

Social media policy – the importance within business

Introduction

The use of social media is becoming ever more prevalent. Sites like Facebook, Bebo, MySpace and LinkedIn are used by millions of people around the world in both their personal and professional lives.

Businesses are also discovering the benefits of developing a social media presence. It offers new opportunities for organisations to network, attract clients, recruit, promote their brand and market their services, all with minimal financial outlay. Many organisations now actively encourage their employees, particularly those involved in sales or business development, to join business social networking sites such as LinkedIn to promote their company and generate new business.

However, along with the benefits come a number of risks. Companies have very limited control over what is said about them on the internet, beyond the scope of their own corporate websites - and the potential audience for any negative comments is huge. Organisations also face risks from inside the company, through the possibility of employees misusing their access to social networking sites.

This is where a social media policy comes in...

What is a social media policy?

A social media policy sets out the standards that an organisation expects from its employees when they are using online social media. It normally gives guidelines of acceptable behaviour and explains what employees should and should not do when using these sites in the course of their employment. It also usually sets out the possible consequences should an employee breach the policy.

Why have a social media policy?

The benefits that social networking sites can bring to a business, in the form of new avenues for business generation, will generally outweigh the possible risks, and it is neither practical or desirable for organisations to try and ban their use outright in the work environment.

However, prudent organisations will recognise that risks do exist, and take steps to manage them. One of these steps is the introduction of a social media policy, which will control how social media sites are used, and give companies a level of protection in the event that such use is abused.

Risk management

The risks that a social media policy can help organisations to manage include:

- Loss of productivity
- One of the greatest concerns that organisations have in allowing employees access to social media sites is the possible loss of time

and productivity, with staff spending more time organising their social life and catching up with gossip than carrying out their role.

- A social media policy can make it clear to employees when it is acceptable for them to use social networking sites for personal use - for example, during breaks - and also what action will be taken by the company in situations of excessive personal use.
- Loss of, or damage to, the company's reputation
 - There have been many reports in the press of instances where disgruntled employees have criticised their employer in online forums or chat rooms, raising the possibility of damage to the company's brand and reputation.
 - Although an employer cannot control what employees do in their non-work time, they can take steps to prevent their actions having a negative impact on the company. A social media policy can remind employees of their duty of honesty and loyalty to their employer and their obligation to act in the organisation's best interests. It can spell out the consequences of being caught deliberately maligning the company.
- Disclosure of company confidential material
 - Many employers encourage staff to discuss work related matters in blogs and online forums, as this can be an ideal way to demonstrate their expertise and promote the company to a wide audience. But this can give rise to the risk of confidential information being disclosed, either deliberately or inadvertently.
 - A social media policy can remind employees of the importance of maintaining company confidentiality, and highlight the fact that they should always make sure that the information they are disclosing is appropriate for the public domain.
- Exposure to harassment or discrimination claims
 - Employers can face discrimination or harassment claims if employees post inappropriate or offensive material online in the course of their employment.
 - A social media policy provides protection for a company by making sure that employees are aware of what is and is not acceptable, and reminding them that they are representing the company when they post online in a work context.
 - Employers are in a much stronger position to take action against staff for such offences if they can show they have a policy that states that such actions are unacceptable, and that the employee was fully aware of the existence of the policy.
- Loss of business contacts that an employee has built up during the course of his employment
 - Social media sites such as LinkedIn can be very beneficial to

businesses because of the opportunities they provide to develop an extensive network of relevant business connections. But companies can be vulnerable in the event that the employee responsible for building up these contacts leaves the company, perhaps to go work for a competitor, and ownership of these contacts has not been clarified.

- A social media policy can protect an employer from this potential loss of business by making it clear that contacts built up during the course of employment remain the property of the employer.

How can Winning Work help?

Gordon BDM are not legal advisors, but we are well versed in the practicalities of using social media in the workplace. We are ideally placed to work with your legal team to develop a social media policy for you, enabling you to effectively manage these risks, and still get the full benefit from your social media strategy.

If you need more information or support in creating a social media policy for your business, contact Christine Black, Client Services Manager on 07964 713592 or at christineblack@winningwork.co.uk or Adam Gordon, Director on 07870 268288 or at adamgordon@winningwork.co.uk