



Helping workers understand and follow social media policies



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Abstract While social media can have significant benefits for organizations, the social media presences and postings of employees can be problematic for organizations. This is especially true when employees have connections to co-workers and managers. Workers posting content deemed inappropriate or detrimental to the organization has led to a significant number of workers being fired for their social media behavior. To avoid such situations, organizations should create social media policies to guide employee content. Organizational implementation of social media policy is on the rise, but serious questions remain as to how to make it effective. One crucial question is how well employees know and understand their employer's policy. In this article, we discuss how to communicate social media policies to workers and help their understanding. To inform our recommendations, we draw on exploratory data from a sample of young adult workers regarding their knowledge of their own company's social media policies.

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1. The impact of social media behavior on employment status

When factory worker Ashley Heffran learned she had received a \$100 holiday bonus from her company, she turned to Facebook to praise her employer. She posted: "I was wowed by this today. Feels great to

be appreciated by your job." Before her shift ended, Heffran's supervisor informed her that she had been fired for violating the company's zero-tolerance policy for work-related social media posts (Galli, 2014).

Similarly, when journalist Kristopher Brooks received a job offer from the *Wilmington News Journal*, he announced it on his personal Tumblr blog. Soon after, Brooks was notified that his job offer had been rescinded because he quoted his offer letter and used the company's logo when making his announcement (Giang, 2012).

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In another example, Cheryl James had an emotionally charged shift at Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn, Michigan, when she was asked to treat an alleged shooter of police. After work she went to Facebook to blow off some steam. She posted that she had come face-to-face with evil, and hoped the cop killer would rot in hell. The post did not contain any direct information about the suspect's name, medical condition, or even the treatment hospital. Despite this, James was fired for her post because it was considered a violation of HIPPA privacy protections for patients and contained unprofessional content (Katarsky, 2010).

These cases, along with many others, illustrate situations in which employees were fired for unknowingly and unintentionally violating their companies' social media policies. Examples such as these highlight some of the practical problems employers encounter when dealing with employees' personal social media usage. Specifically, for the growing number of companies that choose to implement social media policies, questions arise as to whether policies are (1) properly drafted and/or (2) effectively communicated to workers. Oftentimes, the lack of effective social media policy communication and training is the root cause of termination cases.

In this article we offer advice to organizations on how best to communicate social media policies to workers. We draw on an exploratory study we conducted with young adult workers as to their knowledge—or more often, lack of knowledge—about their own organization's social media policy and its components. We discuss provisions organizations should include when drafting social media policies and the importance of enforcement so that workers better understand and appreciate such policies. In addition, we discuss how social media policies can be communicated through training programs and elements that can help these programs be effective. Finally, we conclude by suggesting future needs for research, theory, and guidance for organizations on the use of social media policies.

2. Why is there a need for social media policies in organizations?

Social media usage has grown exponentially in recent years. Approximately 73% of Americans engage in social networking, with sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn dominating the landscape (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Not surprisingly, personal social media usage has consequently become connected to the workplace (Schmidt & O'Connor, 2015). Weidner, Wynne, and O'Brien

(2012) found that 60% of employees were connected with a colleague through social media and 40% were connected with their supervisor. Meanwhile, Hawley (2014) found that approximately 50% of employees posted pictures, videos, or messages involving their employer, which equates to approximately 60 million U.S. workers using social media to discuss employment issues.

These behaviors may not be problematic in and of themselves, as organizations may permit or even encourage social media connections and posts, depending upon the industry. However, problems can arise when unprofessional or negative social media conduct is viewed by recruiters, colleagues, supervisors, or the public—such as in the case of Cheryl James. In addition, positive content posted by employees—like Ashley Heffran and Kristopher Brooks—may be problematic because the dissemination of company information may be at issue. Cases such as these have spurred the development and implementation of social media policies, principally so that companies can protect their professional reputations and proprietary information from exposure.

Proskauer Rose LLP recently found that 80% of the companies it surveyed currently have a social media policy in place (Rubenstein, 2014). However, there is no known applied research and little guidance for organizations regarding whether or not employees of companies with a social media policy are aware of its existence or understand its specifics. Previous research by Schmidt and O'Connor (2015), Whitfield (2013), and others has highlighted the many legal issues and cases involving worker discipline, as well as the impact various laws have had on workers who engage in personal social media usage.

Building on calls for research in the areas of employee perceptions and understanding of social media policy language, we conducted an exploratory study. Our findings suggest that employers need to do a better job in helping employees understand and apply their social media policies. We found that simply having a social media policy is not enough to influence or change worker social media behavior. These results inform many of the practical suggestions for organizations we put forth in this article.

3. The exploratory study

3.1. Nature of the study

The study participants were 166 employed undergraduates (60 men, 106 women) from a Midwestern United States university. They answered questions on their social media connections to co-workers, their behaviors related to talking about work

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