

# Smell the COFFEE

If employers are concerned about what staff say about pay and benefits on social media, the best approach might be to join the revolution, says **Sam Barrett**

Whether it is breaking news of the royal wedding, the death of Osama Bin Laden or the celebrities behind the super-injunctions, there is no dismissing the power of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. But for employers that are used to controlling what is said about their organisation, such power can be daunting.

Michael Rose, director of Rewards Consulting, says: "With so much information out there and anyone able to comment on any organisation they like, employers are no longer completely in control of their brand. This new openness of information can be very worrying for some employers."

The Equality Act 2010 probably adds to the paranoia. One of the provisions introduced

last October makes pay secrecy clauses unenforceable. This means that, even if a confidentiality clause is included in an employment contract, employees can share information about their remuneration. Duncan Brown, principal in the rewards and engagement practice at Aon Hewitt, says: "We are in a very different world now. It is very difficult to keep anything confidential and employers need to think about how they should adapt to this new environment."

## Ban or embrace?

When it comes to social media, employers often react in one of two ways. The first is to clamp down on its use, banning it in the workplace and using the disciplinary process to deter staff from commenting on the organisation. The second is to accept it is out there and find ways to avoid employees seeing it as a means to vent their workplace frustrations.

Few see any sense in taking a hard line. Gareth Jones, managing director of BrubakerHR, says: "If you clamp down on it, it is just like a super-injunction. Employees will not like it and will feel the employer has something to hide. It is nothing new, either. Employees have been talking about their employers for years, but where it used to be a conversation [in] the pub with mates, it is now an online conversation with a much wider audience that could include fellow employees, customers, competitors and potential employees. You cannot control it, so make sure you get involved."

Andy Blacknell, UK practice leader for



## ANYTHING GOES?

- Many see a relaxed approach to social media as the best way to manage employees' use of it, but nobody believes that it should be a place where employees can say anything they like about their employer.
- If something is factually correct, an employee is probably entitled to disclose it unless it breaches the employer-employee relationship.
- Among the areas that would be in breach of the relationship are confidential information, such as trade secrets, and commercially sensitive information, such as customers' details.
- Employers should stress that the normal code of conduct applies to social media. A person can be held responsible for a comment made in a pub if someone overhears it. Social media is no different.
- The code of conduct can be refined further with a social media policy that outlines what employees should consider when they use social networks, helping employees to stay the right side of the line.
- It is prudent to make employees aware of the risks involved with social media. Once they say something on a social media site, they cannot take it back. Employees need to recognise this.

social media at Towers Watson, agrees. "If employers impose bans, it creates negativity and people will use [social media] on phones instead," he says. "It will probably drive even more gossip about the organisation."

In fact, there are advantages in allowing staff to use social media. The ability to share information and expertise makes it an ideal place to carry out research. Blacknell mentions a large pharmaceutical company that was able to shelve an expensive drug research project because of social media. "It used its enterprise social network to connect with other researchers in the organisation and found someone had already run the same research. It was able to stop it immediately, saving time and thousands of pounds."

"If employers impose bans, it creates negativity and people will use their phones instead"

*Andy Blacknell, Towers Watson*

But even if staff use social media to comment on their organisation, there can still be benefits for the employer. Jones says such comments should be regarded as a super-powered engagement survey. "It is instant, real-time feedback on the mood within the organisation," he says. "A smart company would dive on a customer that complains to find out what it has done wrong and how it can make amends. The same should be true when an employee is unhappy."

But there are signs more employers are softening their approach due to social media's advantages, and as people become more accustomed to it and the fear factor drops away. Keith Patrick, senior lecturer in information management at Westminster

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*Karl Roche, IBM*

Business School, says: “There can definitely be benefits, but they are playing with a double-edged sword, so [need to] make sure they are prepared and able to avoid the reputational damage it can cause.”

It is impossible to completely control what employees say about an organisation on social media, as the experience of at least one footballer with a super-injunction showed earlier this year. Instead, organisations need to think about how they can influence what is said about them.

### Business culture

Karl Roche, social media communications lead in IBM’s global systems and technology group communications team, says this should start with the organisation taking a hard look at itself. “Look at the business culture. If there are problems within an organisation, social media could simply magnify them. Resolve these first.”

