



Social media in the workplace

Social media and social networking have become a significant part of our everyday lives. Email, Facebook, text messages and tweets allow us to stay in touch with family and friends 24 hours a day. But how should employers manage social media in the workplace?

Over recent months, AAAA Employer Assist has had many enquiries regarding the use of social media and associated technology in the workplace. What is acceptable or appropriate? And what is excessive?

Balancing employee needs with those of the business

The immediate reaction of many employers is to ban all access to social networking in the workplace. However, in many cases this may be one step too far. In many job roles, employers require their employees to use this very same media in the course of their employment – especially when it comes to mobile phones, email and in some cases, Facebook. It is also appropriate in some instances for their employees to stay in touch with family members for a variety of reasons. This is not suggesting all employees have a right to access such media during working hours - all workplaces should decide how technology can be accessed, taking into account the needs of the business and of the employees.

Despite the positives of social networking, it can definitely be a distraction at the workplace. It is important that employers and employees openly and regularly discuss the appropriate use of any technology in the workplace, including social media.

Risks involved with social media in the workplace

That being said, severe problems can arise from a workplace not managing social media avenues which can be exceptionally costly to your company. The risks to the workplace are when any material is perceived by another employee or person as being offensive or obscene particularly if it is pornographic, sexually suggestive, harassing, hateful, racist, sexist, abusive or discriminatory. An employer risks becoming open to a claims, action or be held vicariously liable for an employee's action when in the course of employment.

While you may not be able to control all the actions or messages uploaded by your employees, some questions to raise or discuss in the workplace include:

- What sites/content are appropriate at the workplace?
- When are appropriate times to access social media sites?
- What should the process be for addressing inappropriate or excess internet usage?
- How is internet usage monitored and by who?
- How are mobiles to be used in the workplace?

By regularly discussing the use of technology and social media in the workplace and by developing workplace social media and internet policies, everyone understands what is expected of them and the consequences of inappropriate use. A policy is also the best way an employer can discipline an employee for behaving inappropriately through excess internet usage, using social media in the workplace or downloading inappropriate or offensive material from the internet at work.

The “golden rule”

While developing a policy is the best strategy for managing this issue in any workplace, there is one golden rule that all employers and employees should keep in mind at all times: never discuss work matters online.

Even if you have a ‘friends only’ Facebook account, private email or anonymous Twitter feed, do not post anything about your work – including anything about your boss, colleagues, staff, patients, pay or conditions. There have been many examples in the media recently regarding employees who have lost their jobs due to ‘venting’ of workplace issues online.

Employers should ensure their policies clearly outline the consequences should their employees contribute to such posts in any forum – even if it is in their own personal time.

Need assistance?

For more information on social media in the workplace, or how to develop a social media policy for your workplace, contact the **AAAA Employer Assist** dedicated toll-free hotline on **1300 735 306**.