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I frequently get pulled aside by C-level executives from professional services firms who secretly reveal that they really don't want their employees showing their expertise on social media. Why? Because they don't want them to be poached by competitors or headhunted by executive recruiters. This is especially true on LinkedIn.

But here's the thing. Our research has shown that allowing – heck, *encouraging* – employee activity on social media conclusively benefits the firm. Certainly there is some risk to increasing employee visibility and potentially turning them into

recruitment targets, but that risk is far out-weighed by the benefits that can result

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In fact, the benefits of employee social media engagement are substantial. The communication and interaction you get from your clients and prospects is invaluable. You can think of it as free, unbounded target audience research. Social media is another tool you can use to evaluate your content. You can measure engagement from all different sorts of content and see what appeals with your audience.

Over 96% of respondents to our study identified benefits that they are reaping from employees' engagement on social media. Increased visibility and **brand recognition** were the top two benefits. Firms also noted other measurable benefits including increased web traffic, better search engine rankings, more content downloads and decreased marketing costs.

"That's nice," you might say, "but can it positively affect firm growth?"

Once again, our research revealed that high growth firms, those with revenue growth greater than 20%, were more than twice as likely as all other firms to have an employee advocacy program (see graph).

High growth firms are also more likely than their slower growing counterparts to say a formal employee advocacy program helps to shorten sales cycles (27.1%). Also, employee advocacy is an important component of social selling. Nearly 64% of firms with formal employee advocacy programs credited them with attracting and developing new business, and almost 45% attribute new revenue streams to employee advocacy.

Okay, but will my firm be setting up itself up to lose valuable employees?

Of course, there is always the chance that employees will leave your firm for some reason. But risk comes with the territory. Instead, think of it this way: a happy employee is a satisfied employee. And a happy employee whose opinion and

contributions are valued is less likely to leave than a disgruntled employee who feels

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benefits include the ability to develop skills that are in high demand, differentiate themselves from their peers and become recognized as thought leaders.

I'm convinced. How do I build an employee advocacy program?

If you're ready to implement an employee advocacy program, don't assume that your employees know how to use social media *in a business environment*. That's where the danger lurks.

Sadly, nearly 75% of respondents said that they had not received any training on how to engage professionally on social networks. On the other hand, more than half of firms with formal employee advocacy programs — those most likely to be successful — provide social media training.

When asked to identify what training would be most beneficial, using social media to create engagement topped the list. Other leading educational topics on the advocacy training wish-list included:

- social media training for specific social channels
- content marketing strategy
- generating and nurturing leads

Study respondents also wanted management training on how to motivate their employees to become brand advocates on social media. So how should you do that? Firm associates believe that communicating the importance of social media provides the biggest incentive to participate. After all, employees want to know their efforts will pay off.

Setting up an employee advocacy program is hard work, but remember – the benefits for your firm and employees are well worth it. Trust me, it will pay off in the end. You

will have a happy, engaged workforce that's respected as thought leaders within your

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