

## Top tips for creating an employee social media policy

Written by Northern Lights PR

How are your employees using social media? And do your employee policies advise them what you do or don't find acceptable business behaviour?

If your first instinct is that your business does not need to worry about social media – have you checked who is on LinkedIn? What if colleagues mention a client on Facebook when they go home in the evening? And is your recruitment policy clear about whether a YouTube clip of a candidate drunk should affect the decision to hire them?

Here are our tips for developing an employee social media policy that will both protect and add value to your business.

*Please note: these are guidelines only. Any social media policy should be checked and approved by your HR and legal advisers.*

### 1. Consult with your staff on what their needs and uses are

Your policy should reflect your business culture and values and help your employees understand what they can and can't do. Few managers will be able to imagine the whole range of ways that your employees are using social media and how it is impacting on their jobs. And it is changing by the month.

Bring together a steering group of employees to say how social media affects their jobs, where the cross-overs are between work and personal life and what they think the policy should include. They can also advise on tricky areas where there is no clear cut answer.

These employees can become your ambassadors to explain the policy once agreed and get buy-in from colleagues.

The steering group should meet once or twice a year to review developments in social media and revise the policy as needed.

### 2. Ensure social media is a part of your core business activities

Social media is still seen by many business leaders as something for 'teenagers'. And consequently social media activities are delegated to interns, the youngest recruit or a junior member of the marketing team because 'they have a Facebook account'.

Social media needs to be understood and managed by the senior management team – it has high risks as well as considerable opportunities. Rarely will a young employee have the skills needed to ensure it is used strategically.

You need social media to be a part of your core business activities – not an afterthought added on. It should be included in strategic marketing and internal communications plans. And these will guide what you need to include in your employee social media policy.

### **3. Define the dividing line between employees' work and private life**

This is rapidly becoming one of the most challenging issues for an organisation to decide.

On the one hand most of us instinctively say that a person's private life is just that, private. On the other when you are confronted on Google with evidence of your employee saying something shocking about your most important customer – most bosses would say that was unacceptable. Even if the post had been made in the privacy of their home.

A good example of why this is so important was when the new head of MI5 was exposed for a [major breach of security](#). It was not he, but his wife who put details of their holiday on Facebook, without any privacy settings.

What would you do if an employee posted on Facebook in the evening 'Had a s..t day at work. Had enough'

- If they mention the company name?
- If they don't mention the company name?

There is a Facebook group called '[You're Fired](#)' for employees who have been sacked for what they wrote on Facebook in their evenings. It would be a good exercise to look at these stories and decide, in principle, what you would have done in these circumstances – this will help you shape your social media policy.

### **4. How far do you want to control employee social media profiles?**

Most of the corporates we have worked with have decided that if an employee creates any social media profile which mentions they are an employee of their company, then this means they must follow corporate rules.

As an example, if they are on LinkedIn with their corporate job title

- they can only join LinkedIn groups that are relevant to the company or their job role – not ones, say, for classic car enthusiasts, if this is just a personal passion
- they can only post comments on their profile that are professional and business relevant
- they cannot tick the box that says they are looking for a job and are happy to accept job approaches

It could be argued that some of these are starting to infringe a person's private life. The Human Rights Act 1998 suggests that employees have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the workplace. It also gives a 'right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence'.

And it could be said that linking up with classic car enthusiasts is just another form of networking and might bring in new business.

All of this is for you to decide.

### **5. What counts for recruitment purposes?**

The Independent newspaper reported "At Cambridge, at least one don has admitted 'discreetly' scanning applicants' pages – a practice now widespread in job recruitment. A survey released by Viadeo said that 62% of British employers now check the Facebook, My Space or Bebo pages of some applicants and that a quarter had rejected candidates as a result. Reasons given....included concerns about excess alcohol abuse, ethics and job 'disrespect'."

This could potentially be regarded as a misuse of personal data, contravening the [Data Protection Act 1998](#).

