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## Online activity of organizational employees in light of research (Poland; 2020 and 2022). Risks and challenges of social media activity

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### Abstract

Around twenty years ago, the media landscape began to change. Social media platforms joined the press, radio, television, and internet, transforming the relationship between sender and receiver. The former content consumer was given the opportunity to become the creator of the message.

This article presents the results of two editions of a study on employee online activity (Poland; 2020 and 2022). The study was conducted using the CAWI method on a group of Polish internet users. The survey questionnaire was distributed on the social media platforms LinkedIn and Facebook.

**Keywords:** social media, online activity, image, reputation, crisis management

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### Introduction

The area of organizational communication, particularly in the context of image, reputation, and crisis management, carries numerous risks and challenges for every organization. Regardless of the organization's size or profile, seniority, professional experience, or media coverage, risk always exists (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2021, 37-40).

About twenty years ago, the media landscape began to change. Social media platforms joined the press, radio, television, and the internet, initiating a shift in the relationship between the sender and the receiver of messages. This transformed media landscape has transformed the role of the receiver (Adamus-Matuszyńska et al., 2023; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, 173-183; Rydzak, 2016, 2023). The receiver is no longer an internet user, a passive media recipient, but more often an internet user with a sender-receiver profile, not only consuming media but also creating it.

The addition of social media platforms (Tworzydło, 2019, 33) to the media landscape has provided organizations with a powerful tool: broadcasting channels they can use for their own purposes without the intermediary of an institutional medium. It is no longer the journalist who decides what will be published about the organization's life; rather, the organization itself largely controls its own content and creates its own channels of communication with its surroundings (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013, 112-115).

What could this situation mean for the organization?

Can employee online activity pose a risk to the organization?

Are employees aware of the impact their online activities have on the perception of the organization?

Do organizations take preventative or reactive actions?

The questions posed above, as well as previous research experience and market practice, prompted the author to conduct the study "Online Activity - Challenges and Risks." This article presents two editions of the study – one conducted in 2020 and one in 2022.

The 2020 edition was implemented during the initial period of the coronavirus pandemic. It was a time when companies temporarily suspended their operations from their usual routines and transitioned to remote work. Increased online activity among employees led organizations to notice statements, comments, and posts that were inconsistent with their values.

After two years, the author of the article decided to repeat the study because she noticed that, despite the passage of time, there were still noticeable problems with awareness and responsibility regarding the online activities of employees, or more broadly, members of organizations. An additional element increasing the risk of negative online activities by employees was the Russian aggression in Ukraine. At that time, higher levels of emotion, online aggression, polarization, and disinformation were observed.

## **Research methodology and respondent profile**

This article presents the results of two editions of the Employee Online Activity Survey (Poland; 2020 and 2022). The research was conducted on a sample of Polish internet users. The survey questionnaire was distributed on the social media platforms LinkedIn and Facebook.

The study (1st edition; 2020) conducted using the CAWI method between April 23, 2020 and May 21, 2020 involved 477 respondents (women: 65.6%; men: 34.4%). Over 70% of respondents had at least 5 years of professional experience, with the strongest representation in the groups with work experience ranging from 11 to 20

years (28.9%) and over 21 years of work (29.1%) (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2020).

The second edition of the study (2022) was also conducted using the CAWI method between August 15, 2022 and November 15, 2022, and involved 524 respondents (women: 63%; men: 36.6%; other gender: 0.4%). Almost 80% of respondents had at least 5 years of professional experience, with the strongest representation in the groups with work experience ranging from 11 to 20 years (29.8%) and over 21 years of work (35.9%) (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2023).

In the first edition (2020), 54.5% of respondents did not hold management positions, while 43.6% were board members, directors, or managers. Respondents represented organizations of various sizes: from micro-enterprises (12.8%; up to 10 employees), through small companies (28.3%; up to 50 employees), medium-sized companies (17%; up to 250 employees), to large companies (40%; over 250 employees).

Among respondents participating in the 2020 survey, 97.5% had professional experience, including 87.4% who were professionally active at the time of the survey. Only 2.5% had no professional experience.

