Social Media Use Policies: What They Are & Why You Need One



- Excessive social networking at work erodes productivity.
- A video posted on YouTube shows your employees engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour at work.
- An employee makes disparaging remarks about the organization and customers on Facebook.
- African Canadian employees complain about a racist blog written by a coworker.

Employees may believe that what they say or do on social networks is private communication or just griping around the virtual water cooler. But as the above examples highlight, inappropriate use of social media by employees—at and outside the workplace—can do serious damage to an organization. And it's not just the disgruntled and the bad eggs that can get you into trouble. Even seemingly innocuous remarks like "Suzy is responding well to treatment" by a nurse on her Facebook page could expose a healthcare organization to liability for privacy and ethics violations, warns Ontario HR lawyer, Dan Michaluk.

The key to protecting your organization: Create and implement a social media policy. Click here to find out how to write a policy. Click here for a Model Policy.

What's a Social Media Policy & Why Do You Need One?

When social networking began to emerge as a workplace problem, some employers tried to deal with it by restricting employee internet use and/or blocking specific internet sites, notes BC employment lawyer Marino Sveinson. But that proved to be an exercise in futility that only served to undermine the efforts of employers to attract and retain multi-media savvy Gen X' and Y'ers.

The current norm, says Sveinson: Allow for reasonable personal use of social media by employees that doesn't interfere with their job duties and make it clear that such use carries no expectation of privacy.

Enter the social media policy—not to be confused with the "acceptable use policy" addressing installation of software on the employer's system, personal use of email, time theft and other aspects of computer and internet use. Unlike social media policies, the latter have been around for a long time, notes Michaluk.

But while it's a fairly new phenomenon, (see IBM Sidebar) the social media policy is based on staples of the traditional HR manual, particularly policies on confidential

information, privacy and the duty of loyalty. The social media policy takes these values and relates them to social networking activity. This is crucial, says Michaluk because “to even the smartest person in the world, communicating via social media tool feels like an intimate conversation.” Having a specific policy reminds employees that social networking isn’t so private and that when they do it, the usual rules governing workplace conduct may apply.

Conclusion

Terms like blogging, Facebook, tweeting, and YouTube didn’t exist when the basic employee conduct policies were written. But once you get past the hype, the challenges posed by employee use of social media are exactly the same as the ones addressed in those crusty “old” HR policies—issues like organizational reputation, confidentiality, harassment and discrimination. What the HR director really needs isn’t a whole new set of rules but a mechanism for translating the old rules to the new media. Effectively written and implemented, this is precisely what the social media use policy does.