



Why employers should care about blogging

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On the Cutting Edge - Brian T. D. Bowman

BLOGGING. It sounds like something that only techies could love. Yet, blogging is now being done by techies and non-techies alike. This should concern you because blogs have the ability to threaten businesses and reputations.

Blogs, short for Internet web logs, are being used more frequently by individuals to post information ranging from photos, gossip, news and opinion about businesses. Often, blogs look and feel like online journals.

They've become more popular because they're easy to create and use, and provide bloggers with a potential audience as large as the Internet itself. That's why we are witnessing political parties, journalists, individuals and even businesses increasingly embrace blogs to communicate their messages to online audiences.

The number of blogs on the Internet ranges widely.

Blogpulse indexed about 30 million blogs as of the end of this June, while Blog Herald claimed there were over 60 million blogs in May 2005.

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, blogs are appealing to a younger audience. Perseus Development Corp. reported last year that bloggers under 19 years old accounted for almost 60 per cent of the total. It's safe to say that blogs will become more relevant to businesses as all of these young bloggers join the workforce in the coming years.

Most blogs are quite harmless. In fact, progressive businesses are embracing blogs as an effective means to communicate in an innovative and interactive way to targeted audiences. It can be an inexpensive way to generate positive online chatter about a business.

This makes sense considering that people are reading blogs. Last year, Ipsos-Reid reported that four in 10 Canadians (42 per cent) have read a blog at least once.

Other blogs, however, can have deeply damaging impacts on affected individuals and businesses. That's because some bloggers use the online platform as a launching pad for virtual assaults against others.

Employers should be highly concerned about the blogging activities of employees. That's because employees who use blogs can, among other things, engage in copyright infringement and defamation.

Employees who write blogs in the course of their employment activities are easier to manage with company policies and procedures. Employees that write their own personal blogs, outside of work, can raise more challenging issues for employers.

The Nunavut Tourism agency, for example, has had to deal with issues surrounding an employee who had a personal blog. The employee was hired by the agency as a tourism marketing officer, but was fired after she posted on her personal blog an unflattering review of a local restaurant and complained about the high price of groceries in Nunavut.

In May, computer giant Apple lost an important court proceeding in California that dealt with blogging. In 2004, a blogger posted sensitive and confidential information concerning a new and unreleased Apple product. Apple was trying to expose the source of the online blogger's information concerning its products. The court, however, concluded that in this case, trade secrets did not trump freedom of the press.

It's safe to expect more litigation as blogging becomes more prevalent. In the meantime, businesses should take steps to protect their business and reputation. For example, businesses should create a work environment where ideas can be freely exchanged. This will reduce the chances that disgruntled employees will vent online.

Blogging should also be directly addressed in employment policies and handbooks so that employees understand their rights and responsibilities to their employer. Such policies should prohibit employees from publishing defamatory blogs about their employers, co-workers or clients.

Employees who operate their own personal blogs should be encouraged to put disclaimers on their blogs making it clear that their views do not necessarily reflect the opinions of their employers.

Employees should also be required to protect confidential corporate information, both on their blogs and in other offline activities.

Blogs are an emerging reality. Progressive businesses would be well advised to take note and then carry out steps to protect their business.

Protect your business

PROTECT your business from employee bloggers. Here's what you can do:

- * Create a work environment where ideas can be freely exchanged
- * Reference blogging in employment policies and handbooks
- * Encourage employees to put disclaimers on their personal blogs
- * Require employees to protect confidential corporate information
- * Prohibit employees from publishing defamatory blogs about your business, co-workers or clients

Brian Bowman specializes in privacy, access to information, advertising and marketing, intellectual property and technology law with the Information & Ideas Group of Pitblado LLP. He can be reached at 956-3520 or bowman@pitblado.com.

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