Blogs Are Here to Stay

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It’s time to update your policies

Attendees at the *2007 Summit for the Nonprofit Sector* in Winston-Salem heard a lot about the Internet and cyber-safety from plenary session speaker and national syndicated columnist Larry Magid as well as the Center’s executive director, Melanie Herman. Both speakers addressed the risks arising from employees who blog.

An emerging trend in the employment arena is the need to discipline or terminate employees who blog derogatorily about the organization on their own site or on a nonprofit-sponsored site. The act of terminating an employee for inappropriate comments on a blog is called “doocing.” The term comes from the name of an employee who was terminated for comments posted on her blog at www.dooce.com.

So why should we be concerned about blogging? Let’s look at the potential risks to the nonprofit when employees blog:

- Blogs may contain gossipy, subjective content that is not necessarily based in fact, much like comments shared at the proverbial water cooler. Rumors spread quickly on the Internet. Search engines pick up on topics addressed in blogs and bloggers often comment on information originally posted by other bloggers, so material printed in one blog can end up on hundreds—many of which are regularly reviewed by reporters. In this way a rumor about a nonprofit can end up published in a newspaper, often before the nonprofit even knows about the rumor or has time to formulate an internal response for staff and stakeholders or a suitable response for the media.
- Employees who blog about their workplace may publish information that the nonprofit would not want to be made public. Examples include stories about donors, about fundraising events gone awry, about programs or services not yet made public, or even allegations or innuendoes of misappropriation of funds or improper treatment of restricted grants or government contracts.
- Bloggers have been known to post sexual content about co-workers, including photos, which may be embarrassing or hurtful and could be used in a harassment lawsuit against the nonprofit.

Prohibiting employees from blogging is not an option, and nonprofit employers need to be cognizant that blogs are not only here to stay but probably will become more prevalent. Some nonprofits have even incorporated blogging into their own communications strategies. Blogs by nonprofit CEOs, board chairs, and even celebrity spokespersons are not uncommon. So what risk management steps can nonprofit employers take

to reduce the potential damage from blogs?

1. Consider implementing a blog policy that reflects your nonprofit's culture and specifically addresses unauthorized blog content.
2. If your nonprofit embraces blogging as a new technique to communicate, make sure that your Web policies provide a way for all content of any official blogs linked to the nonprofit's Web site to be reviewed by a designated staff member before being posted. Then, if unauthorized and derogatory postings are made without review, the nonprofit can prove its due diligence and is less likely to be held responsible. If the nonprofit has no such policy or procedure of reviewing content, it will be held responsible for all content posted on blogs linked to the nonprofit's Web site or authored by nonprofit employees on an official nonprofit blog.
3. Unless the blog is authorized and part of the nonprofit's communications strategy, there should be a prohibition against blogging during work hours and using the nonprofit's computers for this purpose. This prohibition could be incorporated into the nonprofit's existing technology policy that may already contain language prohibiting use of the nonprofit's computers for any non work-related use.
4. Alert employees that engaging in any activity, including posting material on the Internet that is detrimental to the nonprofit or is in conflict with the nonprofit's mission will be considered a violation of the employees' duty of loyalty to the nonprofit. In some states, (North Carolina is one), employers are specifically permitted to terminate an employee whose conduct outside of work conflicts with fundamental objectives of the nonprofit.
5. Inform employees that all blog communications regarding the nonprofit or its employees must comply with the organization's non-harassment policy and non workplace-violence policy. An employee whose posted comments violate the nonprofit's policies faces discipline up to and including termination.

In all but the smallest workplaces, bloggers are certain to exist. Before your nonprofit is caught off-guard and required to respond to unflattering or potentially damaging blog content, take proactive measures to guard what might be regarded as your most valuable asset: your reputation in the community you serve. Consider the steps above as a starting point to protect your nonprofit from potential misconduct by employee bloggers.

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