Abstract: Having achieved worldwide popularity at an astonishing rate, social networking sites (SNS) are a contemporary phenomenon creating new organizational issues and challenges. Initially developed as a personal communication device, SNS have now infiltrated into the organizational context with some significant and insidious impacts. Organizations are dealing with behavioural issues that blur the boundaries between workplace expectations and employee’s personal domains. Using key media examples, this conceptual paper explores the impacts of social networking activities and questions resulting organizational reactions to employee’s private postings. The paper highlights significant implications for scholarship as well as current management practice. We raise three key research questions that create an imperative for empirical research and in-depth analysis and we outline emerging issues specific to HRM practice.

Keywords: social networking sites, privacy, legislation, retention, recruitment

INTRODUCTION
Over the past few years social networking sites (SNS) have attracted a great deal of publicity in the popular media and are now attracting academic and industry attention. The uptake of online social networking is causing new issues in people’s private lives but increasingly is creating new challenges and previously inexperienced situations in the workplace. This conceptual paper explores organizational use of social networking sites but more significantly discusses issues that are arising from content posted on SNS in employees’ personal time. Private postings reflecting employees’ interests and personal activities displayed in public (online) domains are increasingly being perceived as threats to organizational and professional reputations. We contend that the boundaries between private and public domains are becoming increasingly blurred through the emerging phenomena of online social networking.

Social networking sites
Current scholarship concerning SNS is emerging from diverse disciplines and focuses on impression management, networking, technological implications, connectivity and privacy issues (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Academic research to date, focuses on privacy issues (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Hodge, 2006); identity construction (boyd & Heer, 2006); social capital (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007); and digital inequality due to “unequal participation based on user background” (Hargittai, 2008, p. 276). There is, however, a scarcity of research that highlights current and emerging issues and discusses workplace implications arising from this fast-paced phenomenon. This exploratory paper calls for empirical and focused research on the far-reaching impacts of SNS and their workplace effects. In order to guide future research, we propose three key research questions exploring: the changing nature of work; privacy concerns; and legal and moral implications arising from the use of SNS at work.

There are hundreds of SNS utilising a variety of technological innovations and supporting a variety of interests and applications. Such sites include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Bebo (for a review of the history and scholarship of SNS see boyd & Ellison, 2008). The popularity and pervasiveness of these sites has grown rapidly and media discussions
surrounding social networking have attracted the attention of a number of different institutions and individuals. More and more individuals are signing up to social networking sites on a daily basis and members are even more diverse in age range and ethnicity than ever before (Zuckerburg, 2009). Facebook alone boasts two hundred million active users, who in total spend four billion minutes just on Facebook each day (Owyang, 2009). MySpace has a reported seventy six million members in the United States alone, and estimates that each user spends approximately two hundred and sixty six minutes interacting on the site every month (Owyang, 2009). Linkedin has also noted a vast increase in membership and site visitors over the past year and its visitor rate has grown over fifty percent- from over three million to almost eight million visitors a month with thirty six million active members (Owyang, 2009).

While many positive factors of SNS are commonly expounded and highlighted, particularly by enthusiastic marketers, a number of less desirable issues are emerging regarding SNS in organizational contexts. Recent media reports have commented on employers’ behaviours and the way in which they use social networking sites to monitor their employees and investigate potential recruits (Balakrishna, 2006). Organizational monitoring of employees’ social networking activities raises a number of issues and speculation about the impact upon employer/employee relations, as well as ethical and privacy concerns. This paper uses examples from the popular media to explore emerging issues of privacy, retention, recruitment and legal implications created from the fast-paced adoption of ‘private’ social networking activities that have now infiltrated most workplace domains.

Social networking sites are defined as:
“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

SNS are rich sources of personal information including statistical and demographic data, photographs, videos, comments, status updates, blogs, group memberships and thus offer opportunities to interact with personal contacts and also to network and express oneself on a professional basis (boyd, & Ellison, 2008; Friedman, 2006; Zukerburg, 2009; Dywer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007). The most crucial component of SNS is the display of one’s connections and networks and even though the term ‘friend’ is assigned to these connections there are multiple reasons why people are connected (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Although networks of ‘friends’ are often created from personal contacts and through one’s actual (offline) friendships, SNS have not remained in merely the private sphere of people’s lives but have steadily become a component of work life for many people. Therefore the concept of ‘friends’ developed from SNS is extended to cover friends of friends, acquaintances and business contacts. With organizations rapidly adopting this new phenomenon as a useful business tool it is becoming imperative to understand this modern trend and the emerging implications for organizations and their managers and employees.