You need to agree clear guidelines for anyone recruiting to your organisation. Questions to consider

- Is what someone does while a student relevant to their working life?
- Is it reasonable to look at whatever appears on a simple Google search?
- If you find a lot of photos at drunken parties – should that count?
- Do you have different rules for different levels of seniority and roles?

#### **6. Who should manage your social media accounts?**

Generally, corporate social media accounts are managed by the communications team who understand the protocol of social media and how to use it to build relationships with customers, suppliers and targets.

A few companies encourage all employees to use social media – particularly creative ones. A number of chief executives who are good communicators are starting to use Twitter to engage with employees and customers (though it has to be said some ceos are not as good communicators nor as strategic as they think they are!).

Whatever you decide, your social media policy needs to state who can have accounts and what they can and can't say.

You need to specify that whoever creates and manages any corporate social media accounts, must use a corporate password and registration details; keep a record of the password and ensure their manager and colleagues know what this is – to enable access over holiday periods and in emergencies.

There also needs to be a process for when employees leave a company that they hand over all site passwords and that these are changed.

#### **7. Disciplinary procedures**

You need to link your employee social media policy to other relevant policies, particularly your disciplinary procedures.

You will need to give clear examples of what will be regarded as gross misconduct, such as posting derogatory or offensive comments on the internet about your company or a work colleague. Acas research suggests that employers should weigh up the possible consequences of an employee's actions - for example, is an employee merely letting off steam or do their comments actually harm the organisation's reputation?

#### **8. Define who owns the content and contacts**

Most businesses will accept that LinkedIn contacts are personal to an individual and can be taken with them when they leave.

However, Hays [recruitment firm argued in court](#) that an employee's contacts were built through his job – and the court ordered the employee to hand them all over. What is your position?

#### **9. Consider the impact of regulation in your social media**

The most obvious issue here is for quoted companies. Say, an employee unwittingly announces information that could affect share prices. You can see how a junior manager might post on their

LinkedIn account “Really excited, major breakthrough today in version 3 of our product. Should be on the shelves within six months. You’re going to love it”.

You need to work through particularly sensitive regulatory issues for your business and identify potential threats. These should be specified and explained in your social media policy.

### **10. Reflect your business culture**

This is really important. There is no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to social media policies. They need to support your business plan and your values.

Social media can escalate issues – a customer complaint for instance. You need to give your employees very clear advice about what they can and cannot say and how to handle various scenarios.

Time and again, badly handled crises have gone viral. Look at the case of [Ryanair](#) and the comments their IT employees posted online. This is now a case study in just about any handbook or blog on how (not) to handle crisis management.

## **YOUR NEXT STEPS**

If you don’t yet have an employee social media policy or need to amend your existing policy in line with this advice, we have produced a template policy to help you. It covers all the areas raised above and more.

For just £250 you will get an ‘off the shelf’ employee social media policy with guidelines on how to adapt it for your business or organisation. The cost also includes an hour’s consultancy (either face-to-face or via Skype depending on location) to help tailor the policy for your business or organisation.

To request a copy of our policy template and book your consultation, please ring 01423 562400 or email [mail@northernlightspr.com](mailto:mail@northernlightspr.com).

Northern Lights PR also offers consultancy services to help you develop, get approval on, implement and communicate your employee social media policy, including

- Half day workshop with your board to articulate business needs and parameters
- Staff consultation strategy and campaign
- Fully researched and tailored employee social media policy for your business
- Internal communications strategy development
- Overarching social media strategy to help your business harness the power of social media whilst avoiding the risks

### **Contact us**

Northern Lights PR, The Coach House, 4 Rutland Road, Harrogate, HG1 2PY

[www.northernlightspr.com](http://www.northernlightspr.com)

01423 562400

[mail@northernlightspr.com](mailto:mail@northernlightspr.com)

Follow us [@nlightspr](#) on Twitter