The profile of respondents in the 2022 edition of the survey was similar. 57.4% were non-managerial members of the organization, while 42.6% were board members, directors, or managers. Respondents represented a variety of organizational sizes: from micro (13.6%), through small (20.9%) and medium-sized (23.3%), to large companies (42.2%).

Among the survey respondents, 98.1% had professional experience, including 93.9% who were professionally active. Only 1.9% had no professional experience.

In both editions of the study, respondents without professional experience completed only part of the research questionnaire.

## **Employee Online Activity Survey Results**

One of the interesting issues was determining the interest of the organization in the online activity of its members.

In the 2020 survey, nearly 60% of respondents indicated that their organization pays attention to their employees' online activity, including by checking the content posted on their social media profiles and observing how they comment on posts from brands and other entities. Just over 40% of respondents did not notice such activity on the part of their employer.

In 2022, awareness of employer activities was lower. It turns out that 26.5% of respondents indicated that their organization monitors their employees' online activity, including by looking at content posted on their social media profiles and observing how they comment on posts from brands and other entities. 54.5% of respondents did not notice such actions on the part of their employers, and 19% were unaware of this.

When content posted by an organization's employees was deemed to violate its standards, respondents encountered mixed reactions from the organization. Half of the respondents (first survey: 50.2%; second survey: 49.4%) stated that in such situations, a supervisor or other person (responsible for the brand's online activities, company communications, image, etc.) would draw attention to the

inappropriate activity. In less than 6% of cases in 2020 and 3.3% in 2022, the employee was referred for online training or faced professional sanctions (2020: approximately 12%; 2022: 10.6%). Approximately one-third of respondents stated that even if content was deemed to violate organizational standards, no consequences were imposed (in both surveys).

Respondents also commented on criticism from their employers regarding online activity. Less than one-fifth of respondents admitted that such criticism had occurred – 1.9% of respondents had encountered such criticism more than 10 times during their professional careers (in both editions of the study), while nearly 12% in 2020 and 11.3% in 2022 had encountered it less than five times. A significant group of respondents had never heard criticism from their employers (nearly 70% of respondents in the first edition of the study; 84.4% of respondents in the second edition).

92% of respondents in 2020 and 96.5% in 2022 did not experience any professional consequences from their employer as a result of online activity throughout their professional life. Only 8% (2020) and 3.5% (2022) of respondents experienced consequences, and the most frequently used measures included: a ban on speaking online as a representative of the organization (2020: 27%; 2022: 33.3%), job loss (2020: 21.6%; 2022: 33.3%), preparation of materials on a specific topic related to online activity (2022: 33.3%), lack of reward (2020: 16.2%), and lack of promotion (2020: 16.2%).

Respondents also indicated how organizations define policies for employee online activity. Over half of organizations (2020: 55.8%; 2022: 59.1%) do not establish policies regarding what employees can post online and in what context. Nearly one-third of organizations (in both surveys) do so for brand and organization accounts. The least interference was observed with employee "private" accounts.

If the employer defines the rules for employees' online activity - in relation to the brand/organization and/or employee accounts - they can function within the company as sets of explanatory and educational recommendations, constituting sets of "good advice", but they also act as internal documents that must be followed.

The principles of employee online activity formulated by the organization, written down and constituting an internal set of recommendations (guide, explanations, good advice) were indicated by 70.7% of respondents in the first edition of the survey, and by 81.6% of respondents in the second edition of the survey.

In turn, the rules of activity that are written down and constitute a document that must be followed were indicated by 29.3% of respondents (2020) and 18.4% (2022).