Negative comments are likely to be about pay, benefits and working conditions, so an effective HR strategy is essential. Aon Hewitt’s Brown says employers must ensure their messages are clear and considered. “If employers put out unco-ordinated messages, it will

## ENTERPRISE SOCIAL MEDIA

- Operating an internal social network can encourage responsible use of social media as well as creating more effective communication across the workplace. To enable this, a number of enterprise social media tools, including Yammer, IBM’s Lotus Connections and Socialcast, have sprung up in the last few years.
- These have many of the features seen in Facebook and Twitter,
- including discussion threads, hashtags, and the option to follow someone, as well as blogs and forums.
- Unlike other social media, employers can decide the extent of the network. Often, this will be restricted to the organisation, but could include other parties, such as customers.
- Enterprise social media can bring significant benefits. If used properly, it can break down barriers in the workplace, enabling employees to share information and build relationships outside their usual network, office or country.
- However, although it is a work tool, employers have to keep some of the social element in it. If they want to encourage people to work together in this way, it needs to be a social activity.



create a less than positive reaction. Be clear and consistent and think about the criticisms that messages might generate.”

It is also important to brief line managers about messaging because they will often be the first people employees turn to if they discover, through social media, that they are paid less than a colleague or do not have the same benefits. Tim Ringo, partner at Maxxim Consulting, says: “It is not great for the individual or the organisation when employees start comparing salaries. They will not have all the information to explain any differences. Instead, make sure you and your managers can explain the differences.”

It is also sensible to have a social media policy in place so employees know what they can and cannot say online. IBM is a good example of this. It encourages all its staff to blog and use social media, seeing it as a valuable way to communicate, improve customer relations and shape product development. “We have social computing guidelines which explain what we expect our employees to do when they use social media,” says Roche. “These are reviewed annually and every

### IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, READ THIS...

- In recent months, the use of social networking sites such as Twitter has reached a new level, breaking news such as the death of Osama Bin Laden and the identity of public figures behind super-injunctions.
- In the workplace, this means staff have more freedom to comment on matters such as pay and benefits, making it harder for employers to control information in the public domain.
- An effective HR strategy can help to guard against negative messages being given out by staff.

## CASE STUDY

## Ellipse keeps up with the latest chat

Group risk insurer Ellipse has a very open approach to employees using social media in the workplace. Peter Fenner, marketing manager at Ellipse, says: "We ask employees not to use it on business [computers] as there is a risk it could spread viruses, but we do keep a couple of laptops off the network that they can use whenever they like."

"Employees use it in all sorts of ways. Some will catch up with their personal lives; others will do work-related research."

Ellipse is an active user of social media and has its own blog as well as using Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. It also introduced Yammer in the workplace earlier this year. "We are only a small company, but we were looking at setting up the intranet to improve internal

communications and Yammer offered us all the functionality we wanted," says Fenner. "It is much more direct and friendly than email, which has made a difference in the workplace."

Social media is also regarded as a valuable way to see how the company is perceived. "We do monitor what is said about us by anyone, including customers and employees," says Fenner. "It is a very immediate



way to see how the company is perceived and while the downside of social media may be that negative things can spread very quickly, we can respond quickly, too.

"If people are talking about you, they are talking about you. That has to be a good thing."

employee has an online education session to ensure they understand what they can do. We have seen too many terrible cases in other organisations where there has not been a policy in place and an employee has put something on Facebook that has got them sacked."

The guidelines, which are available on the blog section of IBM's website, cover areas such as confidential information, copyright and financial disclosure laws, referencing clients, partners and suppliers, and the use of disclaimers where information relevant to IBM is published in a personal capacity.

IBM runs an annual education process as well as keeping the guidelines on its website, but there are other ways to ensure staff know the rules. Some organisations put their rules on the landing page of social media

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*Tim Ringo, Maxim Consulting*

sites, and require employees to click to accept them. A policy is often self-policing, too.

Ringo says he has worked with organisations that have permitted the use of social media and none has sacked an employee for abusing it. "Social networks are just like any other social situation. If you say something silly, people do not want to hang out with you any more and users are fully aware of this."

Ultimately, no matter how much technology employers bring into the workplace, what employees say about them on social media boils down to a simple matter of engagement. "If you are a decent employer and are prepared to treat people fairly, it will not present a problem," says Rewards Consulting's Rose. "If you are not, watch out." **EB**

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