# Do You Need a Social Computing (Networking) Policy?

**Yes, you probably do.**

The last ten years has seen a revolution in how people communicate with each other.  Social networking, which includes use of Internet forums, blogs, wikis, LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, ZoomInfo has changed the world. As with most social transformations, this one affects the workplace as well.

If you haven't already created a social computing policy and/or guidelines for your workplace, you probably should.  While workplace policy needs differ widely, depending upon the nature and philosophy of the organization, nearly everybody needs a policy.  The trick is trying to decide what will work for you, specifically. The following are a *few* keys to consider in drafting your policy.

**Developing Social Networking Policies and Guidelines**

1. **One size definitely does not fit all.**
   You'll need to customize a policy to fit your industry, how technology is used in your workplace, your employees, and overall organizational need.

2. **Organizations view social networking very differently**
   High tech organizations may be very liberal regarding employee social computing and see business opportunities in letting employees network at work.  Others companies have little use for this communication and only see problems.    Where does your organization fit along this continuum?

3. **What kind of social networking does your organization seek to regulate?**

   **A. When?**

   a. Social networking during work.

   b. Social networking after work.

   c. Both

   **B. What?**

   a. What types of communications do you intend to address?

   b. Does it depend on whether the activities are at work or home?

4. **Which groups in your organization should be allowed to use company equipment and work time for social networking?**    All employees?  None?   Some?

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**5. Should you consider blocking, filtering, or monitoring certain sites at work?**
If so, for what groups of employees?

**6. How could social computing help your organization?**

    a. Professional contacts may use these methods to communicate with your employees.

    b. May improve community presence or reputation.

    c. Creates opportunity to get "the word out" about the company.

    d. Can serve as a means to launch marketing campaigns.

    e. Provides the chance for employees to interact with those in their same fields, increasing employee knowledge, resources, and professional contacts.

    f. Keeps you in touch with your customers and obtains their feedback.

    g. Provides information regarding products and services.

    h. Is a means to respond to news stories.

    i. Provides a service to customers and the public by answering questions and offering information.

**7. How could social networking hurt your organization?**

    a. Inappropriate communication can damage company reputation.

    b. It can waste an awful lot of time and decrease productivity.

    c. Employee communications may not meet company standards of behavior.

    d. Lawsuits

**8. What are some of the legal concerns?**

    a. Defamatory, harassing, or discriminatory communications by employees.

    b. Employee privacy rights.

    c. A few state laws protect employees who engage in lawful activities outside of work. There are also protections for employees engaging in political activities so a personal employee blog regarding politics, working conditions or employee rights is probably protected. Federal law also provides that employees have the right to discuss wages and terms and conditions of employment.

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### 8.    What are some of the legal concerns? (Continued)

d.  The federal Stored Communications Act prohibits a 3rd party from accessing electronic communications (e.g., email or social network sites) without proper authorization.   There's nothing wrong if an employer reads an employee's posts on a public site, there's no expectation of privacy.  However, if that employer gains access to a password protected, personal site by illicit means or by coercing another employee to offer up the password, that's another problem.

e.  Many employers review applicants' social sites to learn more about the candidates.  However, an employer who learns about an applicant's or employee's disability, sexual identity, race, etc. and fails to hire the applicant or promote the employee could face discrimination allegations.

f.  Employees who use social media to make statements about an employer's products could create liability if a consumer later claims that he was misled or purchased a defective or dangerous product.  Companies could be liable for any false or unsubstantiated claims by employees or even for an employee's failure to disclose his relationship with the company.

g.  Copyright violation and trademark infringement.

h.  Protecting confidential and proprietary information.

i.  Concerns that employees' comments on their personal sites could be interpreted as those of the company. (i.e., that the employee represents the company's viewpoints.)

**Bottom Line**

Social networking isn't going to go away. It's difficult to change or control employee behavior under any circumstances.  Yet employees need guidelines to follow.  The goal then is to use common sense to utilize social networking in a manner that can help the organization and which does no harm to you, the employer.  While that's easier said than done, it's important to be proactive and address the issue.

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