The organization's online activity policies (addressed to employees) identified by respondents include guidelines for employee online behavior (posts, comments, photos, videos, etc.) across various spheres of activity – from employee behavior toward the brand, organization, or competitors, to the sphere of professional or internal organizational values. Respondents identified the following online activity policies as the most frequently defined guidelines by employers:

- activity (posts, comments, etc.) towards the brand/organization (2020: 85.2%; 2022: 74.3%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) towards customers and other entities (2020: 49.5%; 2022: 49.5%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding the organization's norms and values (2020: 44.9%; 2022: 37.6%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding media relations (e.g. providing comments, speaking as a representative of the organization) (2020: 41.3%; 2022: 35.6%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding professional ethics standards (2020: 39.3%; 2022: 36.6%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) towards competitors (2020: 38.8%; 2022: 26.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) towards colleagues (2020: 36.7%; 2022: 28.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) as part of professional activities (e.g. employee discussions on the brand profile with customers) (2020: 33.7%; 2022: 36.6%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding online culture (2020: 33.7%; 2022: 33.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding aggressive actions (2020: 20.4%; 2022: 25.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding the employee's own image (2020: 19.4%; 2022: 25.8%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) within the employee's "private" activities (2020: 15.3%; 2022: 14.9%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) regarding the rules of functioning of the organization's members in the online space (e.g. determining whether employees are linked to their superiors or whether they comment on each other's posts) (2020: 11.7%; 2022: 15.8%).

Organizations that pay attention to the online activity of their employees also partially (2020: 36.4%; 2022: 28.6%) define desirable activities, i.e. those that can contribute to a positive opinion about the organization or brand.

The most frequently mentioned by respondents included:

- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a positive tone relating to the activities of the brand/organization (2020: 66.7%; 2022: 86.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a positive connotation relating to the employee's own professional activities (2020: 29.3%; 2022: 43.3%)
- positive activity (posts, comments, etc.) related to colleagues (2020: 28%; 2022: 36.7%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a positive tone describing company situations (2020: 34.7%; 2022: 50%),
- positive activity (posts, comments, etc.) describing situations with customers (2020: 30.7%; 2022: 33.3%),
- informing responsible persons in the organization about online content that may harm the image of the organization, its employees and customers (2020: 32%; 2022: 26.7%),

- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a positive connotation regarding the employee's private life (2022: 16.7%).

While employers identified desirable online activities for employees in approximately one-third of respondents (in both rounds of the study), the scope of undesirable activities from the organization's perspective was defined in almost half of the cases: 49.5% in the first round and 34.3% in the second round. This may indicate that organizations find it easier to formulate restrictions than to recommend best practices that impact the image of the organization and its employees.

Most often, employers consider the following to be undesirable actions in employees' online activities:

- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a critical tone relating to the activities of the brand/organization (2020: 65.3%; 2022: 71.4%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) that may violate the rights of third parties (2020: 63.4%; 2022: 74.3%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) containing vulgar language (2020: 62.4%; 2022: 68.6%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a critical tone describing company situations (2020: 60.4%; 2022: 54.3%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a critical tone relating to situations with customers (2020: 57.4%; 2022: 62.9%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with a critical tone towards colleagues (2020: 52.5%; 2022: 51.4%)
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) related to politics (2020: 48.5%; 2022: 34.3%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) with references to alcohol and other stimulants (2020: 26.7%; 2022: 34.3%),
- activity (posts, comments, etc.) of a sexual/erotic nature (2022: 51.4%).

Defining desirable and undesirable activities by employers is good practice because for many employees - especially those with significant online activity or those not yet comfortable with new media - they can serve as guideposts and protect against areas perceived as potential image or organizational risks. On the other hand, when establishing such guidelines or providing guidance, employers should consider educating employees, which can be implemented in various forms and at varying levels, depending on the needs of employees and the organization. It's also important to consider which elements of online activity can be precisely defined and required by the employer as part of the organizational culture, and which will remain within the employer's expectations, with their implementation dependent on internal relationships.

Unfortunately, few employers among the respondents choose to engage

in broadly defined education. Respondents declared that their organization provides them with training, seminars, and other forms of education (2020: 23.9%; 2022: 24.2%), or information in this area on the website, through mailings, etc. (2020: 28.2%; 2022: 19.9%). A larger group of organizations – 42.9% in 2020 and 42.7% in 2022 – provides contact with the person responsible for communication/image/ social media policy, etc. (consultations, addressing

concerns).

