

A little bird told me ...

Regulating social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, is one of the biggest issues facing HR. Deborah Tarrant reports

By Deborah Tarrant

What are you doing now? Every day social media site Twitter puts this perfunctory question to millions of people worldwide and invites them to answer in 140 characters or less.

The response of managers charged with ensuring the productivity of others or minding the corporate reputation might involve a few sharp bleats on one of the hottest points in the employer-employee relationship right now – the struggle with the perplexing dilemma of managing social networking at work. The phenomenal growth in popularity of sites – in particular, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter – has produced a range of often confusing and confronting issues.

It's been coming for a while, but online networking tools seem to have completely blurred the boundaries between our private and public/professional lives. As momentum and excitement has built for social media's huge commercial potential – providing instant collaboration, direct access to customers, recruitment and marketing opportunities – the traditional media has indeed been atwitter about its risks, pitfalls and many murky areas.

Witness the now numerous reported instances of employees fired for acts ranging from outrageous to puerile and downright foolhardy that have been gleefully posted on sites which so many, seemingly, fail to understand are public fora.

Consider the Swiss woman who lost her job for using Facebook after claiming she was suffering a migraine and was too ill to use her computer or the Aussie party animal fired for phoning in sick before regaling friends (and inadvertently his employer) with the details of his antics the night before. What are we to make of the now unemployed US fast food chain workers' YouTube posting of a video of themselves farting on a pizza, while their hapless counterparts at KFC opted for the debatably cleaner on-camera option of bathing in the company's kitchen sink?

For all its benefits and precariousness, one thing is clear: social networking is no passing fad. With a staff of 49,000, Telstra's public policy and communications group managing director David Quilty was already contemplating how to deal with this issue earlier this year when he attended the World Economic Forum in Davos. Global leaders may have had solutions to the financial crisis at the forefront of their mind but running alongside this urgent agenda were several sessions on social media. The issue of how to harness the upside and rein in the downside of the reality that all the world is now a stage – or, more pertinently, that everyone is potentially a publisher – was also preoccupying the world's most powerful players.

On his return, Quilty put on his strategic skates and in April Telstra became the first Australian organisation to make public a set of guidelines – or guardrails, as he prefers – for preferable social networking conduct for employees.

The rules came with some surprising twists and turns – and not before time. Just weeks before, Telstra employee Leslie Nasser had been “outed” for entertaining many with his satirical postings as the Fake Stephen Conroy on Twitter. The problem, says Quilty, was not that Nasser had broken ranks or that he was poking fun at the influential communications minister, but that he’d failed to announce he worked for Telstra so his followers would understand his context, an imperative that’s now clearly set down in the guidelines.

Social networking is not only ubiquitous – statistics show 3.6 million Australians accessed Facebook in December last year – it’s also nigh on impossible to control. It brings a fresh set of mores where transparency and honesty hold a new significance. Up for grabs now are previous corporate approaches to who speaks on behalf of an organisation and how information is presented to the public.

Flagrant acts that bring undone the reputation of an employer are just a part of this story. Cases where employees are bad-mouthing, misrepresenting or breaching corporate confidentiality are also on the rise.

What would once have been a quick vent about the boss over a beer after work assumes a new dimension should you do it on Facebook or a blog without adjusting your privacy settings.

In the next round, lawyers and financial services companies anticipate issues of insider trading will surface. For dealmakers, the risks of discussing their activities, formerly inherent in elevator conversations, multiply spectacularly with a slip on a social network.

As the head of Deloitte Digital, Peter Williams recently told a conference “trying to get something back from the internet is like trying to get pee out of a swimming pool”.

Stephen Penning, a partner with law firm Turner Freeman, says one of the insidious aspects of social media for both employers and individuals is just how quickly information can spread, and there’s a common misunderstanding over how commentary written in private downtime for the benefit of a handful of friends is effectively “published” worldwide.

