

HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGIC FORUM**DISCUSSION – SOCIAL NETWORKING****Social networking - friend or foe?**

There is no doubt that there is a place for social networking. On-line media that is used well could increase public confidence in local government. For both officers and Councillors, when it comes to reaching certain groups quickly, cheaply and directly on-line methods are hard to beat.

Social networking applications include, but are not limited to:

- α Blogs, for example Blogger
- α Online discussion forums, such as Ning
- α Collaborative spaces, such as Wetpaint
- α Media sharing services, for example You Tube
- α 'Microblogging' applications, for example Twitter.

Blogging

blog (a contraction of the term "web log" is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

Many blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject; others function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of many blogs.

Social Networking

Social networking is the grouping of individuals into specific groups, like small rural communities or a neighbourhood subdivision, if you will. Although social networking is possible in person, especially in the workplace or schools, it is very popular online. This is because the internet is filled with millions of individuals who are looking to meet other people, to gather and share first-hand information and experiences about any number of topics.

Barrack Obama, Gordon Brown and David Cameron all communicate via online media and social networking. CivicSurf is an advice booklet for councillors and other civic leaders on how to use blogs to communicate with their constituents and covers why, what and how to blog.

Standards for England that provides support and guidance to authorities and their members on the Members Code of Conduct and other ethical matters is keen to remind members that if they are blogging or communicating on-line in their capacity as a councillor their obligations to meet standards of conduct still applies.

Councillors that use social networking applications to help them in their work as a councillor are regarded as representing their authority and should aim to achieve the same high standard as they would in person.

However there are a number of things that could go wrong, an example of which was the story of a councillor who discussed two opponents deaths and how it might benefit his party on facebook, visible to all his contacts. Fellow members and the press were quick to disapprove and demanded an apology.

It should not be used for party political purposes or specific campaigning purposes as the Council is not permitted to publish material which 'in whole or part appears to affect public support for a political party' (LGA 1986)

It should not be for displaying confidential material that could breach Data Protection.

Advantages and Disadvantages for staff use

Social Networking has its uses in the workplace – again using it get to difficult to reach groups such as young people. It is also being used as a tool to enrich the information on candidates in recruitment.

However the TUC referred to the UK's Facebook users as ' 3.5 million HR accidents waiting to happen'.

Negative aspects include risks of the following:

- α employees time-wasting and lost productivity,
- α employers using information gained on such sites to make discriminatory decisions about vetting new employees or their promotion etc,
- α employees breaching the employer's confidentiality,
- α damaging the company's reputation by making defamatory statements about the employer, fellow employees or clients,
- α employees making known to the other millions of users what working for the organisation is really like in their opinion.

Real examples of what has happened include:-

- α Directory enquiries group 118 118 discovered workers were making comments about callers they had dealt with. The company investigated the workers who were involved and disciplinary proceedings followed.
- α Virgin Atlantic dismissed 13 cabin crew after disciplinary proceedings concerning messages on Facebook referring to passengers as 'chavs' and making jokes about them.
- α an employee was dismissed after less than a month in her job following her comments on a networking site on how boring her job was.
- α A prison officer was dismissed for gross misconduct after befriending former and current inmates on Facebook.

In order to prevent or minimise these 'accidents', what should an employer do? The short answer is that employers must have an effective Internet and communications policy which specifies the web use that is, and is not, acceptable.

Sources

Cambridgeshire CC Social Network & Blog Policy

Warwickshire CC Social Networking Policy

www.civicsurf.org.uk

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

I:\Windows\temp\CIPD - Data protection surveillance and privacy at work.htm