

Regulating social networking in the workplace is essential

 By [Johan Botes](#)

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Employers who fail to introduce and manage a well-considered social networking policy in the workplace may soon be overtaken by competitors who have successfully managed to do so.

Managing the social networking conduct of staff is not something that should be left to chance. The advent of social networking has even further blurred the lines between private conduct and workplace conduct of staff. Employees tweet and post on Facebook at all hours, sharing information that would have been unheard of a decade ago.

Social Networking Policy

A Social Networking Policy can assist employees and employers alike in understanding the boundaries that are required to manage complex relationships in the modern workplace. This policy should contain clear guidelines or workplace rules on various aspects of using social networking in the workplace or with reference to the employment relationship.

Each workplace is different and a social networking policy needs to reflect the degree of social networking permitted for the various levels of employees; when and how social networking sites may be accessed during office hours and using company resources, if at all; which social networking sites are acceptable and which are not and the limit on types of information or comment that may be made in relation to colleagues, the employer, competitors and so forth.

Clear guidelines should be given on acceptable tone and contents of communication, what type of conduct would constitute an offence and the online behaviour that the employer wishes to promote.

Businesses are now exploring ways to unlock the potential presented by social networking, some cautiously while others are doing so with reckless abandon. According to www.socialbakers.com, 1.5 million businesses globally have a Facebook page.

In many instances, these forays seem to be limited to marketing or advertising roles and departments. A number of companies have taken to the idea of using Facebook or Twitter to launch new advertising campaigns or promotions.

Limiting access

However, by limiting use and access to social networking to advertising agencies, companies may be unduly limiting the use of these vehicles. If the whole workforce actively punts the business, its services or wares that should dramatically increase the reach of the message.

It is important to understand that there is a limit to the employer's reach into the private life of an employee. The cardinal determinant is whether the employee's actions negatively impact on the on-going employment relationship with the employer.

While an employer may prohibit staff from accessing the internet or social networking sites during office hours, using company equipment or networks, it may not - as a general rule - prohibit employees from joining such networks in their personal capacity.

Employee and employer relations

Employers may lawfully expect their employees to always act in a manner that is not designed to destroy the relationship of trust between employee and employer. This demand may include refraining from posting any messages on a website that may be detrimental to the employer's business, such as using racist or anti-Semitic language where the message posted can in any way be linked to the employee or the employer.

Employees posting rude or nasty comments about their boss, colleagues or clients on a website may face disciplinary action or even be dismissed if the message can be traced back to them. The negative impact on the employment relationship of such messages may be as severe as if the employee made those comments to from the stage during the annual year-end function.

Employees can hardly be expected to continue working, in harmony, with a colleague that posts racist messages online and this then becomes public knowledge. No employer should be expected to continue an employment relationship with an employee who sets out to cause disharmony in the workplace.

This adage is as true for an employee who disrespectfully rants about his manager in front of other staff at the company canteen as it is of an employee posting offensive comments about the manager on his Facebook page. It is conducive to sound employee relations in the workplace, though, that an employer advises its employees of its attitude in relation to social media, email and internet usage. A clear policy will go a long way in avoiding the conflict, rather than merely dealing with it when it arises.

If one considers that the average Facebook user has 130 friends, becomes a fan of four sites per month and is a member of 13 groups, the exponential growth in marketing reach is clear to see.

Businesses who do not find ways of unlocking the potential of social networking do so at their own peril.

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