



COMMUNIQUE

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORKPLACE A MUST READ FOR EVERYONE WHO POSTS

By Robin Person

Narisha Smithson* is experiencing some challenges at home, she fell on her way to work, and she is having problems focusing in the workplace. Her day is not going very well. The icing on Narisha's cake comes when she is called into her manager's office to discuss additional job duties that will be assigned to her. Narisha was already stressed enough before the meeting with her manager. She needed to vent, but she was at work and didn't trust her co-workers.

Narisha went home and still could not shake her anger of the day. She signed onto Facebook and figured there would be little harm in venting, as her comments would fall into the category of "free speech" — and besides, her Facebook friends do not know her manager anyway.

Narisha told herself she would be on Facebook on her own time and that her friends would validate her feelings. Herein lies the problem, however. She not only referred to her supervisor by name in her post, but used all types of profanity as she vented. What Narisha did not realize is that one of her Facebook friends, who is also her friend at work, is a mutual friend of her boss. When she saw Narisha's post, the friend immediately sent it to the manager.

If Narisha thought she had a bad day at work earlier, she didn't realize what was headed her way. Her manager and upper management called her in for a meeting that required a Local 1180 representative defending her — not a simple task for obvious reasons. She was found guilty of her actions and as a result, was suspended for 25 days without pay, although the Union did save her job.

In a separate case, Brandi Beyer* developed health issues that were impacting her daily activity at work so she applied for time off through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Brandi had a difficult time with the application process, and although she was eventually approved, she felt stressed and in need of a vacation. She went to Florida to relax with her girlfriends, was having a great time, and shared the whole experience on Facebook and Instagram.

Needless to say, some of Brandi's friends at work were also connected to her via social media and showed her posts to management. When Brandi returned, she was approached by her manager for a meeting about her time off and she had to engage Local 1180 for assistance. Brandi had

charged her time off to FMLA, and as a result, was found guilty and suspended for 25 days without pay. As a result of Brandi's abuse of the system, her FMLA privilege was revoked.

Social media was born in the new millennium when Facebook was launched. According to recent research, people in the U.S. check their social media accounts a staggering 17 times a day, meaning at least once every waking hour, with the average user logging 1.72 hours per day. While you are checking your social media accounts, your boss can be, too. Management uses social media as a key tool not only in the job search process, but in "checking in" on their employees. When you become "friends" with your boss, or a co-worker follows you on Instagram, you are allowing them to get a glimpse of who you are outside the confines of the work environment. This is where it might behoove you to think twice.

While co-workers used to gather around the water cooler to gossip, now it's also done via social media. Your Wednesday night plans posted on Facebook can easily become food for fodder. People who are your Facebook "friends" might not be your friends in real life. Even worse is that co-workers and managers could take you less seriously, you could be skipped over for a promotion, or you might find yourself first in line when layoffs occur, all based on your unflattering social media activity.

Unfortunately, Local 1180 has been in the position numerous times of having to defend members caught in social media snafus. While the Union has had some success so far in fighting for members to keep their jobs, the following that appeared on maximizsocialbusiness.com sums it all up best:

"People get 'Facebook Fired' when they post things they should not be posting, and then a co-worker or worse, a supervisor/manager, sees it because they were Facebook friends. While the National Labor Relations Board and the Courts sometimes find ways to say that laws or 'free speech' should protect certain types of personal posts, videos, or photos, people often find ways to post things that are not protected, and they get themselves, and their Facebook friends, into hot water. For example, in a decision from May 2013, not even the NLRB could help an employee who participated in a Facebook 'group message' and posted, among other things that the employer is "full of [expletive] . . . They seem to be staying away from me, you know I don't bite my [tongue] anymore,

[EXPLETIVE (starting with "F")]. . . FIRE ME . . . Make my day . . ." And, guess what? The employer did just that and the General Counsel of the NLRB recommended that the employee's claim be dismissed."

