

Blogs in the Workplace

The Power of Blogs

While some bloggers use blogs simply to share personal information, many use them as editorial platforms to generate discussion and support for political or social issues. The most popular blogs might be read by hundreds of thousands of people daily. Blogs are different from traditional Web sites because anyone can add a comment to the discussion as easily as they can send an email. In addition, it's simple for a blogger to link to a blog or to a specific posting on a blog. So if a blog or posting catches on, word can spread very quickly, and literally millions of people can read a post within hours.

In its annual "reputation quotient" survey of the reputations of U.S. corporations, Harris Interactive and the Reputation Institute recognizes "word of mouth" as an important influence on consumer opinions -- and includes blogs and the Internet as a key element in that word of mouth. In fact, blogs can influence public opinion so much that the term "alternative media" has been applied to them.

Blogs are being used positively in many workplaces as a tool to share information, for example, to keep permanent records of research and development efforts. Recognizing the PR and marketing power of the blog, some companies use them to keep careful watch on public sentiment about their company. A few even allow designated employees to manage personal blogs in order to improve face-to-face communication with the public.

The Down Side of Blogs

Blogs are as easy as email to use, and they usually have a light, conversational tone. This can tempt bloggers into sharing facts and opinions they might normally reserve for personal email. Once posted, the blog can, of course, be read by anyone in the world with Internet access. The same process that can quickly spread good news can spread bad news, lies, rumors, and misinformation just as fast. That can be a problem for employers.

In several cases, blogger-employees have misused blogs, intentionally or accidentally, to share information or opinions about their companies that should not have been made public. Bloggers who thought they were simply writing about their workday were fired for including details about security, product planning, or other proprietary information. Other employees have been fired for posting inappropriate comments about the company or their co-workers, supervisors, or subordinates. An airline employee was fired when she posted photos of herself in her official uniform, even though her blog did not say anything negative about the airline; in another case a high-tech employee was fired when he posted photos of a competitor's product being delivered to his company's loading dock.

Policies are Forming

A few organizations have taken the step of developing an official blogging policy. Some have forbidden employees to read or post to blogs on company equipment or time -- some even implementing filters that block access to blogs via the company Internet. But many companies are simply reminding employees to extend to blogs the same rules that apply to emails or other electronic communication. This means that employees should not post anything they would not put in a company email or say in person -- in private or in public -- or post anything illegal, harassing, or offensive. Blog posts should also follow organizational restrictions on protecting customer-confidential and restricted information. If personal blogs mention the organization or employment status, it must be clear that any opinions expressed are personal opinions and not those of the company.

Remember that company electronic communication systems are for company business only, and that all of your communications on these systems is subject to monitoring by the company. Unless you have specific permission to do so, limit your "blog time" -- both reading and posting -- to your home computer.

Questions and Answers

I like to read blogs on my lunch hour. Is this allowed?

As with any Internet use, occasional personal use is permissible. However, be aware that blogs are different from most Web sites because they allow you to easily post or reply to comments on the blog. Please refrain from doing this on company equipment or from your company user ID.

I've just relocated to a new city, and I want to start a blog to keep my family up to date about what I'm doing. Does the company care if I do this?

Starting a blog about your personal information is not against any company policy but an employee can inadvertently reveal important company information in the course of posting information about their day-to-day activities. Before you start your blog, speak to your supervisor about your intention in order to clarify potential issues and avoid future problems.

A co-worker showed me another employee's blog, and I was shocked to see that he had posted some unkind comments about me and other people in our workplace. He didn't use our real names, but he named the company and it's obvious who he's talking about. What should I do?

Employees should not post anything on a blog that is offensive or that could be considered harassment. Speak to your supervisor or the Ethics Office about what you have seen.

I read some negative information about our company on another blog. I want to respond and correct this information. May I do this?

Although your intention is to protect the company's reputation, you should not engage in this type of discussion on a blog. Discuss the information that you saw with your supervisor. If the company feels it is important enough to respond to, a designated company spokesperson will do so.