The survey also addressed employee assessments of employers' online activity policies. Respondents demonstrate considerable awareness of this issue – over half of those surveyed in 2020 (57.4%) and as many as 70.6% of respondents in 2022 considered such policies useful and helpful in clarifying doubts about the organization's expectations and avoiding misunderstandings. A significant number of respondents considered them "safe" from the organization's perspective (2020: 47.4%; 2022: 54.2%).

In 2020, approximately one-fifth of respondents considered the existence of employee online activity policies to be "safe" from a personal image perspective (20.5%). In 2022, such policies were considered "safe" from an employee personal image perspective by approximately one-third of respondents (32.4%).

Among the respondents, there was also a group representing a different position: the respondents believed that every adult knows how to behave online (2020: 8.8%; 2022: 8.4%), for 11.5% of respondents in 2020 and for 13% of respondents in 2022, the rules of online activity violated their freedoms, and for 9.2% (2020) and 10.3% (2022) they were a factor limiting online activity.

## **Challenges of the pandemic and respondents' beliefs about online activity**

In the second edition of the study (2022), the survey questionnaire was expanded to include additional elements. Respondents were asked to identify challenges faced during the pandemic in the area of online activity. While these responses may seem surprising to some professionally active individuals with experience communicating online, as they likely pose no challenges and were already engaged in the digital world before the pandemic, we should not forget about those who were forced to enter the world of new media and undertake new activities in previously unfamiliar conditions and under often unclear rules.

Nearly half of the respondents (2022: 47.7%) indicated that such a challenge was the need to navigate (establish relationships, sell, etc.) online areas (e.g., social media) that were previously unfamiliar to them. For 34.2% (2022), online activity and the lack of training demonstrating which online activities are well-regarded by the organization or employer were a challenge. For 39.8% (2022), the challenge was the lack of a person (within the organization) with whom to discuss sensitive issues related to online activity. Hate speech and other forms of electronic aggression were also included in the challenge category. It turns out that in situations involving hate speech and other forms of aggression, the challenge was the inability to respond when such actions were directed directly at a member of the organization (2022: 19%) and other internet users (2022: 26.4%).

Respondents were also asked (second edition of the survey; 2022) to define their position in relation to six situations related to employee online activity and which may have an impact on the perception of the organisation in the external and internal environment.

With respect to three statements, respondents took a strong position (answers "I strongly agree" and "I tend to agree"), as follows:

- My online activity should only be of interest to the employer insofar as it relates to my professional duties : declaration of compliance at the level of 82.3%.
- On my social media profiles, blog and website, I set rules of activity consistent with my personality and interests : declaration of compliance at the level of 91.6%.
- In the online space, the employer should refrain from setting limits on my speech, as long as I do not violate the rules of culture of speech : declaration of compliance at the level of 81.7%.

Respondents reacted differently to the fourth statement: The Internet is about emotions, therefore

I allow expression of emotions in online activities, even if it means using vulgarisms, which was not met with the respondents' approval – 62.6% of the surveyed group chose the options “I strongly disagree” and “I rather disagree”.

However, the last two statements divided the respondents:

- Criticism of the employer (for security reasons under a changed identity) on the Internet is justified as long as there are reasons for it : 41.6% did not agree with the statement, but 37% had the opposite opinion.
- Criticism of the employer (under one's name and surname) on the internet is justified as long as there are reasons for it : 47.3% agreed with the statement and 34% were of the opposite opinion.

## Summary

The topic of employees' online activity has been attracting attention since social media became a place for exchanging views, discussions, and even destructive forms of communication.

Organizational employees, in addition to their professional online activities, also remain active as internet users. In such cases, they often tend to define their social media spaces as "private" or "their own," and treat the content published there as an unrestricted right to express themselves.

Employee accounts and profiles displaying non-professional content can be diverse in nature, for example, relating to social or political issues. In practice, this means that employees become active participants in the public sphere, and their online activity can garner widespread distribution. If this involves issues that strongly engage online communities, it can pose a reputational risk to the employer.

Therefore, it is important to be aware of employees' online activity, both on the part of the organization and the employees themselves.

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