The problem is multi-faceted. One, be extremely careful with your social media posts from work and from home. You never know who is going to see them. Two, even if you are using your own smart phone or tablet to post during a break from work, the reality is that you were posting during the work day. Recent trends show that while more than half of U.S. employers now block social media access at the workplace, it certainly does not prevent people from using social media on their own time from their personal portable devices brought to work. A large problem arises when workers access social media on their breaks, as it leads to the question of whether a break from work is considered personal time, or still work time.

Advancing technology has long been a catalyst for change in the workplace, in good ways and bad. Now social media is raising the stakes by disrupting the way we work, or don't work, as the case may be. If you have to think twice about what you are posting, then you should not be posting it. Remember that social media is a written trail that connects back to you and your family.

Before you "like" your friend's status update, consider whether your boss will like all the time you are spending on social media, or whether your post — however innocuous you think it might be — could be misinterpreted by the powers that be.

Almost everyone is on social media these days, including your boss and the HR department. Although Facebook has been around for 10 years, it seems people still haven't learned to think about how their posts could impact their careers. Take a look at your social media accounts; are you posting something that could lead to your termination? By now, most companies have social media policies. Do you know yours? If not, familiarize yourself with it. If your company doesn't have a formal policy in place — and even when they do — it's better to be safe than sorry by keeping the following guidelines in mind:

DO:

Be smart about what you post

It's obviously a bad idea to complain about your boss or co-workers or to say anything negative about your employer on social media. Gripping online may feel therapeutic, but it can also hurt your career.

Help shed a positive light on your employer

Many companies like to use your network to promote what they are doing and keep people engaged. So it's great to add all your new co-workers if you don't use social media as a place to vent or post what could be considered inappropriate or questionable material.

Be proactive and thoughtful

Make conscious decisions about which of your social profiles are public and which are private. A lot of new graduates choose to make Twitter public and Facebook private, but make those choices based on what you are most comfortable with and what you can stick with. Eliminate things you wouldn't want a superior to see.

Be authentic

There is a fine balance to be struck between being you and being inappropriate. Look to your new peers who have been at the company for a few months or years to see how they are walking that line.

Consider the following

Will you be able to stand in front of others and speak freely about your post without wavering? Is your post considered social media bullying or stalking? Would you be able to defend your post to a union representative, judge, or current or future employer if necessary? Is your post teetering on the edge of sexism, racism, gender bashing, etc.?

Remember

Social media is used by potential employers, law enforcement and in some cases, current employers. People put so much information on social media that authorities/employers can easily investigate and learn all about you before they ever meet you.

DON'T:

Friend co-workers you don't trust or your boss

Be careful about which co-workers you're friends with online as you never know how good a "friend" they really are. Since your boss can make your work life wonderful or miserable, avoid the latter by keeping social media out of the equation.

Complain about work

It's Thursday night and you have to stay late to finish an expense report while your friends are out tasting margaritas at a new happy hour hotspot. Yes, that's very frustrating. No, you should not share that anywhere on the internet. Keep your complaints out of the virtual world.

Be too casual

Make sure your posts reflect the best version of you. That means no catty comments, snarky replies, or mentions of hot button topics like religion or politics that might be inappropriate for some workplaces. Keep your language clean and professional.

Play hooky and tell

Whether it's cutting work for a doctor's appointment, to sleep late, or phoning in sick so you can catch a movie, make sure you don't post about your adventures where anyone might see.

Post about something illegal

Whether it's sharing a cocktail recipe if you're under 21, pictures with drug paraphernalia, or a silly pose with a stolen street sign that has your name on it, don't post about it publicly.

Post harmful information

Social media should not be used in the workplace or to harm anyone. The result of a potential harmful post can be considered unlawful and legal action could be taken against you.

When in doubt, use The Communique test:

If you wouldn't want it on the front page of the Communique, don't put it anywhere on the web!