

# Social responsibility

## How to manage the benefits and risks of social media in the workplace

As the number of people and businesses using social media continues to proliferate, workplace social media policies are getting more attention.

“It’s important to craft a written social media policy that protects a business without infringing on employee’s rights,” says Stephen Goldblum, a member at Semanoff Ormsby Greenberg & Torchia, LLC. He advises having a legal expert help establish a clearly defined social media policy.

“An employment lawyer who drafts personnel policies can help create a social media policy suitable to your business’ needs,” he says.

*Smart Business* spoke with Goldblum about the benefits and risks of social media, as well as the importance of a written social media policy.

### What are some of the most popular uses and types of social media in the workplace?

There has been an explosion in the growth of social media and it has changed the way people communicate, both at home and in the workplace. Some of the most popular examples of social media include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube and Pinterest.

Companies can benefit greatly from the use of social media, but there are also significant risks, which is why it’s so important to have a well-articulated social media policy. Even if a business doesn’t have a social media presence it can still be affected by what people, including its own employees, post about the business.

### What benefit does social media offer?

All businesses can capitalize on the use of social media. One example is the recruitment of employees. Over the past several years, outlets such as LinkedIn and Facebook have become an important part of

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the recruiting process for many companies. Also, social media allows a business to communicate with current employees as well as the public to drive existing or prospective customers to its website or physical location.

### What are the risks associated with social media?

One of the biggest risks is that people misuse social media while at work. For example, employees may inadvertently or intentionally disclose confidential or proprietary information about their employer through social media, or publish negative or false information. Employees may also waste time on Facebook or YouTube rather than concentrating on their assigned responsibilities.

The social media phenomenon can be a liability for businesses. For example, social media can be a source of discovery in employment discrimination cases. In fact, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recently ruled that a claim of racial harassment made through a coworker’s Facebook postings could go forward. It’s also important to note that personal information that companies glean from social media cannot be used to make employment decisions. Although most businesses know that questions about a person’s background are generally not permissible in a job interview, significant

information about a person’s race, gender, religion, national origin and age can be gleaned from a person’s use of social media, which creates a risk for discrimination lawsuits if this information is used in the hiring process.

### Why are written social media policies important?

It is incumbent upon businesses that they have a well-drafted social media policy that is distributed to employees so they know in advance what is expected of them. The policy must clearly state whether social media usage is allowed at work, and if so, under what circumstances. The organization should articulate its social media goals, including what it uses social media for and what it expects to get out of its use of social media. Employees must understand that they are responsible for the things that they post on social media and must clearly understand the legal impact that their actions can have on the company. Employees must understand the need to exercise good judgment and to protect the company from the disclosure of its confidential and proprietary information. Finally, it’s important to outline the consequences for failing to abide by the policy, which might range from a warning for a minor infraction to termination for a more significant violation of the policy. ●