

What are the advantages and disadvantages of social networking sites? What should we include in a policy?

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As it relates to social networking in the workplace, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Benefits of social networking platforms vary based on platform type, features and the company itself.

Social networking platforms may allow organizations to improve communication and productivity by disseminating information among different groups of employees in a more efficient manner, resulting in increased productivity. While it is not meant to be all-inclusive, the list below outlines some of the possible advantages and disadvantages.

Possible advantages:

- Facilitates open communication, leading to enhanced information discovery and delivery.
- Allows employees to discuss ideas, post news, ask questions and share links.
- Provides an opportunity to widen business contacts.
- Targets a wide audience, making it a useful and effective recruitment tool.
- Improves business reputation and client base with minimal use of advertising.
- Expands market research, implements marketing campaigns, delivers communications and directs interested people to specific web sites.

Possible disadvantages:

- Opens up the possibility for hackers to commit fraud and launch spam and virus attacks.
- Increases the risk of people falling prey to online scams that seem genuine, resulting in data or identity theft.
- May result in negative comments from employees about the company or potential legal consequences if employees use these sites to view objectionable, illicit or offensive material.
- Potentially results in lost productivity, especially if employees are busy updating profiles, etc.

Employers do have the right to simply ban all computer activity that is not work-related, but this approach may not yield optimal results. If employees are to be allowed access to social networking platforms, then a comprehensive and well-defined policy should be established to prevent abuse.

Social networking use policy generally includes the following elements:

- Defines what social networking is particular to your organization, so employees know exactly what is meant by the term.
- Establishes a clear and defined purpose for the policy.
- Communicates benefits of social networking and of having a policy.
- Provides a clear platform for educating employees.
- Takes into consideration any legal ramifications of not following laws.
- Refers to proprietary and confidential information at risk.
- Talks about productivity in terms of social networking.
- Provides guidance regarding social networking outside of company time/property that could be associated with the company, employees or customers. Some employers may prohibit posting of company information on social networking sites without explicit consent.
- Outlines disciplinary measures to be taken for policy violations.

What may be the most concerning aspect of social networking platforms is that they encourage people to share personal information. Even the most cautious and well-meaning individuals can give away information they should not; the same applies to what is posted on company-approved social networking platforms.

Employees may not be aware of how their actions online may compromise company security. Educate employees as to how a simple click on a received link or a downloaded application can result in a virus infecting their computer and the network. Advise them not to click on suspicious links and to pay careful attention when providing personal information online. Remember that just because employees may have an online profile, it doesn't necessarily mean they have a high level of security awareness.