

WORKPLACE MATTERS

Like other tools, social media can help or hinder

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witter” was just named the Top Word of 2009 by Global Language Monitor, a group that follows global language trends. Facebook, LinkedIn, blog, YouTube and Skype are also becoming household words. These web-based tools fall under the category of “social media,” online technology that enables people to share information and resources via the Internet. In the same way that email and use



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of the Internet has been fully integrated into the majority of workplaces, use of these social media tools will likely follow suit.

Young professionals entering the workforce (often referred to as Generation Y or Millennials) thrive on social media and new technology. Ninety-nine percent of this generation regularly uses social media, according to research the Participatory Marketing Network released earlier this year. Within ten years, these young people will comprise approximately half of the workforce. This fact virtually guarantees that social media will play an ever increasing role in the workplace.

Depending on the perspective, online social media tools are either a huge productivity drain and potential workplace liability, or a way to increase efficiency and improve communication and collaboration. The truth probably lies somewhere between these extremes.

Tamara Russell, an attorney with Barran Liebman in Portland, is a frequent speaker on the liability concerns related to social media in the workplace. Issues include “employees who post confidential information or trade secrets online and those who post online comments that could create a hostile work environment for other employees or customers. Another concern is personal state-

ments made online by an employee that others may perceive to be made on behalf of the company.” Russell is particularly concerned about the increasing numbers of employers using social networking sites to check out job applicants. In doing so, an employer may be inadvertently “asking” interview questions prohibited by federal and state civil rights laws about a candidate’s religion, health status, race, or gender.

Russell advises businesses to develop a written policy that provides clear guidelines on the appropriate use of social media at work. She says businesses “may not need a specific social networking policy if they have existing policies covering standard issues such as anti-harassment, anti-disparagement, and computer use.”

So how do businesses encourage appropriate use of this new media while limiting liability? Any approach will need to be tailored to your company’s industry and culture. For some professions, industries, or occupations, the use of social media might be appropriate or beneficial for business development purposes (e.g. for sales people to make and maintain contacts). For others, an outright ban may be appropriate because the workforce simply has no business reason to access or use social media while at work or while using the company networks, facilities, or equipment.

Every business is different, but here are some guidelines for creating a workplace social media policy:

1. Designate representatives. Decide who your social media representatives are and give them specific guidance. Examples might include not sharing information that is confidential or proprietary and speaking respectfully about the company, current and potential employees, customers, partners, and competitors. Employees who are personally involved with social media shouldn’t identify themselves with your company or brand.

2. Identify appropriate themes and subjects. Decide what can and cannot be discussed and share that information with your company’s social media representatives. Don’t assume that everyone knows what is controversial or aligned with your brand’s culture and ethics. Assume that everything shared on social media is on public record.

3. Don’t copy material from other sites without permission. Respect copyright laws and reference or cite sources accurately. Plagiarism applies online as well.

4. Brainstorm applications of social media in your business. Talk to your employees about their engagement in social media and solicit ideas and suggestions for its business-related use.

Clarifying acceptable use of these potentially valuable new technology tools will allow your business to explore their potential while minimizing risk. In the past, businesses were worried about allowing Internet or email access for employees. They feared that people would spend the day surfing inappropriate sites, shopping online, and otherwise wasting company time — not to mention potentially leaking company information. Guidelines for appropriate use were clarified and gradually these restrictions eased in most workplaces. Today many of us couldn’t do our jobs without unlimited use of these tools.

Over time, as the use of social media increases, it too will likely become just part of doing business. Until then, it makes sense to be prudent and establish guidelines that are clearly understood and followed.

If you have questions about training your work force, contact Robin Onaclea Scott, business service coordinator at Lane Workforce Partnership, at robino@laneworkforce.org or (541) 682-7224.