

When social networking becomes an occupational hazard



By Dan May, Operations Director at ramsac

Earlier this year a city trader at Goldman Sachs was reported to have spent 500 hours on Facebook in six months.

CURRENT RESEARCH SUGGESTS that he is not alone; with an estimated 233 million working hours being lost each month in the UK as a result of time spent on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo. Add this to the 164 million sick days taken each year and it is a surprise any work gets done at all.

Yet, it is not only productivity that is at stake. Most people will talk about the ups and downs of the working day in the pub or over dinner, but today these views are being expressed and broadcast to the world, and a private conversation between friends can soon spiral into a major workplace drama.

Banning the use of social networking sites during working hours (or personal internet use full stop) may have a positive impact on productivity, but balancing an individual's right to freedom of speech and the corporate and social responsibility that comes with being an employee is increasingly difficult to manage.

Below are some top tips for employees and employers that, if adhered to, will ensure that social networking can be enjoyed, without jeopardising your professional reputation, or that of the business.

Without wanting to sound patronising, it is important to think about what you write before you write it. Letting off steam to friends via Facebook when you didn't get the pay-rise you expected will provide a few seconds of satisfaction and a few comforting replies, but if you accepted your boss and colleagues as friends then you may as well be standing on your desk shouting. This brings me to my next point - don't get competitive for friends!

Everyone wants to appear popular and boast how many friends they have on their page, but if you don't want to share your personal views with your boss or your colleagues then keep your networking purely social.

Understand your company internet usage policy. If you are an employer without such guidelines, it is strongly advised that some basic rules are compiled and then published across the organisation. An

employer is well within their rights to ban employees from accessing sites such as Facebook during the working day, or on company hardware, as well as discipline those who break the rules.

Remember, even if you diligently keep your browsing and posting of comments to outside office hours a breach of company confidentiality may be viewed as gross misconduct and can even result in dismissal.

Think beyond Facebook. Managing a profile on professional sites such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) can be a useful business and career resource, helping you to build and maintain professional contacts that may in turn add value to your career development as well as the bottom line of the employer.

Employers and human resource departments are savvy operators; so don't be surprised if they research sites such as Facebook prior or post interview (although employers are discouraged from doing this in the interests of ensuring equal opportunities are observed). An immaculate CV and polished interview technique is worth little if the virtual persona tells a different story.

Finally, regardless of what social networking site is used, it is important to remain vigilant to the fact that there are criminals out there who surf the internet looking for any opportunity to harvest personal and corporate information for fraud purposes such as obtaining credit (the Home Office estimates that ID theft costs the UK economy £1.7 billion each year).

Social networking is undoubtedly here to stay but always think twice about the information you divulge about yourself and your business.

