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Is Myspace Really My Space?

They say nothing in life is truly free. The ‘free’ bus pass that I use to get around campus during inclement weather is factored into my tuition. The roads I travel are paid for with my tax dollars at the gas pump. Even Google, seemingly the homepage of the internet, is not free. To many of the most popular sites on the web, each one of us users is just a number used to generate ad revenue. However, spouting an unkind opinion on Facebook may cost you more than a few “meet hot singles in your area” banners, it could cost you your job.

Companies across the globe have come to adapt to the age of social media, with many having one or more hired positions dedicated solely to this quite literal advertising machine. This can be a win-win where when Chipotle hosts a contest on Twitter to see who can get the most retweets of a burrito themed Haiku, it gives the company nearly free advertising while supplying one lucky winner with a year’s worth of free Mexican inspired cuisine. It can also act as a form of customer service, so when Joe Shmoe publicly complains about his faulty Roto-Rooter, the manufacturer has the chance to do right by the customer as well as earn the respect of virtual passersby. With corporations using social media more like what was once confined to a brick and mortar store, they also start to see what their employees post in their leisure time as watercooler banter. When these comments become less playful and more disparaging, the human resources department sometimes feels the need to step in.

In Time Magazine’s article “5 Surefire Ways to Get Fired From Your Job”, writer Jon Acuff states that the most effective way to get fired is to criticize your company online. “Instead of talking to a friend about work or confiding in a family member, air your grievances on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram,” Acuff writes in this column. Although it is satire, the humor would not play as well if it were not such a well-known occurrence. We commonly hear about these things happening with grade school teachers, news anchors, or athletes. These jobs fall under public scrutiny and perhaps it should be assumed that they must keep from posting inflammatory remarks on social media. However, even the kindest of posts can get an employee in one of these fields fired.

In January of 2017, a substitute teacher for a Maryland school district jokingly corrected a student’s grammar on social media. Although the resulting conversation between the substitute teacher and the student ended with both parties in good spirits, the school district did not approve of the interaction, nor did it favor of the trending hashtag surrounding the situation. To the substitute teacher’s chagrin, the district fired her, stating that the termination was a direct result of her tweets (Massarella). You do not have to be a public figure to be in the limelight, though.

Reddit, a popular social media site and news aggregator, often hosts online interviews called “Ask Me Anything” where users of the service have the opportunity to ask interesting individuals anything they wish. In August of 2014, an Uber driver from Boston took the spot as the interviewee where he gave compliments and aired gripes about the company and his job. Two weeks later, he was fired without notice or explanation. Later the same year, a driver in Dallas was canned for complaining about the company on social media after his tweets reached the eyes of Uber’s CEO (Huet). Personally, do not expect my Uber driver to have any higher moral or ethical standards than I do, but it appears that the company thinks otherwise.

Many workers preach about the importance of a good work-life balance. If you have heard the expression “work to live, don’t live to work”, this is along the same line of thinking. It is the question of, once you near the end of your life, will you be satisfied with how you had spent your time. Those who speak of the work-life balance feel that leisure time is more satisfying than time spent at a job, especially to those who do not enjoy their workplace. This mantra is becoming increasingly important in technology industries, where high profile employers like Amazon and Google encourage their workers to work 50 or more hours a week. I believe that there should be a definitive separation between the workplace and home life. Once you have spent your 40 or more hours per week at your job, you deserve the chance to get away from it all. It is bad enough when you are expected to spend your whole high school and college career dedicated to school work, where there is never true free time because ever looming deadlines.

To me, having your company actively monitor your social media presence is just another way for them to squeeze the personality out of its workers. Some companies, though, have recognized this and done work to encourage individuality among its employees. Zappos, an online shoe distributor and subsidiary of Amazon, has lead the way in this aspect. One of the interview questions that the company asks all its potential employees is how they would rate themselves on a scale of weirdness, where it seems that the weirder you are, the better (Hsieh). Having dealt with Zappos customer service before, I can attest that it is a unique and pleasant experience. Employees give information about their personal lives and try to connect with customers on a friendlier level rather than a strictly professional one. While this sounds like it could be a creepy experience, I assure you it is quite refreshing, especially compared to the mundane, politically correct culture that most businesses present.

Although I am not a follower of any Zappos employees on social media, I do assume that they are free to post how they wish, within reason. I believe that companies have the right to terminate employment for social media posts in certain situations. While a small remark about having a bad day at work or wishing for the weekend should be overlooked, constant lambasting of one’s own employer or even a rival company is certainly within reasonable bounds for a company to present a warning to the disgruntled poster. If the action persists, then I believe that this would be grounds for termination. However, social media is quite new in the grand scheme of things and it should not be assumed that employees understand the publicity that a post can bring or the full repercussions thereafter. While workplace gossip may allow for a looser tongue, those conversations are more than likely not going to be recorded and published for the world to see. Social media posts are there for good. Even pressing the delete button on an old post does not erase it from an offended viewer’s mind or hard drive if they had happened to take a picture of it.

Due to an employee’s potential lack of knowledge about the role of social media in the workplace, it is important for companies to enact and clearly publish a social media policy. Human resources positions are often understaffed as is, and adding full time policing of social media can be a gargantuan task, but Jason Shinn of the Michigan Employment Law Advisor argues that it is crucial to the success of a company, because a company’s “legitimate business interests are often directly associated with its employees”. Further, a company’s social media policy should not be overbearing in a way where employees feel like anything they say or do could be a misstep. Employers must be careful that this policy does not infringe on the National Labor Relations Act right to engage in protected activity, yet should discipline discrimination, harassment, and retaliation that occurs online, just as they would in the workplace. This sounds like a step in the right direction for social media policy. While it seems completely unreasonable for an employer to expect an employee to hand over their log in information to social media websites as to control their every action, employees must also assume some best practices when communicating in public forums online to not only protect themselves, but their employer as well.

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