Little wonder companies, accustomed to controlling brands and corporate images, are appointing social media managers and consultants, seeking legal advice and, in some instances, banning outright the use of social media at work. Many have focused on the amount of time employees spend chatting to buddies online, but this doesn’t entirely put a lid on the problem according to James Griffin, director of online risk management consultancy SR7. Social media audits show that prime time is not the old nine-to-five, but 7pm to 10pm.

Given the preceding era of connectivity where work-related text messages or emails have been answered at all hours, Laurel Papworth, Australia’s foremost social media expert suggests the notion of banning a short burst of social activity at work is “an anachronism”.

“Anyone who would waste a huge amount of time on Facebook at work would only switch to email, internet surfing or playing solitaire online,” she says. “Timewasters waste time. Don’t blame the tool!”

Besides, blocking social media at the firewall not only precludes taking advantage of its benefits but undoubtedly will impact on the recruitment and retention of younger workers, they say. Organisations that might have been expected to take a conservative stance on social networking are actively embracing it for recruitment/marketing purposes. These include Ernst and Young, AMP and CPA Australia to name just a few.

Others are opting for a modicum of control. Ann Sherry, CEO of Carnival Australia, for example, has sanctioned special terminals in team rooms for the company’s employees to use for “tweeting” and related activities during their work breaks.

Annalie Killian, AMP’s catalyst for magic (aka director, innovation, communication and collaboration – social media), says concerns about inhibiting collaboration and knowledge-sharing has prompted the organisation to opt for self-regulation and for its policy AMP has borrowed two words from Microsoft: “Be Smart”. AMP’s bloggers are told simply: “You are responsible for what you write, respect your audience, and respect copyright.” Killian says complaints have been dealt with on a case-by-case basis and turned into coaching opportunities, but these are few and far between. As she points out: “We have many introverts in the organisation so it’s not like we are dealing with thousands of employees who suddenly want to express themselves publicly. It’s a matter of different strokes for different folks and it’s not a massive problem.”

Not all are so assured. Social media policies are advised by the experts although they have only become a priority action-list item in ASX Top 200 companies in the past few months, observes Penning.

Australia is behind the US, confirms Papworth who reports an upswing in interest in her course on social media guidelines suggesting many policies are now being written.

“Where organisations do have guidelines, they have not been making them public, but this will change,” she tips. “The best defence when a staff member acts inappropriately is to be able to point to a code or guidelines to show the public what was agreed to as an organisation.”

Penning says employers may have incorrectly assumed they’re covered by existing policies for internet and email usage or rules around who speaks to the media. “Existing policies won’t stretch to the new social media,” he warns. “It’s important that employees know the rules and understand what will happen if they are breached.” Consequences may range from a formal warning to termination.

Employers face a risk of unfair dismissal claims from those who were not given guidelines and informed of the potential consequences of failure to comply. Cases involving corporate reputational damage are on the increase. Penning also advises employment contracts should encompass social media policy.

Nick Abrahams, head of the technology, media and telecommunications practice at law firm Deacons, which is currently twittering up a storm, says social media policies should cover the basics such as reasonable use – how much social networking at work is okay? – and security risks. Social networking sites also present opportunities for spam, phishing and malware attacks.

Direct HR issues concern staff interaction as social networking sites can be regarded as an extension of the workplace, Abrahams argues. Employees should be reminded that HR policies, such as those relating to sexual harassment and bullying, still apply.

He points out that US companies are mandating etiquette where senior managers are not permitted to ask junior employees to be Facebook 'friends', but they may accept invitations from those down the reporting line. On the reputational front, Abrahams recommends only authorised people should engage on social network sites on behalf of a company. Other employees should make it clear in their posts (if they disclose where they work), "that the comments are personal views and not the official position of the company".

With just a handful of accredited individuals, Telstra now expects workers not only to identify themselves as an employee if they mention their employer and be careful not to imply they are speaking on Telstra's behalf by using a disclaimer: "The views expressed in this post are mine only and do not necessarily reflect the views of Telstra."