Networking itself is not a new concept; it has been embedded in the core of economic activities since trading activities began (Granovetter, 1973). Strong and weak contacts have always been essential for conducting business activities and traditionally networks were composed of personal ties with whom one had previously established a reciprocal relationship (Granovetter, 1973). Technology has evolved and revolutionised traditional network systems creating “a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronic-based communication and information technologies” (Castells, 2004, p.3). The internet has transformed the way in which individuals can network and has enabled individuals to
communicate and establish relationships by removing geographic restrictions. Thus the internet has allowed networking to occur on a mass global scale and individuals can now establish a multitude of global relationships without the need for face-to-face communication (Castells, 2004; Gauntlett, 2000).

Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2011) suggest that individuals who accumulate large numbers of friends on SNS are not able to meaningfully engage with them all and thus may not develop useful relationships with many of these. Social networking sites are distinctive, as they “locate people in the context of their acquaintances, provide a framework for maintaining an extensive array of friends and other contacts, and allow for public display of interpersonal commentary” (Donath, 2008, p. 232). Individuals interact by constructing a personal profile page, which includes personal information that display their beliefs, opinions and ideas (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dywer et al, 2007). Whilst the intention of these sites was initially to allow individuals to interact with close personal contacts, the growth and popularity of these sites has enabled individuals to interact and network with multiple people from any location and time zone (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Although online social networking offers the opportunity to meet and connect with strangers, current research actually suggests that sites such as Facebook are used to maintain and solidify existing relationships (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Even when the existing relationship constitutes a ‘weak tie’ (Granovetter 1973), there is usually a common offsite component shared by the online ‘friends’ (boyd & Ellison, 2008), therefore there is an interaction between offline and online interactions that is supported and developed through SNS. A common example is when an individual requests online connection with someone that attended the same school, even if they weren’t friends earlier, the common bond of attendance is enough of a tie to facilitate the connection. These weak ties and online interactions increasingly facilitate organizational networking for personal and career-orientated objectives (Donath, 2008) and the role of SNS is continuously and rapidly evolving for workplace purposes. The technical-social relationship has firmly infiltrated into organizational contexts (Wajcman, 2006) through direct organizational initiatives as well as informally through employees and managers connecting to their SNS during work hours (sometimes termed cyberloafing see Lim 2002).

The changing nature of work

With the speed of change in the online environment and the rapid adoption of new communication technologies both in the workplace and private spheres, significant changes are occurring in how people work and interact and this has complex implications for employers and employees. Advanced industrial societies have made many changes socially, economically and technologically which has “called into question the meaning of work bequeathed from an earlier time” (Casey, 1995, p. 26). Bureaucratic theory reinforced that the organization is a public space where individuals are expected to represent their organizations values and beliefs in order to achieve the organization’s specific goals (Beetham, 1996). While organizations still aim to create strong organizational identity, employees engage in online personal activities within the workplace (Wajcman, 2006; Casey, 1995) that may not always be aligned with organizational objectives, mission and values. Due largely to SNS and associated activities, public and private spheres are now meshed together causing a state of confusion. The introduction of communication technologies such as computers, the telephone, the cellular phone, internet and portable communication devices, have enabled organizations to diversify beyond the office space into a multinational and virtual space operating twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week without geographical or temporal restrictions (Casey,1995). Employees are now expected to be connected to their organizations continuously via these mobile technologies that enable emails, text messages, video conferencing and phone calls (Wajcman, 2006). Employees can also take their work into their home by using the same technological mediums, enabling continuous connectivity to both spheres (Casey, 1999; Kolb, Collins, & Lind, 2008). This has
significantly blurred the boundaries between work and private domains allowing employee’s
extracurricular activities to become visible to fellow employees and management.

