

Social Media Uncertainties How HR Professionals Can Help

By **Donna Z. Wilkinson, CCP, SPHR**

Recently, I reflected on the many reasons I love the human resources profession. Ironically, these are some of the same reasons why I also find it frustrating and challenging to be an HR professional.

The list can be summed up in one word: uncertainty. The uncertainty of the profession keeps me on my toes; it is both exciting and unsettling. We deal with people, not widgets – and there is nothing more unpredictable than people. We also deal with legislation and are continually forced to interpret what it means – take, for instance, health care reform.

There is a topic I would like to discuss that I feel will absolutely change the way we all do business if it hasn't already: social media. Because of its relative "newness" and rapid rise, social media has created uncertainty for HR professionals and company leadership in general. This uncertainty includes employee social media use (do you restrict use or embrace it?) and how to integrate social media into the business (do you add it to your toolbox and go full tilt or simply wait and react as required?) Social media is changing the way our society communicates. If you haven't felt the effects of social media on your business, you will soon.

Crafting a plan

As HR leaders in our organizations, we have to prepare for this change by keeping our management team and our employees informed. This means participating in a conversation with our senior leadership regarding why we should care about social media, monetizing its importance in our business and establishing a social media plan for our company. I believe HR leaders should help prepare their employers by doing the following:

- Educating senior leadership about social media
- Discussing social media opportunities and challenges with management to determine the framework for a plan
- Developing and implementing a company-wide policy
- Training employees on social media (how it applies to their job/department and ways to avoid potential pitfalls)

Step one in this process is educating your organization's leadership on why this is something that requires their attention. When businesses start to talk about how they can better connect with their customers and what that means for

their revenues, it is very powerful. After this initial conversation and buy-in, creating a more detailed plan is the next step. This will likely involve various departments, benchmarking best practices and/or establishing a bigger interactive marketing presence within your organization to drive this initiative.

Policy development and roll-out comes next (or happens concurrently) and should reflect the culture of your organization as well as support the newly established social media plan. Employees should be reminded that all other company policies also extend to social media. The instantaneous and far-reaching nature of social media, along with its permanence, can broadcast brief lapses in judgment to much larger audiences for years to come. The basis for many of the social media "do's and don'ts" is nothing new – employees have always been accountable for their actions outside of work if their impact is felt at work. The introduction and rapid growth of social media use just adds a new twist to this accountability.

Employee preparation

The final and ongoing step in the establishment of a successful social media plan is employee training. Even the best plan will fail if individuals are not equipped to put the plan into action. This training should help remind employees that it is critical to think before they post – just as it is important to think before they speak. Employing common sense guidelines and educating staff about their expected behavior online is essential.

In addition, employees should understand how they can utilize social media in their positions and departments. This means that they should be aware of what they can and cannot do, who to obtain approval from if posting company information and be reminded that even inappropriate personal social media use can negatively impact both their reputation and that of the organization.

I urge each of you not to remain passive about this topic. It would be easy to do with seemingly more "pressing" issues that require your attention. Although a plan will not make you immune to problems, it will help you communicate to your employees what is expected of them and create a more direct dialogue with your customers.

Best of luck to you as you tackle the issue of social media within your organizations. Proactive work in this area will help you face this uncertainty with a comprehensive plan – and that resolute preparation just may give you a competitive edge.



Donna Z. Wilkinson

Searching for the 2011 HR Award Winner

Nominations for the 2011 Ogletree Deakins/HR Dimensions Human Resources Professional of the Year award are being accepted until March 25. The award will be presented during the Indiana Chamber's 47th Annual Human Resources Conference & Expo. Complete information and the nomination form are available online at www.indianachamber.com (membership tab/awards programs) or by contacting Jesse Brothers at (317) 264-7549.

INFORMATION LINK

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