

# SOCIAL MEDIA SECURITY POLICIES: GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Nipul Patel, Purdue University North Central, [npatel@pnc.edu](mailto:npatel@pnc.edu)  
Hetal Jasani, Northern Kentucky University, [jasanih1@nku.edu](mailto:jasanih1@nku.edu)

---

## ABSTRACT

*The introduction of Social Media into the workplace has created the need for a new way of thinking for employers. Social Media's growth into corporations has opened opportunities and benefits that many corporations did not foresee in the past. However, the use of these services has also created many risks for the company's reputation and has developed vulnerabilities in corporate culture and security policies. Some risks are so great that businesses are putting an all out ban on the use of the Social Media services. This paper examines the impact of social networks on corporate culture as well as on corporate information security policies. Guidelines are offered for an organization to enhance their presence with social networks as well as employee participation.*

**Keywords:** Social Networks, Social Media, Information Security, IT Security Policies, Privacy Policies, Human Resources

A 2008 Network World publication states, "Nearly one in four businesses block employee access to social networking Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace, according to a survey of about 200 human resources professionals" [2]. Some organizations are taking lighter approaches to reduce risk, which allows them to take advantage of the many benefits social networking provides. While there are many theories on whether corporate policies should control the use of Social Media by employees, the goal of

any company will be to assess their tolerance of risk and develop guidelines that maximize the benefits. Social Media has reshaped the way businesses are represented. To take advantage of the Social Media and its many benefits, the risks must be carefully monitored and measured.

There are numerous reasons why a business would want to take advantage of social media. It provides direct access to customers. Companies are trying to monetize social media and also develop real relationships with their customers. Many of the recent social media tools have allowed this direct access to customers, but it has also developed many problems for those companies who want to jump into social media. According to a PRweek commentary, FedEx recently developed an advertising offensive against UPS. Their tool of choice was the use of Social Media like YouTube, Twitter and blog posts. It was a campaign that lasted months and was said to be very successful at promoting their objectives [1]. Social Media provides a fast way to post information. Not only that, it also provides a fast way to retrieve information. Companies can get instant feedback to their clients and customers.

Social Media is also being used as a tool for hiring and recruiting. This gives the employer a chance to find out more information about a potential employee prior to hiring them. Sites such as Facebook display much of your personal information publically by default. Through privacy settings you can hide

certain information from the public but not all of it. This means that someone's age, sex, friends, disabilities, religious views, political preferences, and race could potentially be used by the employer. This leaves a concern for discrimination. While discriminating against potential hires is unlawful, the use of social media provides a much easier way to not get caught. A recent Law Office Management & Administration Report publication discusses some ways employers can use Social Media effectively with new hires [7].

- ✓ *Applicants should be screened uniformly using only lawful information*
- ✓ *If the company does not have the resources to screen the applicants in this manner, then they should resort to more traditional methods*
- ✓ *The person(s) screening the potential employees should be in a non-decision making position and should only report the lawful information to the person in the decision making role*
- ✓ *Employers should document reasons for hiring*
- ✓ *Employers should consult a counsel before making the hiring decision*

The misuse of Social media in the hiring and recruiting process can have very hazardous consequences. The tips above provide a way to reduce the risks of these sites, but do not always eliminate the potential of unlawful discrimination. The benefits of successfully implementing a more informative screening process are obvious. Potential employees' attitudes toward work, personal qualities, and even values can be discovered. In doing so,

employers have an opportunity to more efficiently screen applicants, thus improving the reliability and quality of the applicants they hire.

Social Media also gives businesses an advantage to their employees because they can have an open environment to discuss ideas, collaborate, and interact. IBM is one company that advocates the use of social media to its employees. They encourage each employee to explore the internet and take part in the blogosphere. An article titled "IBM Social Computing Guidelines" posted on IBM's website states, "Whether or not an IBMer chooses to create or participate in a blog, wiki, online social network or any other form of online publishing or discussion is his or her own decision. However, emerging online collaboration platforms are fundamentally changing the way IBMers work and engage with each other, clients and partners"[5]. Companies like IBM recognize the empowerment Social Media provides to its employees. Embracing this empowerment instead of banning it was the idea of IBM. But IBM did, however, recognize the importance of some computing guidelines so that it could maintain its professional image. To tackle this challenge, IBM created a wiki in 2005 to be used as a guide for those who wanted to blog. Collectively, the employees discussed the rules and guidelines that would be built to guide online Social Media usage. Today, IBM lists an executive summary of IBM's social computing guidelines on their website.

A closer look at the meaning of Social Media will immediately raise red flags in the legal department of almost any company. Social Media is most commonly referred to as tool that allows media to be shared freely. It's usually the job of the

communication department and the public relations department to act as representatives of the company. With the introduction of Social Media, websites such as LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube and Facebook, are being used by employees from all departments. This means the company no longer has control over the image the company wants to portray. A recent publication, "the biggest risk of social media in the workplace is external employee misuse: Employees can easily make unauthorized disclosures of confidential company information, such as trade secrets, proprietary information, and personnel matters"[7]. This type of information could tarnish a company's strategy and reputation.