Organizations have discovered that SNS enable them to reach a global and diverse audience
through direct interaction with individuals which gives an organization access to valuable data
concerning customers and employees. (Fitzgerald, 2009; boyd, & Ellison, 2008). SNS also offer
the opportunity to create rich organizational networks and relationships with current, past and
future employees, and a variety of organizational stakeholders (O’Murchu, et al, 2004).
However, although such rich information may be advantageous for organizations, networking
technologies have enabled employees’ personal information, posted from both within and
outside the organization, to be exposed to management scrutiny (Murphy, 2007). Many
organizations encourage their own employees to sign up to their organization’s SNS, however
employees may not realise that their personal information is visible to the organization
(O’Murchu, Breslin, & Decker, 2004). This potentially allows managers and peers to ‘spy’ on
others in their workplace and personal information may be further circulated (via email, text and
other mediums) and this information can also be used in disciplinary sanctions against
employees (Murphy, 2007; Zeidner, 2007). From a Human Resources Management (HRM)
perspective the organization may also use SNS to access information regarding future
candidates. Such organizational utilisation of SNS indicates that SNS have uses that extend
beyond their original purpose of personal communication with friends, and it appears that SNS
may be changing the nature of work itself which has implications for employment relationships.

It is evident that such a dramatic societal change has called into question the traditional nature
of work. In particular, the influx of information and communication technologies has created a
globally diverse workforce which has few geographical and temporal boundaries (Wajcman,
2006; Casey, 1995). Information and communication technologies not only sustain economic
activity they also have a significant role in enabling individuals to socialise and conduct
personal activities from their workplace (Wajcman, 2006). This global economy has evolved at
a rapid pace, thus blurring the lines between the public and private spheres which distinguish the
organizational realm from the domestic realm (Beetham, 1996). The public and private realms
are no longer distinguishable from one another and technology is revolutionising the way in
which work is conducted and making obsolete some traditional methods of operation (Beetham,
1996; Casey, 1995). Both employers and employees may access online information regarding
others’ personal lives and this may play a part in redefining organizational relationships. It
seems important therefore to investigate the use of SNS in organizational contexts, the impact of
access to a wider range of personal and information regarding organizational members, and the
effects upon organizational relationships between peers, managers and subordinates, and other
organizational stakeholders. This relational development forms the basis for our first research
question:

*RQ1: How are Social Networking Sites (SNS) being used within organizations and
how is the online social networking phenomenon redefining the employer-employee
relationship?*

**Privacy issues**
The internet from its inception has been plagued with threats to privacy and the security of
information (Berry, 2004; Tavani, 1999). Angwin (2010) highlights that ‘spying’ on internet
users and collecting data such as consumer preferences, health issues, financial information, is
one of the fastest growing internet businesses. Angwin speculates that online social networking
sites are being targeted, cautions that the practice is pervasive, and warns that there are no legal
limits on using such data. Such practises are likely to be adopted in the workplace and raises
privacy concerns in employment relationships. The issue of privacy is complex when it comes

to online social networking and the ways in which employers and employees use, engage with, and exploit the information readily available from SNS. There are number of reasons why SNS have become an important consideration for employers and employees. Once information is transmitted online it becomes a paperless, but permanent character record (Wagner, 2006). Workplace use of SNS and information gleaned from these is blurring the boundaries between public and private domains and this raises the question of privacy and whether an employer (or employee) should have the right to use information gleaned from SNS in employment decisions. Privacy refers to an individual’s decision regarding when, how and what personal information is revealed to others (Westin, 1967). SNS enable individuals to express themselves freely, however even though this is a valuable communication forum, the internet is a public realm where privacy is often limited and some would argue, even non-existent (Wagner, 2006). In a study comparing privacy factors between Facebook and MySpace, Dwyer et al (2007) found that online relationships still develop even when participants perceive that safeguards to privacy are weak. They also stress that privacy concerns regarding SNS are not fully understood and encourage further research into this phenomenon.

