

Social Media and the Reasonableness Standard for Business

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Social media is a hot new marketing tool that is helping many small businesses grow without spending a fortune. However, social networking can create problems for small firms when employees spend too much time using the technology for personal rather than business reasons.

I remember when I started my career employers were concerned about employees receiving too many personal phone calls during the work day. Now, the phone has been replaced by social media sites.

Recently I posed this question on my Facebook page: Should employees use time at work to post personal items on sites such as Facebook? In general, most of the responses said that unless something is work related employees should use non-work hours to post personal items. "Facebook can be time consuming and employers should not pay for their personal time on Facebook," one friend commented.

A business owner said, "Absolutely not. If it's personal, it's not business. Employers are struggling to keep each employee on their payroll and that means each employee has to be as productive as possible. As a small business owner, if my employees don't get daily jobs done-I have to do it. Paying them to update their FB page while I'm scrubbing the restrooms or baking scones doesn't bode well with me. Maybe larger companies can absorb the nonproductive time, but I would guess most small businesses just can't afford it. Great question, Susan."

A couple of people noted the difference between hourly and salaried workers. "As long as the work is being done and you are salaried and the postings are not inappropriate, no real harm in it. Many studies show that small, frequent breaks actually increase productivity."

Additionally, one of my FB friends noted many employees are "virtual" today, which often results in a blending of work and personal time. "Many executives are writing and responding to work e-mails at midnight . . . and I include myself in that group. For some virtual workers, Facebook replaces the social conversations found in more traditional office environments. In that context, most 'employees' are giving their employers 50-60 hours of work per week and are on call 24/7 . . . so a little bit of Facebook connection is probably a healthy thing," she wrote.

Personally, I think each business owner needs to set guidelines for their employees and apply the rule of reasonableness. There are always going to be times when we need to handle personal issues during working hours. That's a simple reality. But taking advantage of an employer's time to network via social media sites is basically like stealing from the company. You are being paid to focus on business, not promote your personal agenda.