

Facebook and Personal Boundaries

Cissy Pau | Image: Antony Hare | Published: May 05, 2010



Achieving employee productivity in the age of social networking. 3 tweets
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Every generation of new technology brings a new challenge to office managers. In the days before the personal computer, it was a relatively simple matter of figuring out how much time was appropriate to spend on personal phone calls at work. Then along came email, and it became more difficult to draw the line between business and personal use. With the newest wave of technology – social media coupled with instant information via smartphones – the line becomes almost impossibly blurred.

For some employers, social networking really has no legitimate part in the employee's workday. Others view social networking as integral to the company culture and encourage employees to create company buzz through Twitter, Facebook and other online networks. So where do you draw the line? Banning social media outright probably isn't a realistic option,

nor is throwing open the doors to all-day tweeting, chatting, texting and posting. Finding a balance between personal networking and company productivity will depend on your company culture, employee needs and customer expectations.

Consider Okaki Health Intelligence, a company that analyzes national health data. Staff are located throughout Canada, and all work virtually. Employees set their own timelines and deliverables, and as long as these are met, they are free to work when they want, where they want, however they want.

"My employees tell me what is realistic for them to accomplish, and I hold them to what they tell me," says Farees Kara, Okaki's chief technology officer. There are no company policies related to personal emails, cellphone usage or social networking. The company provides a generous cellphone plan and, provided they don't exceed monthly airtime and data limits, employees are free to use their phones as they wish.

Kara believes that his employees are more productive when they set their own schedules. "If they want to update Facebook and spend time with their kids and then work after the kids go to bed, that's fine," Kara asserts. "However, they better have done by our weekly phone call what they said they would have done."

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Pacific Woodworking, an architectural millwork manufacturer, where the majority of employees work in a shop environment. "We are not uptight, and we understand that employees sometimes need to deal with personal issues at work," says co-owner Mike Harskamp. "However, the personal use of cellphones is discouraged and there are no computers on the floor." By extension, social networking is limited to personal time. To accommodate staff, the company has set up public computers in the staff lunchroom that are available for personal reasons during breaks.

Determining a policy that works for your company starts with asking what is necessary for employees to effectively perform their job. A recruiter, for example, may benefit from using her social network to communicate vacancies at her company. Production workers in that same company probably don't need to update their status on Twitter as part of their jobs. Company practices must suit the roles of each employee.

Employee self-discipline and maturity also play a part in determining how restrictive company practices need to be. "We only hire mature, responsible staff who don't take advantage of the freedom," says Kara. Formulate guidelines that seem appropriate to work needs and employee expectations. Relax the guidelines if employees need more leeway or enact more formal rules if there is abuse.

Whether choosing an unrestricted approach like Okaki, a controlled approach like Pacific Woodworking or something in between, the overriding goal must be to create a work environment that engages all employees and inspires them to achieve top performance.

Cissy Paul is principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting Inc. in Vancouver.

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