Employers have quickly realised that they can easily access personal information that their current and potential future employees display on SNS. This means that employers may view potentially embarrassing and inappropriate behaviours showcased through comments, video links and photographs displayed by the actual employee or their contacts and friends. This can be achieved simply by using a search engine or accessing information via the employee’s network of contacts (Du Toit, 2008). Although such activities are supposedly ‘private’ they may reflect attitudes and behaviours misaligned with organizational values and policies. Provocative images, records of drunken debauchery, defamatory statements and descriptions of sexual dalliances with co-workers posted on sites such as Facebook and MySpace have seen many employees of organizations facing disciplinary actions or even dismissal (Du Toit, 2008). This has been seen as rather problematic particularly for younger employees, sometimes referred to as ‘digital natives’ or ‘net generation’ (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008), who, having grown up with online communication, may be rather reckless when expressing themselves online (Wagner, 2006). Researchers refer to the ‘privacy paradox’ experienced by teens who although they desire to protect their privacy, indulge in online behaviours that do not reflect this privacy imperative (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Stutzman, 2006; Barnes, 2006).

Additionally, employees may choose to post deceptive and defamatory information that could seriously damage an organizations reputation (Zeidner, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Panko, & Beh, 2002). Such information may have been deliberately posted to cause an organization harm or may constitute personal reflections on workplace events from past, current or even future employees. Armed with incriminating posts from SNS the employer may then instigate disciplinary action against the employee for bringing the organization into disrepute. Globally there have been many media examples of individuals being fired due to the images and comments they (or their acquaintances) have posted online. In South Africa and North America it is becoming common for employers to fire employees based on the personal content sourced from social networking sites found via a simple internet search (Du Toit, 2008). Such disciplinary measures are becoming commonplace and raise questions about employee’s right to privacy and the cases emphasise the overlap that has now been created between personal (private) postings and organizational considerations and influences. Such examples support the perception that the reputation of the company is important and reinforce the notion that organizations may resort to tough penalties in order to protect their good name, while simultaneously raising questions regarding employee privacy, boundaries between work and private activities and whether employers should monitor and control employees’ ‘private’
musings. This raises our second research question regarding privacy and use of information from SNS:

RQ2: (a) Does information employees post on social networking sites influence their employment? (b) Should employers have the right to access such information and apply disciplinary measures in response to information gleaned from SNS?

Privacy issues and concerns are inextricably linked with both legal and ethical imperatives and currently these issues are not well understood or researched even though they are currently creating new dilemmas for organizations, managers and employees.

Legal and ethical issues
Currently there is no law that deals with social media and its role within the workplace, and it is also notable that the courts largely support employers’ rights to monitor their employees’ online activities (Du Toit, 2008; Panko, & Beh, 2002). Employees can be held accountable for comments that may be obscene, unsavoury or derogatory about the organization (Wagner, 2007) and current employee legislation governs employees’ actions outside of the organization as well inside it (Du Toit, 2008). This raises the ethical and legal issue of whether employers have the right to investigate their employee’s private postings and impose sanctions when content is perceived to be contrary to the organization’s desired public image (Du Toit, 2008). While employers cannot dictate employees’ actions that occur outside the organization and in their own time, some comments and actions posted online do negatively impact upon the organization’s reputation (Du Toit, 2008). Thus if employees post pictures or content considered provocative or disagreeable to the organization and publicise their organizational affiliation then the employer may feel justified in taking action in response to perceived damage to the organization’s reputation (Du Toit, 2008). According to Hodge (2006) current US legislation is not sufficiently developed to address issues arising from SNS, yet organizations are imposing harsh penalties upon employees perceived to have transgressed organizational standards in their online posts.

Examples of employees being disciplined over online content include an employee of Waitrose in London who made a negative comment about Waitrose’s owners - the John Lewis Partnership. The employee was instantly dismissed for an objectionable comment he posted on his social networking page which was viewed by a fellow employee and relayed back to the employer (Neate, 2008). The employer perceived that the employee’s comments were inconsistent with the organization’s values. In his defence the employee voiced a critical point “At the end of the day what I wrote was private…you would never get sacked for saying something like that in a pub…I was sacked from Waitrose for something I said on Facebook in my own time” (Neate, 2008). Another key example which has caused much controversy occurred in late 2008. It involved Virgin Atlantic Airlines staff who were fired, after they started up a Facebook thread, which they ultimately used as a sounding board for airing organizational concerns (Cabin Crew Fired Over Web Slurs, 2008). In this thread they portrayied the airline passengers in an extremely unsavoury light and voiced their opinions on poor health and safety regulations and questionable airline performance (Cabin Crew Fired Over Web Slurs, 2008).

