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SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMPLOYEES

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Most organisations are aware that it makes good business sense to empower employees with a clear understanding of the goals, vision and direction that drives the organisation. In fact, employees that are in sync with these goals are not only valued for their role within the organisation they can also become external ambassadors that drive the organisation and the brand in the marketplace.

Social media is facilitating employee empowerment as technology blurs the once concrete boundaries between the workplace and home. Yet, it is because of a rapid rise in the uptake of social media, through personal use, business use and the proliferation of technological devices that enable access across multiple platforms, that many organisations feel overwhelmed when it comes to both embracing and guiding social media use. Employees are also unsure or unaware of their responsibilities, both in the workplace and at home in relation to their employment, social networking sites, tweets and blogs.

It's therefore important and timely that organisations of all sizes consider these issues and work to implement social media policies that align with and complement existing operational and procedural policies.

This update explores employee use of social networking focusing on current trends, outcomes, best practice and procedures. The issues discussed in this update expand on my presentation on the topic to the 25th annual IPSANZ Conference in Sydney, September 2011.

Current social media trends

It doesn't seem that long ago that organisations were advising employees about appropriate usage of the telephone and computer that sat on their desks. The introduction and subsequent mass take-up of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter and the increased usage of smart phones, tablet computers and other devices has changed not only the way that people communicate and access news and information, but it has blurred the boundaries between home and work. It has also driven interaction, promoted dialogue and placed a new emphasis on the concept of recommendation.

Statistics that paint a picture of remarkable social media growth are well documented: 750m active Facebook users in July 2011, more than 250 million active users accessing Facebook through their mobile devices, 175 million registered Twitter users and 25 billion tweets sent in 2010. Predictions that smartphones will account for 78% of mobile phone sales in Australia by 2014 indicate that employee access to social networking sites will expand in line with device development and growth.

Personal use and opinion continues to dominate the social media space. In May 2011 Sensis reported that 62% of Australian internet users had a presence on social networking sites. In comparison only 25% of medium sized

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businesses and 50% of large businesses had a social media presence.¹ If personal opinion about organisations, workplaces, brands, products or procedures are dominating the social media space it is important that organisations become engaged in developing strategies for social media use that ultimately benefit the employee and the organisation. It is also important that pro-active steps are taken to ensure that internal and external use of social media fits in with the organisation's strategy and branding.

Recent Fair Work ruling about social media

Issues associated with the use of social media are already being played out in the Australian workplace. In August 2011 Fair Work Australia found that the Good Guys Townsville branch were within their rights to dismiss an employee who had made threatening expletive comments about a co-worker on his personal Facebook page. While the employee did not directly name his employer, a number of his co-workers were able to read the post because they were Facebook 'friends'. The dismissal was upheld because the Good Guys employee handbook required employees to be courteous and polite when communicating with other staff including not resorting to personal abuse or offensive language. The ruling noted that the applicant was aware that there were other employees who would be able to see his comments and that 'the separation between work and home is now less pronounced than it once used to be'.²

This recent Fair Work Australia ruling highlights that organisations need to be developing social media policies now to facilitate risk management and align with their other policies and procedures such as IT Acceptable Use Policies and Privacy Policies.

The social media policy guidelines and best practice

While social media affords opportunities for general or disparaging comments about employers, co-workers, products or services it also provides a channel for employee innovation, recommendation and promotion. Organisations that work with their employees to develop balanced procedures and strategies around the use of social media will be able to pro-actively manage their message and at the same time provide transparent boundaries. A balanced approach to policy development will also ensure that both internal and external uses of social media are consistent with the goals and values of the organisation.

A number of technology companies such as Kodak, Intel and IBM have developed sound social media policies that set boundaries, uphold values and outline expected behaviours as well as promoting guidelines that encourage best judgement.

'Even if you are talking as an individual, people may perceive you to be talking on behalf of Kodak. If you blog or discuss photography, printing or other topics related to a Kodak business, be upfront and explain that you work for Kodak; however, if you aren't an official company spokesperson, add a disclaimer to the effect: "The opinions and positions expressed are my own and don't necessarily reflect those of Eastman Kodak Company.'

Kodak social media guidelines

'The Good, the Bad, but not the Ugly. If the content is positive or negative and in context to the conversation, then we approve the content, regardless of whether it's favourable or unfavourable to Intel. However if the content is ugly, offensive, denigrating and completely out of context, then we reject the content.'

Intel social media guidelines

¹ http://www.aimia.com.au/enews/Membership/Members_Only/SENSIS_SOCIAL_MEDIA_REPORT_May2011.pdf

² <http://www.fwa.gov.au/FWAISYS/isysquery/624449f8-3802-4613-8b12-5bb9a581fc0e/1/doc/>

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The development of a social media policy requires consideration of a number of factors that go further than defining the amount of time or access employees will be permitted within the workplace. Issues related to the type of uses that will be permitted and how employees will interact in the social media space also apply. In defining a social media policy consider some of the following issues:

Employees respect for organisation rules and guidelines

Employees should be made aware that in the social media space they are bound by the same legal and other rules that apply in the workplace, including issues related to copyright, trademarks, non-disclosure agreements, intellectual property agreements and confidential or proprietary information about the organisation, clients or providers. They should also seek permissions to refer to conversations or clients, cite references or sources and consider the privacy rights of others' including on sensitive information.

Audience and co-worker respect

There should be recognition that the same values and behaviours required in the workplace apply in the social media space. This includes no disparagement of competitors, no slurs, no racial, gender based, sexual, religious or political discrimination. As well as, no defamation, obscenities or insults.

A personal best judgement/value added approach should be supported

Employees should be encouraged to use their best judgement when posting comments or opinions and to add value to the conversation. This involves promoting guidelines that encourage employees to be themselves, be consistent and correct mistakes online when required.

Understanding, acknowledging and adhering to policies and boundaries

Employees should understand that they are personally responsible for what they say. When discussing the organisation or its business in the social media space the employee should always make clear who they are. If they aren't an official spokesperson for the company they should acknowledge the opinions as their own.

Defining a way forward

Technology and social media are facilitating business to business and business to customer interaction that was not even considered ten years ago. While at this stage the growth of social media for personal use outweighs business use, both areas continue to expand rather than decline.

If organisations can work with employees to develop and implement effective social media policies, business to employee interaction may be harnessed and developed in ways that promote rather than hinder business growth and innovation.

Organisations that take action now will ultimately set themselves up to manage risk, set direction and operate efficiently and effectively in the burgeoning social media space.

'Social computing blurs many of the traditional boundaries between internal and external communications. Be thoughtful about what you publish – particularly on external platforms. You must make sure you do not disclose or use IBM confidential or proprietary information or that of any other person or company in an online social computing platform. For example, ask permission before posting someone's picture in a social network or publishing in a blog a conversation that was meant to be private.'

IBM social media guidelines

Sainty Law offers specialist communications and media legal advice that adds value to its clients' businesses.

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