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Research Note

Social Media, Employees & Workplace Concerns

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Applicable Sectors: Banking & Finance, Public Health, Legal Services

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Abstract: With the emerging digital natives and social media, companies must begin to more effectively and robustly address the use of these various electronic forms of communication by employees in and out of the workplace. Finding the right policy to fit a company culture is key, and then backing up the policy with clear communication, leading by example, and appropriate training.

Introduction

Social media and social networking are hot topics for businesses these days, and the pace of information sharing has been changed forever. Now with technologies and services ranging from Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs, texting, instant messaging, Flickr – the list is ongoing and ever growing. These new modes of communication are now allowing for people to share immediate and unfiltered content. And this has raised many questions, debates, and problems for companies and organizations that are struggling to keep up with the pace and shifts that drive the dynamic world of electronic communications.

Social Media Concerns

Some of the concerns for a company around social media have to deal with employee behavior and information-sharing practice. There are a number of security, ethical, and legal concerns about employees using social media in the workplace. The emergence of social media within the workplace has created new and unprecedented scenarios, particularly with the newest batch of employees entering the work force. Particularly, as Robert Mason et al. point out, these emerging workers are people who have “grown up in a world surrounded by connectivity and digital tools. They are ‘net natives’ or ‘digital natives.’ These are people who have never known a world without the Internet, instant messaging, online games, and the possibility of persistent digital presence with networks of people.”

There is a wide range of individual and corporate expectations and thoughts about what constitutes appropriate use of social media in the workplace. Is it acceptable to text while in a meeting? What about someone who access Facebook on company time and on company equipment? What about using those 140 characters on Twitter to make a frustrated comment about a supervisor, off time and off site? Sometimes it is simply organizational culture that dictates what

is deemed acceptable in the online sphere. But regardless, “one thing ... is that there is a certain lack of clarity on the part of employees about what’s acceptable and what is not. The conclusion is that companies might want to establish policies or engage in a dialogue about this.” (Rafferty) Depending on the sector and services, there are various levels of appropriate behavior by employees using social media. In some cases, it may be best to completely cut off access, and in others, full-blown company use of social media tools can actually contribute to customer service and add value.

Social Media in Context

Determining what concerns a company may have about social media usually is tied in to what kinds of services they provide. For example, some organizations may be concerned about their public image – their sales and revenue depend on keeping a positive competitive edge, and thoughtless employee commentary could damage that. Other companies, on the other hand, deal in sensitive, proprietary, and private information. Employers in financial institutions, legal firms, government offices, educational institutes, and medical facilities all must ensure that they protect their information and prevent the inadvertent disclosure of confidential information. Employees must not Tweet about clients or patients, even if the story makes them laugh, nor share corporate decisions that are not yet made public.

Trouble has occurred when assumptions are made about what employees know - kinds of behavior and practices are acceptable and which are not. Significant damage to business and careers can be made in the milliseconds it takes to put something out into the cybersphere. Sometimes managers and supervisors are left baffled, seeing younger employees behave online in unethical or simply rude ways.

A Social Media Policy

At the end of the day, much of social media behavior and uses in the workplace is dependent on the organizational culture and the people who work there. But any company needs to place social media on the table and have company-wide dialogue. Policy should be created to fit the needs and culture of the organization. Ideally, because people watch and are influenced by each other, the behavior set by managers and supervisors will inform how their employees approach social media use. John Putzier says it well: "Traditional managers want [to have] a policy and be done with it, and that's not realistic and effective. Your whole philosophy should be, 'It depends.'" (Rafferty) But a policy is insufficient if it is not backed up by example and clear communication.

There is a legal area that a company must consider as well, to cover their own liability and employees. Any policy should explicitly call out that "the employer reserves and exercises the right to monitor all communications made using company property." (Lanham) This is particularly important to ensure that the company does not violate any privacy laws that protect employee. Perhaps most importantly, employers should offer training to employees on the appropriate use of social media under any policy that is created.

Take Action

Organizations need to make social media practice a part of their company's official conversation. Social media use is no longer a water-cooler conversation, but a boardroom dialogue. Companies and managers need to be informed of what and how social media uses might violate legal or ethical policies, and then make sure all employees have that communicated to them. But they must be aware that simply having a policy will not necessarily change behavior. These policies have to be established, integrated, and accepted. Corporate culture, the "tone at the top" is often a powerful key to appropriate behavior being followed.



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Managers and established employees should give new employees guidance and develop a culture of coaching for appropriate behavior. No one should make assumptions that new hires will know the practices and behavior expectations. Set the expectations and explain the rules the very first day of employment.

Also, employers can “urge employees to separate their personal and professional digital lives,” says John Lanham. While it may seem basic, employees need to hear from their managers they are prohibited from sharing any confidential information, regardless of method or venue. Using examples that are relevant to the company and work can help make this more clear and understandable.

Social media and the changes it is bringing to the work place are not going away. While clear precedent and policies are often shifting and changing, companies must develop plans and strategies to integrate into their culture and organization.

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