Although Wilcox, (2006) makes a strong case arguing that Human Resource practices should encompass social and ethical responsibility there are no specific legislations and few moral protocols guiding the managerial practices of collecting information from SNS regarding potential employees. Management has traditionally relied on interviews and reference checking during the selection process for new employees (Di Milia & Smith 1997; Di Milia, 2004) however, SNS have enabled employers to gain access to information that they would not
normally view in a curriculum vitae or perceive during an interview (Zeidner, 2007). Increasingly employers are conducting background checks on candidates and employees by viewing their social networking pages to assist in selection decisions (Zeidner, 2007). Such background checks may be undertaken by a paid third party or by simply connecting to known contacts of the applicant. Applicants may then be rejected due to content viewed by the potential employer. An example of this occurred when Mary Willoughby, the Human Resource director for a New York based non-profit organization, was recruiting a technology director. After selecting a number of candidates, she viewed the MySpace page of the leading candidate and after reading about his interests in violent films and romantic exploits she decided he was not suitable for the position (Zeidner, 2007). Social networking sites have also exposed a number of high profile cases of resume fraud (Zeidner, 2007). Two prominent cases occurred in 2007 when the social networking sites were viewed of Radio Shack Corporations ex CEO, David Edmundson and a well-regarded Massachusetts Institute of Technology admissions officer. It was discovered that both had lied about their previous education and employment history and this resulting in them being immediately dismissed from their positions (Zeidner, 2007). These cases exemplify ways that employers are using personal data posted on social networking sites to make important decisions about their employees or potential candidates. It appears that such informal practices have significant implications particularly for younger, more naïve, candidates that may not perceive the association between their private postings and future employment opportunities.

It has been suggested (and somewhat assumed) that a generational influence permeates SNS. As the baby boomer generation begin to retire organizations are populated by greater numbers of ‘Generation Y’ individuals whose birth year commences from the year 1982 onwards (Caley, 2007; Milliron, 2008). Generation Y (also deemed ‘Millennials’, ‘Net generation’ and ‘Digital natives’ see Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008) have been entering the working world since the beginning of the millennium and are often referred to being ‘wired from birth’ due to their extensive exposure to technology from a young age. Younger employees are having a significant impact on the way in which technology is used within the workplace (McGuire, Todnem By, Hutchings, 2007; Caley, 2007). This generation is familiar with personal technology as it has been integrated into their personal and social lives since childhood (Caley, 2007). Technology is vitally important to Generation Y employees who regard it as a fundamental component of their identity in both their social and organizational lives (Milliron, 2008). This highlights a significant implication for younger employees as they are more likely to engage with SNS and may value a strong online presence (Wagner, 2006). Studies have demonstrated that Generation Y are less apprehensive about putting personal details online and are more likely to document their lives and divulge personal events on blogs and online video diaries hosted by SNS (Wagner, 2006; Caley, 2007). Younger employees are more likely to post embarrassing and inappropriate information and images about themselves and their friends on social networking sites, as they may be naïve regarding unfavourable consequences of content that may be viewed by employers. Even as awareness about potential repercussions from online posts increases, it is difficult (and maybe even impossible) to completely remove prior postings from the internet as these may have been saved, stored or copied to alternative sites and locations.

The infamous ‘Cisco Fatty’ is the most recent example of an online social networking faux pas that has gained much media attention. Connor Riley a twenty-two year old American college student had been offered a job at Cisco Systems. Using the online medium of Twitter, she expressed her thoughts on her new job offer, tweeting: “Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose and hating the work” (Popkin, 2009). Unbeknownst to Riley, Cisco associate Tim Levad responded to the tweet stating “Who is the hiring manager? I’m sure they would love to know that you will hate the work…” (Popkin, 2009).
After Levad posted his response to Riley ‘Cisco Fatty’ became an overnight viral sensation which resulted in Riley’s internship offer being withdrawn and the loss of her “fatty paycheck” (Popkin, 2009). ‘Cisco Fatty’ is a prime example of not only the power that online social networking sites hold in employment relationships, but it further reinforces the notion that younger employees may forget or dismiss the significance of having their online activities available to a global audience (Popkin, 2009). This case highlights how a simple ‘tweet’ can result in the loss of a valuable career opportunity and may have further implications for future employment opportunities (Popkin, 2009).