Safeguarding the company's reputation or interests is one thing, but concerns also surround the release of the confidential information and the accuracy of what's posted.

Ensuring people fully grasp what is acceptable social networking behaviour is vital, says Quilty who wrote into Telstra's guidelines the need for employees to seek permission from their managers and the Public Policy staff before dealing in company details. So do you need a lawyer to write your policy?

It's wise to have it checked over by a lawyer, suggest the experts, although Quilty says he and another team member started with a blank sheet of paper. Papworth believes there's a strong case for encouraging staff input. "Covering a company legally is not the same as protecting the staff and brand." While statistics show the number of 45+ social networkers is growing, "senior staff may not fully understand social platforms," she says.

Papworth's recommended approach is undertaking a social media audit of actively networking employees and inviting "social media star employees to help form guidelines because they will be across appropriate behaviour. The working party can then run a brown-bag lunch to show off their MySpace page and explain the new rules," she says.

Monitoring staff activity should not be necessary. "As with email and the internet this is an area where commonsense needs to prevail," Quilty argues. He has no issue with Telstra staff using company equipment to socialise online because precluding online activity would disadvantage the company in

so many ways, he says. "We're not actively monitoring this. We expect their use to be reasonable and not inhibit their ability to get the job done."

Papworth believes online networking behaviour will quickly self-regulate on all fronts, particularly "as people become more conscious of their invisible audience".

Most instances of companies wanting to take action against an employee to date have been the result of a complaint rather than the company actively keeping an eye out for cyber misdemeanors, according to Gerard Phillips, head of workplace relations and safety at law firm, Middletons.

Those wishing to keep tabs on employee activity need to keep in mind workplace surveillance laws. In NSW, for example, employees must be informed if their online activities are being monitored at work.

For employers who find something potentially damaging or actionable online, there's also the issue of substantiating the evidence. That is, confirming that the "offending" entries have actually been made by that person, Phillips points out.

As for the growing number of reputation management services, Griffin is quick to point out despite reports of employers "spying" on employees, his company's vigilance is strictly for corporate brands and products and how they are being represented in the blogosphere. "We're not checking on people's private behaviour."

A social networks snapshot

Deacons' Social Networking Survey 2008 research provides a snapshot of internet use in Australian workplaces. The survey found 62 per cent of workers have access to the internet from work and of these:

- 14 per cent use it at some time to access social networking sites. Usage is significantly higher among younger workers with 32 per cent of 16-24 year olds and 23 per cent of 25-34 year olds reporting frequent or occasional use.
- 20 per cent said their employer blocked access to social networking sites while 57 per cent said their employer allowed it (23 per cent did not know).
- 76 per cent of workers who use the internet at work could see a benefit to their organisation in allowing access to social networking sites believing it showed: trust in employees (68 per cent); gave people a break from day-to-day work and kept them fresh (48 per cent); and allowed them to better network with other employees, customers and suppliers (40 per cent).
- Among those who use social networking sites, 91 per cent saw a benefit to their organisation from the activity. In general, younger workers were more likely to see these benefits than their older counterparts.
- 16 per cent overall said an employer's policy regarding online social networking would influence their decision to join one employer over another. This view was particularly strong among 16 to 24 year olds, with one in four saying it would.

- 91 per cent say that they use the internet appropriately at work, with only one per cent admitting to frequent inappropriate use.

What's next in social media?

The web is a very transient place. It may seem that the masses have only just logged on to Twitter, but already new frontiers are being explored and early adopters are embracing the next new thing.

Social media sites are just the beginning, says Australian expert Laurel Papworth and her trailblazing international counterparts. The next phase involves linking collaborative technologies. A five-year vision outlined in a recent paper by Forrester Research's Jeremiah Owyang foresees the entire web becoming an almost infinite shared social experience – what's more, it's already happening.

