



Getting Ahead of the Social Media Risks in the Workplace

Most employers today leverage social media to improve communications internally and externally. With the advantages come many risks which need to be anticipated and managed to minimize the potential for business disruption or reputation damage.

Social media has grown and expanded, and crossed the dividing line of being a means for communicating with friends versus serving as a workplace collaboration tool. Once it crossed that line, employers found that there are many advantages to using social technologies, including improving communication between stakeholders, improving customer services, enhancing collaboration among coworkers and between employees and supervisors, increasing employee engagement, and supporting employee recognition and reward systems. With so many advantages, it is easy to lose sight of the employer challenges and risks, until the customer complaints get the company on the front page of a newspaper or a manager sends a racist tweet which goes viral. Though reputational risk is high on the list of risks, there are others just as serious, like cyber-attacks, data breaches, and theft of employee's personal data. Employers must be proactive in identifying and mitigating the risks or suffer potentially severe consequences to the brand and/or operations.

Risks in Every Direction

Auditors around the world were asked in the 2013 Protiviti Internal Audit Capabilities and Needs Survey what they consider the highest risks of social media. Auditors named brand and reputational damage, data security, data leakage, regulatory and compliance violations, viruses and malware, employee defamation, loss of employee productivity, loss of intellectual property, financial loss, and interrupted business continuity. The name "social media" sounds innocuous but presents serious risks to companies.

Governance of social media is an ongoing issue because employers must find a balance between protecting the company's reputation and data with leveraging social media to get the most benefits. One of the first steps the employer should take to get ahead of risks is a complete review of the social media system, from who has access to what it is used for to security systems. If the review reveals any deficiencies in technologies, or policies and procedures, they need to be corrected. Many employers have still not implemented a formal social media governance program because the very nature of social media is that it allows free communication and information sharing. Employees need to understand that social media for work purposes is different than social media for personal purposes.

One of the challenges of managing social media is that most business functions now use it, and early adopters have likely developed their own procedures. Marketing is communicating with different stakeholders than sales or Human Resources, for example. Organizational policies should cover what is important to the business as a whole, and procedures need adaptation to adhere to policies. One approach companies have taken is creating a social media working group, and every function using social media has a representative on the group. Otherwise, it is too easy for something to slip through the cracks.

Assigning Adequate Resources

Getting ahead of the risks requires diligence in the review process. Right permissions, approvals, and access to social media need clear definition. The corporate network needs adequate security to minimize unauthorized intrusion but also to prevent confidential information from inadvertently being leaked. Committing the right level of resources to security is critical. Appropriate security assets can stop social media users from accidentally introducing viruses and malware into the system and can prevent criminal activity.



Providing employee training on corporate policy and procedures is essential to social media management. The policies and procedures need to stay current though because new technologies present new risks. For example, live streaming on social media sites is gaining ground. While it may be nice for organizational members to see streaming of an employee recognition event or the CEO giving a motivational talk, it is not nice to see a scandal taking place in real time.

Know the Law and the Lay of the Social Media Land

The risks mentioned by the auditors include the potential reduction in productivity. Supervisors cannot look over every employee shoulder. It is possible to invest in software that produces data and statistics that inform managers of employee online activity. Monitoring software can also find all mentions of the organization online, and that has already led to employees being terminated. Knowing the laws impacting social media is of the utmost importance. What employees say during their off-hours on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites can have a direct bearing on the organization.

It is a fine line at times. The National Labor Relations Act protects employees who discuss working conditions with another employee. It does not protect offensive remarks or racial slurs made against other people. However, there are states that have passed laws protecting the rights of employees posting on their own time, as long as the posts are legal. Hate speech is never protected.

There is no way to eliminate all risks associated with social media. Social media is here to stay, and savvy organizations are ensuring it is treated like other asset investments. The ROI needs measuring. For example, if social media is used for attracting potential hires, the ROI is an increase in the number of diverse hires with the right skills, knowledge, and experience. The appropriate ROI calculation depends on the way social media is used in the organization. It can increase productivity, increase sales through marketing, reduce the time it takes to respond to customers, increase employee collaborative activity, increase engagement of clients, and promote diversity and inclusion. The measurement process itself can play a role in controlling risks because of the data collected and analyzed.

Here to Stay

The fact that social media challenges are found internally and externally has made the education of employees on policies and procedures, and the investment in high quality security and monitoring systems, the primary risk mitigation strategies. The Society for Human Resource Management advises organizations to develop a comprehensive and well-defined social media policy. It might be tempting for some employers to ban social media in the workplace, but that is not realistic if interested in attracting Millennials and H Generation Z talent. As always, the business culture plays a big role in encouraging employees to maintain integrity and honesty in their work-related behaviors, whether using social media in the workplace or on personal time.