Examples of adverse outcomes have originated in particular from the education sector which has documented several dismissals arising from content viewed on SNS. A number of teachers have been dismissed from their positions due to content deemed inappropriate that they posted on their online social network sites. Ian Defeo a twenty four old substitute teacher from New Jersey was fired for having a personal band page on MySpace. His employers justified his dismissal on the grounds that his songs contained explicit lyrics which were unacceptable for the school’s children to hear (Reynolds, 2007). Similarly, Melissa Hospodor from Ohio was asked to resign from her teaching position after it was claimed that her MySpace profile contained references to sex, alcohol and drugs (Reynolds, 2007). The justification behind these dismissals was that teachers are regarded as responsible role models and modern children familiar with social networking sites, may view unsuitable content regarding such influential adults which may have negative impacts upon them (Reynolds, 2007). These examples highlight the trend for organizations to access information regarding the private activities and events of potential recruits or even their current employees (Cohen, 2008), and emphasises that disciplinary action (or even dismissal) and withdrawal of job offers for recruits, is the likely organizational reaction (Wagner, 2006; Cohen, 2008). It is apparent that there may be specific industries or professions where the impact of publicly displaying certain private activities is particularly sensitive and therefore even more likely to elicit strong organizational responses. However, the examples reinforce questions regarding the legality and morality of private activities resulting in severe workplace consequences. This raises the question of whether the organizations in these cases had clear, stated policies informing their teachers that content displayed on SNS could impact upon their employment status? If not, should they have?

The following examples are specific to workplace behaviour, yet the so-called private realm of SNS was used to publicly display organizational misbehaviour, again with significant consequences for the employees. In the first, recent (and virally famous) example, twenty-one year old Australian call-centre worker Kyle Doyle created media interest and amusement. Doyle told his employer he was unable to come into work due to medical reasons and took the day off sick. However on his Facebook profile he updated his profile status for the day in question stating “Kyle Doyle is not going to work, f*** it I'm still trashed. SICKIE WOO!” (Facebook ‘sickie’ guy facing investigation, 2008). Unbeknownst to him the employers became aware of his Facebook posting and engaged in a number of personal email exchanges with Doyle requesting a medical certificate for his absence. Doyle argued he did not need a medical certificate for a one day leave of absence whereby his employers exposed to him that they knew he was faking his illness and he eventually ‘confessed’. Although Doyle was not fired he did come under investigation receiving a formal warning for his actions (Facebook ‘sickie’ guy facing investigation, 2008). In the second example of organizational misconduct, two young Mexican hospital employees were fired for taking close up pictures of hospital patients’ injuries and then posting them on their MySpace profiles. Even though their MySpace profiles were considered ‘private’ their employers were tipped off, thus resulting in the two employees being immediately dismissed (Reynolds, 2008).
Although the organizational reactions would appear to be justified in the latter two examples, all of the examples reinforce the ease of access to information displayed on SNS. The cases exemplify actual disciplinary reactions and raise further ethical concerns about the morality and legality of using so-called private postings in the organizational context. They also highlight the lack of any clarity and consistency regarding workplace legislation linked to SNS and internet use. Legislation pertaining to internet use within the organizational context varies on a global scale. Currently legislation for online issues is rather problematic because organizations often function in a number of different local and foreign locations making it hard to create legislation to comply with the differing government standards (Panko, & Beh, 2002). Legislation concerning privacy issues and technology use is still ambiguous and while it is often assumed that employees will respect organizational values and reputation, technological ‘misbehaviour’ has resulted in monitoring and surveillance of internet related activities within the workplace (Panko, & Beh, 2002). The aforementioned ‘blurred boundaries’ between private and workplace activities has created a cornucopia of new organizational issues and behaviours, and this would strongly suggest that new policies and legislation may be needed to help organizations manage such issues in a fair, overt and consistent manner. This imperative results in our final research question:

*RQ3: (a) What new legislation is required to manage workplace issues pertaining to SNS and what are the ethical implications linked to potential legislation? (b) Should organizations be required to formally state any policies and disciplinary consequences that may arise from ‘private’ postings by employees using public SNS?*

