & Boyd, 2004). However, in the

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