
TUC Briefing on online social networking and Human Resources
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Facing up to Facebook

In recent months, it's been hard for anyone working in human resources to avoid the hype around online social networking. Millions of people in the UK are registered with services such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo or Friendster, and use them to conduct their social lives online, discussing interests, organising events, making new friends, or just sharing gossip.

Employers around the country are finding that these private life services are widely popular with their staff. Newspapers are full of stories on how the trend might affect working relationships, and how some employers are reacting to it.

Social networking as a time waster

A number of employers have moved to ban use of Facebook at work, believing that allowing access to it may encourage staff to waste time. It is of course their right to decide how their own IT equipment can and can't be used, but in some cases this may be an over-reaction.

Those employers who currently allow staff use of their work computers during their own time, for personal web use or email should not feel that this new trend necessarily changes that. Aside from the hype, Facebook is just another way of using the web to organise your social life – it isn't the first and won't be the last. We believe that good employers should consider allowing their staff personal use of the internet in general at the workplace, during break times, provided this is used responsibly and doesn't interfere with work or could compromise the employer's reputation.

Handled properly, personal access to the internet during breaks could be a valued benefit for staff, and also help employees develop useful IT skills. Many employers have a Web use policy, making it clear to staff what is and is not acceptable. Publicising this policy is the best way to ensure that staff do not use the internet to waste time on company time.

If you monitor internet usage at work, data protection regulations require you to make it clear that this is happening. In such cases, it's a good idea to include clearly in your web use policy that private conversations could be intercepted in the same way as other business communications.

Social networking and personal conduct

Regardless of whether staff use social networking services at home or at work, there are bigger issues around staff conduct, which will also concern HR managers.

People obviously have only one real identity, and that has to cover them for both work life and personal life. Asking people to totally sacrifice a private life is unreasonable. This isn't such a problem offline, but when everything is written down online, the scale of the problem makes it a whole new issue.

Employers may have some valid concerns about the way their employees conduct their personal lives, such as breaches of commercial confidentiality or damaging the company's reputation by slandering co-workers or clients.

This is of course the same issue whether the misconduct happens online or offline. However, online social networking is making employees' private lives more public, with details now instantly searchable and potentially stored online forever. We're concerned that some companies may be over-reacting to this increased level of knowledge about what their employees say about their work.

Potentially just as bad is the way in which many other companies are instead simply ignoring the issue, meaning they will only work out their response when faced with the first problem, and having to take drastic action that could have been avoided by early intervention. This approach makes the UK's Facebook users 3.5 million HR accidents waiting to happen.

Employees have a right to a personal life, and provided they do not breach reasonable conduct guidelines, employers should respect this. They wouldn't follow an employee down the pub to check on what they said to their friends about their day at work. Just because they can now do something akin to this online, certainly doesn't mean they should.

A responsible way to handle this is for employers to negotiate a reasonable conduct policy with employee representatives, and make it clear to them what is expected of them in their private lives, both offline and online. This way staff will be less likely to get an unpleasant surprise when they find out their employer doesn't approve of something they said or did.

The current media hype is sometimes unhelpful and may encourage employers to waste time on imaginary problems, when an honest and open conduct policy, coupled with a hands-off approach to employees' personal lives could avoid unnecessarily damaging relations with the workforce.

Work is such a big part of our lives that it is only natural we will discuss it to some degree in our private lives. Everyone has a bad day at work from time to time for example, and employers should not be over concerned if someone occasionally shares that with their friends.

Millions in the UK are already registered with Facebook or similar social networking tools, to conduct part of their private lives online. Many, especially younger employees, now see online social networking as the norm. Every workplace in the UK is going to have to deal with the issues sooner or later. Tackling it sooner, and in co-operation with employees and unions, should be in employers' interests in avoiding possible pitfalls.

Employers need to work in partnership with their staff to develop workable conduct policies, and ensure these are well communicated to everyone working for them. Actively engaging with an issue that is not going to go away is the best way to ensure that there are no unpleasant surprises for both employers and employees.

Social networking and recruitment

Another area in which social networking has been seen to impact on work is the reported use of sites like Facebook to vet candidates for recruitment. This is no doubt a temptation for many managers seeking to appoint staff, but any employer who takes equal opportunities in recruitment seriously should not be considering this. As only a minority of potential staff will have public profiles on social networks, using information from this source can give an unfair advantage or disadvantage to certain candidates.

There is also the danger it may leave the employer open to charges (well founded or not) of discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, sexuality or other criteria, if this information is not available on application forms but can be deduced from a search personal profiles online.

Social networking and security

Some companies (and IT security companies' marketing departments) have raised concerns about the risks posed by social networking. If staff identify themselves as working for a particular employer, it may help identity fraudsters to gather information to use against a company.

Whilst this could be true, it is part of a wider issue and unfair to just single out sites like Facebook as the culprits. Many surveys have shown how easy it is for a fraudster to discover information such as computer passwords, by asking staff the right questions. Employees need an all-round greater awareness of security and identity theft issues, both online and offline, in order to protect businesses better.

If employers help staff with training on IT security and identity theft, those staff will also have a better idea of how to minimise security risks to themselves and their company on social networking.