Our research questions highlight that the online social networking phenomena has emerged rapidly and has created new issues for HRM. We suggest that SNS are being used by managers to gather information on current (and future) employees. However, using so-called ‘private’ data from SNS is not explicitly stated in workplace policies and there appears to be a lack of transparency and clarity around this practice. Firstly organizations may have to decide whether or not they condone gathering and using information from SNS. Secondly, if the organization does intend to take actions arising from information about employees then it may be prudent for managers to develop guidelines for employees (and candidates) regarding personal postings and the organizational actions and associated disciplinary activities that might arise. Finally, the lack of any legislation or even guidelines governing SNS may expose both HRM professionals and employees to accusations of privacy breaches and ethical misconduct. This may result in some emotionally charged situations that may have significant impacts on the employment relationship in this ambiguous, fast-emerging socio-technological minefield.

**Conclusions**

Over the past decade the internet has had a significant impact on changing the nature of work and boundaries between private and public domains have become blurred. Employees and managers frequently engage in online activities in the workplace that encompass both their personal and work requirements and employers must recognise this duality within modern organizations (Berry, 2004; Casey, 1995; Friedman, 2006; Tavani, 1999). Additionally, employees engage in many internet-based activities during their own personal time, particularly on SNS but these so-called private actions are being scrutinised and used by organizational colleagues and managers. Information from SNS is being used in decisions regarding recruitment, selection, and on-going tenure. Several examples were cited of dismissals in response to employees’ personal postings and the paper calls for focused empirical research into the specific organizational issues arising from organizational monitoring and use of SNS.
Social networking sites play an important role enabling individuals to both socialise and personalise a technical space to cater to their own unique individual traits, ideas and opinions (Wajcman, 2006; Dywer, et al, 2007). This is what makes social networking so unique but at the same time problematic for organizations. When an employee acts freely and irresponsibly (or even irresponsibly) on their personal SNS it can cause detriment for an organization if it is viewed by fellow employees, the organization’s clients, consumers or competing organizations and can even result in the loss of reputation in the community as a whole (Panko, & Beh, 2002). Due to the rapidly evolving nature of the internet it can be difficult for employers to define and implement workplace policies. There is increasing evidence to suggest that managers access employee’s information without their knowledge, even when employees are not using the sites at work (Balakrishna, 2006). Privacy on the internet is almost impossible to achieve and as the anecdotal evidence suggests, what one says and does on social networking sites can have a profound impact on current employment status as well as future employability (Zeidner, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Panko, & Beh, 2004).

This exploratory paper emphasises that focussed empirical research is required to help deal with very real management issues of privacy, legislation, workplace relationships, the social networking phenomena and its implications for organizational processes such as recruitment, selection and retention. The paper outlines three key areas of focus: the changing nature of work; privacy issues; and legislation and ethical needs in response to this fast merging online phenomenon. We raise three specific questions for further research and these include: (1) the impact of SNS on the employment relationship and we question how the employment relationship is being redefined through the blurring of boundaries between private and public domains? (2) We emphasise privacy issues related to personal postings and ask if information employees post on SNS is affecting their employment, and if so, do employers have the right to use such information. (3) Finally we query the types of legislation required to manage new online issues and question organizational requirements to be transparent about using personal online information as the basis for disciplinary action for employees. We also emphasise a moral and ethical imperative and suggest that transparency and honest discussion may be needed regarding organizational use of information from SNS. This is topical and pertinent to managers and their relationship with employees as well as to workplace peer relationships.

Future initiatives may involve organizations creating policies stating that content on employee’s personal SNS can affect their status and position within the organization. Such policies could outline acceptable online content and explicitly state disciplinary measures for online content that negatively affects the organization. However employers need to also understand the nature of the technology and realise that individuals can be unwittingly ‘tagged’ or implicated in photographs, videos and groups unknowingly. It is also vital that employees understand that a simple search engine can access personal data that can be damaging towards an employee, employer or both (Murphy, 2007). The internet and its role in society is complex and organizations and their employees will need to be educated and responsive to changes and adaptations in the technology and future permutations of social networking sites. Individuals and organizations must acknowledge that in cyberspace - there’s no such thing as privacy.
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