Someone may question as to why the discussion of company information outside of work environment is important when the information is posted under the personal account of an employee. The problem develops when the public cannot distinguish if the content expresses the views of the company or the employee. This presents a whole new set of problems since many consumers find information on social media information so attractive. One common problem stemming from this is where the reader of this personal content associates the information as a view of the company. While this would seem to be a freedom of speech, this type of speech can lead to other, more hazardous problems. A recent Personnel Today article discussed a situation where the FTC had taken actions against a company who failed to establish procedures on how to deal with online Social Media, which had resulted in a consumer injury [6]. It was clear that no policies were in place to inform employees that the disclosure of such information could be unethical or even illegal.

The next risk is probably the most common in any company. The use of Social Media affects the productivity of employees. Monitoring the use of computer games, personal phone calls, and other non-work related activities is being extended to monitor the use of Social Media. Another potential risk is the internal disputes. Social Media provides a place for less formal communication which could lead to misunderstandings, harassment, and awkward or inappropriate discussions. As the use of Social Media grows within the company, the lines between professional and personal discussions can be easily blurred. In a recent McClatchy Tribune Business News wire feed, it was explained that a woman was working for a company that used social media. After posting a comment on Facebook reading "hogtie this swine flu." The exchange of comments following the post grew into an argument over sick days and company policy. The woman and two other workers were fired for the exchange. This highlights the need for a distinction between private and professional conversation [3]. Corporations are now faced with the challenge on how to make these distinctions on social networks.

It is clear that businesses must address the risks that Social Media presents. In a 2010 Personnel Today publication, the author lists several guidelines on how to establish these corporate Social Media Policies [6]:

- ✓ *There should be a separation of social network policies and general technology policies*
- ✓ *Make all employees aware there is no exception of privacy when using their resources*
- ✓ *Address privacy and data security in policies*

- ✓ *Consider prohibiting the use of social media to harass, discriminate, or violate the law*
- ✓ *Make all employees aware of the disclosure employees must include when using Social Media*
- ✓ *These policies should be written, implemented, and monitored*

Some companies may have no need for Social Media, in which case the overall ban of Social Media sites may be the best option. A recent HR Focus journal has indicated that a survey of 1,400 CIOs released by Robert Half Technology found that 54 percent of US companies have taken actions to ban employees entirely from using social networking sites [9]. In this study, it was also found that the primary reasoning behind the ban was due more to the loss of production rather than due to legal concerns. However, the overall ban on the use of Social Media is not all encompassing and can have some negative effects. According to a Personnel Today publication, "By banning Facebook, you might not be doing yourself any favours; you could be in danger of isolating your staff and sending out the message that you don't trust them" [10]. It also does not cover external use of Social Media. To address this issue, employees should be encouraged to disclose that their opinions are the opinions of the writer, and not those of the company when discussing information about the company.

Some businesses are reluctant to join social media marketing for reasons beyond the risks of production loss and legal risks. Some businesses are not sure how or if a social media marketing campaign would bring a return on their investment. A great amount of effort may go into developing the proper environment

and policies to guide a social media marketing campaign. Yet, it is still difficult for companies to make this investment, because there are very little ways to measure the ROI. There are currently few, strong metrics tools available. Even if there were metrics in place to measure the impact of the social media marketing, it would be an added cost the company would need to adopt. In short, a social media marketing effort is no small task. Because of this, many businesses have decided to avoid social media, until it's developed stronger evidence of its success.

When IBM encouraged their employees to participate in the web, the social computing guidelines were created to protect not only the company, but also the employees. A summary of these guidelines is provided on their website. These twelve guidelines are fairly common; however, several prove to be very useful. IBM's third guideline tells you to identify yourself (name and role). It also asks you to write in first person so that it is clear you are speaking the opinions of yourself and not of the company. IBM's fourth guideline goes hand in hand with their previous. If they are to make a posting about IBM on any site outside of IBM, a disclaimer must be posted with the writing reading "The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent IBM's positions, strategies or opinions" [5]. Guideline number ten requests that IBM employees be mindful of their association with IBM. IBM asks that each post is consistent with how you want to represent yourself and colleagues at IBM. As discussed earlier, Social Media sites can cause a strain on productivity. IBM's last guideline addresses this issue very tactfully by asking that the employees try to add value and worthwhile information to their posts [5].

Overall, these guidelines encourage the use Social Media, while also putting the responsibility of representing the company in the hands of those who use these services.

In many companies, the communications or public relations department are those that represent the company. These departments provide a centralized way of controlling the image of the company. It can also be viewed as bias of the company by the public. When employees are able to speak out, the public sees this as an alternate and much more attractive source of information. Thus, the employees can sometimes have a much more powerful representation of the company. Many companies see transparency as being good for public relations, but as an employee of any business, you may have access to the intellectual knowledge and business strategies of that company. Thus, the company allowing the use of social media is taking a large risk of letting this intellectual knowledge become public knowledge. As an employee, you are being trusted with that information and should be guided on how to use it on Social Media websites, just as you would on any other media.

