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Creating a Social Media Use Policy

by Jeff Hoffman

What is Social Media?

Traditional definitions of social media include Facebook, Twitter, Myspace , Blogging, YouTube and LinkedIn. Instant Messaging can also fall into this category. Define it in your policy so that there are no questions about what is covered. The trick here is to not be so specific as to create loop-holes in your policy, so your policy should probably include the phrase "and similar media types." You don't want to start splitting hairs with your staff about what is or isn't covered when it comes to enforcement.

Why do we need a Social Media Policy?

Social Media provides your staff an incredibly powerful voice to the world and what they say or do has the potential to reflect positively or negatively on your organization.

A Social Media Use Policy should attempt to provide guidelines on what your staff should do or say in public as it relates to your organization.

What should be in your policy regarding Social Media?

Used properly, Social Media can be beneficial for business and improve communication. You can use it to enhance communication with clients, other employees or even potential clients. Conversely, without proper control, it can do irreparable damage as well. Keep in mind the term "appropriate use" and how you want your organization represented to others.

What is appropriate and what isn't?

If you're going to allow or perhaps even encourage the use of some types of Social Media, be specific about the DO's and DON'Ts within each media.

For example, you could make a simple rule that says that you don't want employees to ever mention clients by name on-line on any forum or ever post anything critical of others.

Remember that communication of ANY type between one of your employees and someone else on any media could be considered legitimate communication on behalf of your company. Even anonymous posts on Facebook pages by an employee can come back to haunt you. A judge in Illinois recently ruled that the source of those types of posts must be revealed. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if a frustrated employee posted something nasty on a client's Facebook and it was revealed that they worked for you? It has happened!

Will you allow employees to post videos to YouTube and under what circumstance? Spell it out!

What about personal use of Social Media sites?

Should your staff be able to say anything they want about you, your company or your clients on their Facebook page?

Employees talking about company matters during their off-hours should also be a concern. For example, if an employee spouts off on a blog about something that happened at work, that communication is out there for all the world to see for a very long time. While acknowledging the First Amendment right of free speech, you should establish some consequences for any posts that reflect badly on your organization. There are legal issues here so a call to your lawyer may be appropriate before you publish anything relating to communications outside of the office.

Should I allow Social Media in my office at all?

Used properly Social Media can make significant contributions to your organization. However, there are studies that indicate that 20% and more of employee work time is spent on non-business computer related activities. Computer related time wasting is significant and unregulated Social Media time wasting should definitely be a concern.

What about Instant Messaging?

Aside from the time wasting distractions of IMing, there are definite security issues associated with open IM connections on employee computers. However, monitored in-house Instant Messaging can be a significant communications bonus.

Should you specify consequences for violations?

Absolutely, but don't go for the jugular for every offense. Lay out a simple to understand list of consequences with an eye on the consequence fitting the offense.

Will you issue a warning for a minor offense?

Will you suspend someone if they ignore a provision or will you fire someone if the offense is serious enough?

Again, consult your attorney regarding what actions are legal.

. . . and finally, be consistent.

Make sure that your Social Media and Computer Use policies are in sync and don't contradict each other. Also make sure that your policies are posted in plain view and that everyone reads and signs a copy.

About the author: *Jeff Hoffman has been a technology consultant for over 39 years working with Fortune 500 companies as well as organizations in the SMB market.*