"Federation" is a hot topic. It allows the portability of identity information, so users of one social network can securely access data or systems of another domain without the need for user administration.

Last year saw the launch of Facebook Connect, for example, which allows a Facebook login to be used to access partner web sites. Users can share what they're doing on those sites with everyone on Facebook. "Aggregation" is also in action.

Check out FriendFeed or Power.com. Ultimately, aggregation sites will become dashboards allowing users to interact with all their social networks and other web services.

The Open Web will overcome the currently disjointed social networking experience, but portable IDs are just the beginning of the transformation, according to Owyang who predicts a revolution in the paper, *The Future of the Social Web: In Five Eras*.

The upshot will be a world of interconnected consumers who will transform marketing, eCommerce, customer relationship management and advertising, he says.

Increasingly, consumers will rely on their peers as they make online decisions and stronger communities will create a shift away from the power of brands as the newly empowered consumer defines the next generation of products.

The evolutionary eras are:

1. Social relationships:
People connect to others and share
2. Social functionality:
Social networks become like operating systems
3. Social colonisation:
Every experience can now be social

4. Social context:
Personalised and accurate content
5. Social commerce:
Communities define future products and services.

Timewasting websites

The “cyberslackers” guide to wasting time at work

No 1. Facebook

Top of the list for employee time-wasting websites everywhere, 3.5 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (worldwide). With more than 200 million active users this addictive site allows members to update their profiles, add friends, upload photos, events and much more.

No 2. YouTube

Anyone can be a broadcaster on YouTube with 10 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute. Viewers can while away hours online watching anything from the perverse to the sublime. 52 per cent of users aged between 18-34 regularly share their favourite videos with friends and colleagues.

No 3. Twitter

A favourite of pollies at poll time, celebrities all of the time and succinct bloggers everywhere, anyone can Twitter. Users write short updates or “tweets”, which are shared with their network of family and friends. Twittering can prove extremely addictive (and somewhat narcissistic), especially when your inbox is flooded with email alerts informing you of new followers.

No 4. Flickr

With over 5000 photos uploaded in the time it’s taken you to read this sentence, Flickr is one of the most popular online photo-sharing websites out there. Users can flick through hundreds of photos or videos using a few keywords as criteria. Like Facebook, users can be sucked into a time-wasting vortex with one set of photos leading to another, resulting in hours of flicking.

No 5. Urban Dictionary

Ever wondered what the phrase “Facebook alzheimer’s” means? Named one of the best websites of 2008 by Time magazine, Urban Dictionary defines words, phrases and sub-culture slang not normally recorded in the average lexicon. With more than four million definitions written since 1999 this treasure trove of aphorisms is an addictive one when you get going.

No 6. MSN

Is your colleague furiously typing away at the desk opposite you? Think they’re hard at work? Think again. MSN Web Messenger is an instant messaging service allowing users to chat to each other in real time. The perfect remedy for a bored employee, chatting online is an entertaining (and covert) way to catch up with friends while looking very busy.

No 7. Ebay

A death trap for shopaholics everywhere, Ebay can see users trawling for hours through its pages of collectables, fashion, music and much more.

No 8. Realestate.com

If you've ever scoured the pages of realestate.com in the hope of finding your dream house you'll understand just how much time can be wasted on this site. Despite being able to narrow your search by price, suburb and number of bedrooms, house hopefuls can spend entire workdays trawling through pages of overpriced rentals.

No 9. Go Fug Yourself

Celebrities everywhere beware! Star fashion faux pas will be deemed "fugly" (frighteningly ugly) by the hilarious bloggers at Go Fug Yourself. Once you start on this site you can't stop, with catty entries dedicated to just about every female – and male – celebrity traipsing the red carpet today.

No 10. Seek

Job searching while at work is for the very brave (or stupid). Unhappy, ambitious employees can hunt for hours on this website in search of their dream job. Just make sure you don't get caught!

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