

It's ridiculous for City Hall to ban online tools like Facebook



BY RACHEL SA , TORONTO SUN

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Years from now, banning Facebook in the workplace will seem as ridiculous as the idea of banning telephones.

Wisely, the city's government management committee will meet next week to discuss the possibility of lifting the ban on Facebook for all City of Toronto staffers.

The general perception of Facebook, held especially by those who either don't use it or use it predominately for playing games, is that the social networking tool is nothing but a giant time suck.

The truth is Facebook is an increasingly integral communications tool in the modern world.

In my work as a public relations consultant, it would be unthinkable NOT to have a presence on Facebook — and on Twitter, LinkedIn and other networks.

If part of your job includes interacting with the public then online social networks are far from frivolous: They're essential.

Councillor Paul Ainslie, Ward 43 Scarborough East, is chair of the government management committee, which will decide the fate of the Facebook ban. He tells me he's a self-described "social media junkie."

"When Mayor Ford appointed me, he said: 'You've got to make the city more open and transparent'. I said: 'I'm going to have to drag the City kicking and screaming into the 21st century'," Ainslie told me in a telephone interview. He was stunned to find city departments not utilizing Facebook.

For example, the parks and recreation department was holding town hall meetings across the city to gather input from the public.

"When I asked how they were advertising (them), they said they were doing newspaper ads and an e-mail letter," Ainslie told me. "I said, 'Unless you're using social media like Twitter and Facebook, you're missing an entire demographic of people because you're advertising in a way that I would consider very 1960-ish.' So I got them to start using Facebook."

And, of course, if we are encouraging city employees to utilize online tools in order to reach out to the people of Toronto, then banning those online tools is ridiculous.

"In the 21st century to have a municipality the size of Toronto, the largest in Canada, banning Facebook, to me just doesn't make any sense," Ainslie said. "We have 50,000 employees in the City of Toronto and I think the majority are very proud of the work they do ... I think they can help get the message out there about what an amazing city we have, our programs and our events. The benefits far outshine any negative aspects."

That said, there are some downsides to Facebook in the workplace. Indeed, it might not be necessary for every employee to access it.

Depending on their job and depending on how employees use it, Facebook can be a colossal time waster.

But so can chit-chatting at a desk, making personal phone calls, or tooling around any number of sites that haven't been blocked.

It's the responsibility of individual employees — with guidance and supervision from managers — to understand the difference between work use and personal use of Facebook.

For example, killing hordes of the undead in the game, *Zombie Lane*, obviously isn't work-related (although it can be very cathartic after a stressful day at the office, let me tell you).

"We're all mature adults here," Ainslie said. "At least I'd like to think we are," he added, laughing.

If the ban is lifted, Ainslie wants to see a social media policy and training put in place for city staff.

That may sound like just another added cost, but the truth is it's the cost, and the reality, of doing business in the 21st century.

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