Ask the experts: How do I set and implement boundaries around Internet use in the workplace?

Be wary of privacy and human rights issues when establishing rules for Internet use

Cori Maedel: CEO and HR Executive, Jouta Performance Group

Internet use in the workplace is so commonplace that employers sometimes overlook the need for policies. Here are some guidelines.

Boundaries for use

Implement a policy for your company that outlines:

• why the Internet is being provided;
• expectations around use;
• how use will be monitored;
• specific restrictions/allowances that exist; and
• consequences of misuse.

Boundaries for collecting information online

When writing a policy around collecting information online about potential employees, tread carefully. Recent case-law decisions penalized those using such findings to influence hiring decisions. This goes for current employees, too. But it’s not cut and dried. These cases shouldn’t set the precedent for your organization, but it’s important to be up to date when creating policies.

To minimize repercussions from Internet searches, outline who in your organization will search, what they are viewing and how it will be used.

The fine line between privacy and a company’s rights is tricky to get right but costly to get wrong.
Next steps

An Internet policy must be solid. Ensure yours follows privacy legislation, human rights laws, WorkSafeBC regulations and case law.

Seek advice from HR professionals to create a policy that aligns with your culture and is legally sound and relevant. Consult an IT professional to ensure HR captures the necessary safeguards they are putting in place.

Consider balance – between no social media access and some access. This is an open debate and one worthy of finding common ground.

Cissy Pau: Principal Consultant, Clear HR Consulting Inc.

Here are some key considerations when determining the boundaries for your company’s Internet use policy:

1. What are employees’ roles and responsibilities?

The policy will depend on whether employees require Internet access to accomplish their job. If so, establish ground rules on acceptable and unacceptable use of the Internet and any restrictions that apply to different positions. For example, perhaps your marketing staff need to access social media constantly – but maybe your production workers, who don’t need Internet access, should be online only during their breaks.

2. What is your company culture?

Your company culture will shape the policy you develop – is it open, trusting and casual? Or more conservative? If your company consists of staff who are accustomed to being constantly connected, a policy significantly limiting Internet access may appear archaic and inefficient. Also, consider your staff’s reliability and trustworthiness to see how much oversight is required.

3. How will the policy improve productivity?

The Internet can be an abundant source of information as well as a big time waster. Boundaries for employee Internet use need to be practical, realistic and allow for the greatest level of work productivity and efficiency.

Here are some good ways to implement the policy:

• To improve buy-in, inform employees that you’re developing the policy and seek their input.

• Once the policy is developed, communicate it to your employees. Answer any questions they have and ensure employees understand the policy. Requesting employee sign-off on having read the policy is recommended.

• Document the policy for inclusion in your employee handbook or email the document to your staff.

Lindsie Thomson: Partner, Harris & Company LLP

The best way to implement rules on Internet use in the workplace is through an easy-to-understand policy that is communicated to all employees.
A policy on Internet use should be focused on ensuring employees work during work time and do not engage in online activity that could harm the interests of your organization. Some basic rules include:

• limiting online activity during working time to work-related tasks;
• prohibiting online activity that is contrary to the law or offensive;
• prohibiting online activity that exposes the organization to liability;
• prohibiting the downloading of copyright-protected or unlawful material;
• a reminder that rules and policies on confidentiality apply to all online activity;
• prohibiting the viewing of online material that is obscene, pornographic or otherwise inappropriate; and
• prohibiting the use of the organization’s equipment or network to post on social media sites.

Depending on your work environment, you may wish to allow employees to engage in personal use of the Internet during the workday. Be warned, though, if you allow this, it will be harder to monitor whether an individual’s use complies with the policy. It will also be more challenging to enforce the policy consistently.

Your policy should explain the consequences for non-compliance and state that the employer may monitor Internet use in order to ensure compliance. If you have a unionized workforce, there are additional considerations, including whether your collective agreement places any limits on your management rights in this regard.

Once the policy has been drafted and communicated to employees, it’s up to you to ensure compliance. Consistent enforcement is critical to ensuring employee buy-in and your credibility.