



# Employer Answers IN THE WORKPLACE

## Managing Social Networking Activities

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*As part of SEDCOR's alliance with Cascade Employers Association, this feature appears periodically in the Enterprise. Cascade provides employment knowledge and support in the areas of human resource management, employment law compliance, training, pay information, safety and employee benefits.*

### Question:

I like the idea of on-line social networking, but am concerned the new technology might be abused by my employees. How can I manage this?

### Answer:

Ask any human resource professional and they will tell you that this is one of the most commonly asked questions in the past year.

Last week, a company owner "Kim" called in and suggested I "Google" her company name. When I did, a long list of search results appeared. She called my attention to a result near the top of the list, an employee's MySpace.com web page. I opened the link and found a not-so-tasteful photo of the employee. I also noticed several photos of his "contacts" – including a suggestive photo of one apparently underage female, with an eyebrow-raising caption.

The employee's site did not contain any negative information about the company itself; he had only listed the company as his employer. Still, his site was among the top search results. Needless to say, this is not the place Kim wants her customers to go when searching for product information.

Kim's question was whether she could adopt a policy limiting the use of her company name on-line. My answer was "yes" – she could adopt such a policy, and probably should, but only after careful consideration of how any limitation on use may impact her marketing and public relations goals.

Social networking is becoming the communication tool of choice for people of all ages. Many networks are by "invitation only" while others are open to the public. All networks provide an opportunity to share personal profile information, including place of employment. A weblog, or "blog," is a website where regular entries are made offering opinion, commentary or news on a particular subject. Others serve as personal online diaries. Most blogs contain text, as well as photographs, videos and audio.

Some employers find employee networking activities and blogs benefit recruitment as well as employee productivity and morale. Others encourage the use of blogs to promote events or new products, and to increase communication among current employees.

While these tools have benefits, the potential for misuse is significant. Casual networking can jeopardize the professional image of an organization. Blogs increase the risk of compromising confidential business information and creating conflicts of interest. Reputation, defamation and harassment are also common concerns. Morale can be damaged when negative comments about the company or its employees are posted. As you can imagine, the more personal

content included in the profile or post, the higher the risk for damage to an employer's reputation.

Because of these risks, employers should adopt policies that clearly establish the organization's standards and expectations for such communications, as well as the consequences of failing to abide by those policies. Employers should also monitor blogs, by conducting periodic company name searches to uncover inappropriate content, conflict and confidentiality concerns.

Sample policy language might include:

"The Company understands that many employees choose to engage in social networking, blogging activities and participate in on-line forums. To preserve the integrity of our name and our image, use of our Company name when engaging in these activities is strongly discouraged."

The policy should also address topics such as:

- Compliance with company confidentiality rules, conduct standards and harassment policies.
- Disclosure of conflicts of interest.
- Discussion of co-workers, customers, clients, partners or suppliers.
- Use of company equipment and time for networking and blogging activities.

Another excellent tip is to perform a web-search of your company name on a periodic basis. This will show you what your customers see when they are looking for you. You might be surprised.

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