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Feature

Prohibitions on Social Media: Not Your Best Solution

Draft the right policy to balance the interests

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We are lucky when we work in a place where we make friends. Feeling a personal connection to the work you do and the people you work with can be an instrumental part of feeling engaged and happy in our professional lives.

Like anything, it's all good until it's not. As an example, sometimes colleagues fall in love and then sometimes they break up. And when that circumstance starts to affect people's ability to work, be productive and feel safe at work, you've now made it your employer's business.
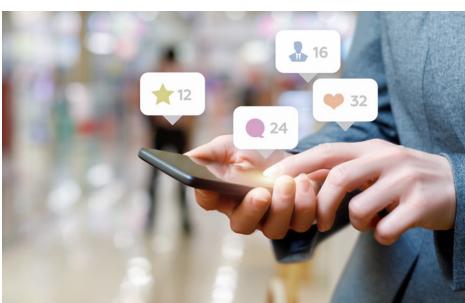
It doesn't make sense to prohibit workplace friendships, but we do pay attention when those relationships negatively affect the workplace. The same is true for social media.

Some people are of the view that they should have separate accounts for personal and professional purposes, and in a lot of cases that makes sense. School teachers are a great example of that. People should take whatever precautions they feel are appropriate.

But like friendships, social media does not have a clear boundary between personal and professional personas. For the most part, maturity, not regulation, is the most effective strategy.

Employees have a right to a private life and frankly, employers generally aren't interested in becoming a part of it. But when you post something online that negatively affects your employer's business or workplace, you're making your post their business. Freedom of speech is not an exclusive right — it is not only yours. If you have a right to post your opinion, remember that your employer has corresponding right to not like it, subject to human rights laws and similar. How would you feel if your company tweeted that all of its employees are morons? Probably the same way your company would feel if you called your boss a moron online.

Then there's the flip side. Many employers encourage their employees to promote the company through their personal networks. In order to create a healthy, constructive conversation, companies often provide approved messaging or themes, as well as guidelines on how to effectively post while being mindful of confidentiality and other similar risks. Maturity says, "When in doubt, ask." Prohibiting employees from posting anything at all about their companies is really just punishing those who can handle themselves because of a small minority who can't.

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Social media is never truly private, even if that's what your account settings say. We've seen what happens with Facebook. Because of re-posting, re-tweeting, screen captures and so forth, social media is ultimately a permanent public billboard that forever memorializes your thought or conversation.

In drafting social media policies for workplaces, employers must be practical. There is a balancing of interests that must occur. Employers are often best advised to think of risk mitigation rather than risk elimination in order to achieve that balance. Here are some considerations for employers in drafting social media policies:

- What role, if any, do you want your employees to play in your corporate social media strategy?
- What do helpful or positive employee contributions look like? What does negative or unhelpful content look like?
- How do you intend to distinguish or balance employees' private and professional roles in social media?
- How will you support employees in effectively using social media for your workplace, even if they do not support your company's social media strategy? (They're going to use it whether or not you've asked them to.)
- Do you have a plan for when things go sideways?
- How do your social media expectations dovetail to your respectful workplace expectations?
- Have you clearly communicated your expectations to your employees and educated them on positive uses of social media?

At the end of the day, there are no longer any clear or impenetrable boundaries between workplaces and the rest of the world. Corporate social media policies are inextricably tied to respectful and healthy workplaces. Rather than policing the issue, employers are well advised to embrace the benefits and challenges of social media and work with employees to strike a healthy balance.

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