

## **Expert Q & A**

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*Interviewed by Joseph Coombs, Workplace Trends and Forecasting Specialist, SHRM*

### **How common is it for employees to talk negatively about their companies in social media forums? What are the repercussions?**

It's becoming increasingly common. One survey has shown the percentage of respondents who say they've had to discipline employees for violating a social media policy has steadily increased—from 11% in 2008 to 17% in 2009 and to 21% in 2010.

This increase is quite understandable and can be attributed to a couple of factors. First, there is the unprecedented high number of people in the general public who are using social media; this number translates to a respective increase among the general workforce. That means you have all these folks experimenting and exploring with this new form of expression, communication and connectivity. And they're all trying to figure out how best to use the medium, making mistakes along the way. That's why it seems only natural that customary griping and whining, which used to be done over a beer after work, has now migrated online and is reflected in increased negative talk.

Another factor contributing to the increase is the difficult economic climate. Let's face it, many workers are staying in jobs where they're not exactly happy because they know the job market is tough. This means they may have gripes and criticisms they don't dare bring up at work and can now use social media as a place to vent and get (perhaps broader) support from their friends online.

The repercussions to employees who post negative comments will, of course, vary greatly depending on the nature of the comments and on the type of social media policy the company has in place. Repercussions will range from very mild discipline (especially if no policy is in place and the employee can claim the "nobody told me I couldn't" defense) all the way to termination if the comments are hostile or damaging.

### **Depending on the nature of the comments, what is HR's role in rectifying the situation and what should be the approach?**

As with so much of what we do, HR plays a strategic, proactive role. This means that HR is on the case long before the offending event occurs. As HR professionals, we know we must always watch beyond the horizon for trends and patterns that affect our workforce and our organizations.

HR professionals have been monitoring the increasing influence that social media is having on how people communicate and express themselves, and they have quickly realized the need to craft and implement a social media policy. They have either created stand-alone policies or have expanded already existing electronic communications policies.

The role of HR changes from strategic (developing policy) to operational (implementing policy) as soon as the policy is breached. Once the company learns that an employee posted negative comments online and a violation has likely occurred, HR changes hats—we are now tasked with assisting the company in enforcing its policy.

Depending on the nature of the negative comments and how they relate to existing policy, HR ensures that the policy is administered in a fair, consistent and legal manner. That could mean conducting an investigation and ensuring the employee is appropriately counseled or disciplined with proper follow-up. If warranted, it may also mean participating in the decision to terminate the employee.

### **How important is it for companies to have social media use policies, and what should the parameters involve?**

A couple of years ago, it may have been optional, but these days, it's essential to have a social media policy. And there's no "one size fits all." The parameters of a good policy really depend on the company culture, type of industry and whether the company sees social media as a nuisance or embraces it as the "new normal."

Start by asking, "What's the purpose of the policy?" Is it to prevent employees from wasting time using social media while working? Is it to protect valuable company secrets or sensitive client data? Is it to discourage employees from bad-mouthing the company after working hours?

Or, is it to provide guidelines to employees who are expected to participate in social media on behalf of the company? Is it to encourage and educate staff on how best to promote the company and engage customers through social media? Or is it all of the above?

Once you determine the purpose, calculate to what extent you are prepared to devote resources for monitoring employee activity and enforcing the policy. After you have answers, then you're ready to begin.

On a related note, The National Labor Relations Board recently took a position that suggests social media policies should not be overly broad.

The NLRB settled a case where it claimed that because existing laws allow employees to discuss certain topics (working conditions, wages, management practices, safety, unionization, etc.) without fear of retaliation, prohibiting this discussion—whether around the water cooler or on Facebook—interfered with protected speech and was an over-reach by the company.

### **Aside from recruiting, are there other ways social media can benefit HR professionals from an operational standpoint?**

Whatever your area of operational responsibility (be it compensation and benefits, learning and development, HRIS systems), you can benefit by joining and taking part in social media networks, especially those with a professional or business emphasis such as LinkedIn or Twitter. How? There are communities, groups and blogs that specialize in everything under the sun. Joining one of these will connect you with individuals with a vast wealth of information, who are ready to share, aggregate and opine on whatever topic you may need.

For example, by joining a compensation and benefits group, one can ask questions about insurance providers—which are recommended, which ones to avoid, or who is offering good value—or ask how upcoming changes in legislation may affect the landscape.

Another way HR can use social media is to supplement or even replace the employee newsletter and communicate more effectively with their own employees about events, new babies or new benefits.

In the bigger picture, HR professionals must fully engage in social media in order to understand its attraction, its risk and also its great potential. HR is perfectly positioned to design policies that mitigate the risks and harness the benefits of social media, but they can only do that if they understand it.