To govern Social Media appropriately would mean that a company does not restrict the rights of those opinions expressed by the employees. It would be misleading to the public to not distinguish the views of the company and the personal views of the employees. This is why companies like IBM have added guidelines on how to post external content when referring to the company they work for. Not only does this protect the company, but it can also protect the person that posts the content. The internal use of social media can be monitored more closely,

but should companies govern its use? With the risks addressed earlier, it is clear that some restrictions must be put into place to prevent discrimination, discourage the abuse of inappropriate and over use, and avoid the loss of the companies' intellectual knowledge. Just as there are restrictions and guidelines on other forms of communications, Social Media should not be treated as an exception. A recent Wall Street Journal post stated, "Only 17% of U.S. businesses actually have a social-media policy for employees" [8]. This could mean that potential 83% of businesses in the U.S. that do not ban Social Media are allowing employees to have total freedom on social media networks. This puts the company's reputation and employees at risk.

Many companies boast that they give each employee a right to voice their ideas. A ban against all Social Media could create a bad corporate culture and lead to a loss of trust from the employees. In a recent Accounting Office Management & Administration Report publication, it was stated that Intel addressed this risks of Social Media cautiously. They started with the use of internal tools such as an intranet and blogs. This prepared the employees on how Intel wanted these posts to be positioned as well as how to avoid the loss of intellectual property. After its success, Intel integrated several other forms of blogs. This publication also cited Jackie Medeck, a senior attorney with Intel saying, "One of the things Intel did was to create a Social Media Center of Excellence," and "This is an internal group whose goal was to empower people, but also to institute guidelines and procedures so that we were protected as a company" [6]. This freedom allowed the employees to express their thoughts and ideas through a well guided and monitored system. The

advantages were the collaboration of ideas, broadened audience, increased reputability, and greater employee satisfaction.

Through the use of social media, it appears that the employees must act as representatives of the companies. The readers of social media content cannot distinguish views expressed by the person or the company, unless otherwise specified. This is why there is a need for social media to be governed by corporate policies. However, to what extent can companies govern the policies? The example about Intel provided earlier was a good example of setting boundaries for the employees. Intel had setup guidelines to allow an employee to talk about the company outside of the in-house developed social media tools, but in doing so they would be required to indicate that the views were those expressed by the individual and not of the company. This gives the readers of this media, a clear indication of where the information is coming from, as well as its context so the readers are not misled.

Mashable.com, a website that follows social media trends, reported that Reuters released a Social Media policy of their own. This policy instructs journalists to avoid bias online, tells them not break stories on Social Media first and instead breaks news via news wire, and also provides recommendations on how to utilize websites such as Twitter and Facebook. In some cases, journalists are even asked to get manager approval before posting to Social Media [4].

### CONCLUSIONS

Generally, the corporate world still does not see Social Media as a reliable and credible source of information. However, it is a way to provide

transparency, increases the speed of communication, encourages collaboration, and contributes to the ease of access of information. Thus, the popularity of social networks has grown rapidly. Some businesses have chosen to ban social media use all together, but these bans restrict the employees' right to speak out, could discourage trust, and inhibit the organization from taking advantage of the many benefits that the Social Media can provide. While there are many theories on whether Social Media is necessary in each organization, the goal of any company should be to assess the tolerance of risk and develop guidelines that maximize the benefits. To take advantage of the Social Media and its many benefits, these risks must be carefully monitored and measured. Proper usage of social media guidelines should be developed and implemented prior to establishing presence with social media network.

### REFERENCES

1. Bovim, E. *As it relates to social media, corporate reps aren't getting the right message*  
PRweek, 1 Mar. 2010
2. Brodtkin, J. *One in four firms block Facebook*  
Network World, 21 Jul 2008
3. Christie, T. *Posting problems: Social Web sites create issues for employers, employees.*  
McClatchy - Tribune Business News, 7 March 2010
4. Grove, J. *Reuters to Journalists: Don't Break News on Twitter.*  
<http://mashable.com/2010/03/11/reuters-social-media-policy/>  
Last accessed 21 Mar. 2010
5. IBM, *IBM Social Computing Guidelines.*  
IBM  
<http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html>  
Last accessed 21 Mar. 2010
6. Ingham, J., *Could Social Media Be Putting Your Firm at Risk?*  
Personnel Today, 10 Mar. 2010
7. Jackson, R., *Social Media: Counsel for Clients and Firm Managers.*

- Law Office Management & Administration  
Report 1 Apr. 2010
8. Jones , D., *Opportunities to Make Business Better.*  
Wall Street Journal (Online) 19 Mar. 2010
  9. Moss, R., *Controlling the Legal Risks of Social Media,*  
HR Focus, 1 Mar. 2010
  10. Vorster, G. *Firing off... social networking - should employers ban facebook?*  
Personnel Today, 18 Sep. 2007