

Blogging and the Workplace

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A recent issue of concern for employers is the proliferation of “blogging.” “Blog” is the abbreviation of the term “Web log.” Blogs are essentially on-line self-publishing tools that are used in any number of ways and for any number of purposes. One of the ways that people use blogs is as an electronic personal diary. The problem with an electronic personal diary is that it is posted on the Internet, and is available for wide dissemination. As with many personal diaries, there is a temptation to include thoughts and observations on a wide range of topics, from bloggers’ personal lives to their work lives.

One example of a blog causing an employer problems is with respect to an employee who left a large computer company in Seattle to take a new job with another in San Francisco. Having made the move, the employee decided the best way to keep his friends and family updated with news of his new life would be to create a blog.

After the employee went through the new employer’s orientation program, he made a number of negative comments about the process, and in particular, the celebratory party thrown for employees who had successfully completed orientation.

Given the amount of content on the Internet, you might think that finding a particular blog without having the specific web address would be like finding a needle in a haystack. While the analogy may be true, there are thousands of people who surf the web looking for interesting blogs. In the case described above, a popular industry news site discovered the blog and advertised its location. It did not take long before blog-watchers with an interest in that employer were viewing the blog and then linking their own websites to it. News of the blog spread exponentially, soon coming to the employer’s attention. The employee was promptly fired for the comments he had made.

Another incident involved a female airline employee posting to her blog suggestive pictures of herself, taken in (and out of) uniform. Again, interest in her site was fervent, and it came to the attention of the airline company’s management, with the same result as the employee described above.

Though the above two examples above lead fairly easily to the decision to dismiss, there are other examples that are not so clear. Certain industry groups have a following, which could be charitably described as fanatic. One example is a website known as HowardsForum.com, which is an on-line message board for those interested in cell phones and other forms of wireless technology. Last year, after industry rumours had abounded for weeks, pictures of a new cellular phone were posted to the website prior to the company announcing the new product. The company quickly became aware of the posting and surmised that an employee had taken the pictures of the product. The company investigated, reviewing previous postings by the author, who was known by the web handle “Jaxxx.” By reviewing personal comments made in previous messages, the company quickly discovered that Jaxxx was employed in Alberta.

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In this instance, Jaxxx was not fired.

Why was Jaxxx not fired? Perhaps the company decided to be forgiving. Or, perhaps it was concerned about generating a huge amount of bad publicity for its new product. As it turns out, people who take the time to write web postings about new cell phones are often the same people who will line up to be the first on their block to have the hot new technology. Such people are often key components of the marketing strategy when bringing a new product to market, as they will promote the product to their friends and neighbours. If a company wishes to get a favourable initial reception to a new product from this key demographic, it might not be a good idea to anger them.

This is the essential problem with blogging. For many companies, firing an employee who posts offensive content to the Internet is not as simple as making the decision and carrying it through. There are larger, and in some cases much larger, issues to be considered.

So what is a company to do? Many companies have already developed Internet policies which outline the proper use of the Internet, the type of material that is considered offensive, etc. It might be appropriate in this day and age for companies, especially companies that deal in technology, to implement an employment policy specifically dealing with blogging. We recommend that any such policy contain, at a minimum, the following:

- An explanation of the specific activities that will be considered to constitute blogging.
- A description of the type of blogs that are acceptable, and those that are not.
- A statement of consequences that will result for inappropriate blogging.

Like any employment policy, a blogging policy must be: distributed to employees, explained to them, unambiguous, consistently enforced and reasonable.

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