Growing popularity of social media creates need for organizational policies

Memphis Business Journal by Barbara Richman

The popularity of social media continues to grow as evidenced by ongoing publicity highlighting its benefits and widespread use. Employers are increasingly jumping onboard to ensure that their organizations maintain a competitive edge. While there is an awareness of the numerous benefits derived from the use of social media, employment-related downsides may be less fully understood.

It would not be surprising, for example, if an employer arrives at work one morning and learns that an employee has placed derogatory comments about the organization and co-workers on a social networking site. At the same time, another employer may find that a client's confidential information has been posted on a site for the "world" to see.

Situations such as these point out the need for organizations to provide guidance to employees in using this popular means of communication. Implementing social media policies is an essential step for employers to take in communicating their expectations.

The following are examples of information that can be incorporated in a social media policy:

1. Establish an understanding that the employee's use of social media (e.g. blogs, message boards, social networking sites, forums) may have employment implications if the communications involve the organization, regardless of whether they are posted on or off the job.

2. Inform employees that their online presence can reflect on the organization. Expect employees to use good judgment and be prudent in their actions.

3. Remind employees that online activities have the ability to enhance or damage their professional reputations. Explain that each posting can create a digital footprint that is lasting. Assist employees in understanding that they should avoid posting comments or pictures online if they would not want this content to appear on the front pages of newspapers or early morning talk shows.

4. Prohibit employees from involvement in harassment, discrimination or other behaviors barred by law or organizational policy.

5. Caution employees that they should not have an expectation of privacy while using the organization's systems and that all Internet data that is composed, transmitted or received will be subject to monitoring.

6. Express an expectation that confidential or proprietary information of the organization will not be disclosed. Require employees to obtain written authorization prior to posting the organization's logos, trademarks, intellectual property or similar information on personal web pages or other sites.

7. Explain that only individuals designated by management can state an organization's official position.

8. Inform employees of any limitations on personal use that the organization has established in regard to employees' involvement in social media activities during working hours.

9. Decide whether there is a need to restrict recommendations that employees post about co-workers and other business associates, such as supervisors endorsing the work of employees under their supervision. Be mindful that in the event of termination, an endorsement written by an employee's supervisor may be used as evidence against the employer.

10. Include language that establishes an expectation that policy violations may result in discipline up to and including termination.

11. Explain that it is not the organization's intent to address non-job related participation in social networking, blogging or similar activities.

12. Instruct employees to contact the human resources department and/or other specified personnel with policy-related questions.

The following are additional considerations in developing and administering the policy:

1. Design a policy that is in keeping with the needs and culture of the organization, understanding that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach that can be applied by all employers.

2. Decide whether to develop a separate social media policy or to include the guidelines in an existing Internet and e-mail policy.

3. Consider seeking the advice of legal counsel prior to implementing or revising a policy and at times when disciplinary situations arise. An attorney can provide necessary, up-to-date information on federal and/or state laws and court cases that can impact the organization's ability to restrict use, such as cases related to off-the-job activities and privacy rights.

4. Communicate the policy and obtain each employee's signature to confirm receipt. Decide whether to include an acknowledgment agreement that states that the employee has received, read, understood and agreed to comply with the policy.

5. Assess the need to provide training for supervision and employees on the contents of the policy and how to make distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable actions.

6. Recognize that the social media landscape is continuously evolving. Take steps to ensure that the organization monitors changes and makes policy revisions, as appropriate.

BARBARA RICHMAN is a senior consultant with HR Mpact, a Memphis human resource consulting firm. She can be reached at (901) 685-9084, (901) 496-0462 or barbara@hr-mpact.com.