

Workplace rants on social media are headache for companies

By **Stephanie Chen**, CNN
May 12, 2010 12:48 p.m. EDT

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Compliance firms say more companies complain about work rants on social media
- 2009 survey: Quarter of firms surveyed disciplined workers over social media gaffes
- Posting work gripes on Facebook could be grounds for firing, employment attorneys say
- Managers should be careful about invading privacy when monitoring work rants

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(CNN) -- One by one, the office Casanova dated several of his female co-workers at a small technology firm in California. His dating escapades turned public -- and problematic -- when he chronicled his opinions of the women on Facebook.

He called one co-worker "a snore" before the updates spiraled into explicit comments.

When his manager learned about the Facebook updates, chaos ensued. One woman who was the subject of his offensive comments believed she had been sexually harassed at work.

This scenario can be a manager's nightmare, and it's happening more frequently with the growing prevalence of social networking, says Shanti Atkins, president of ELT Inc., an ethics and compliance training company with 2,000 clients nationwide. Cleaning up the social media disaster at the technology firm (she declined to give its name) is just one of the dozens of cases Atkins has taken in the past six months.

As Facebook and Twitter explode, companies are awkwardly confronted with the consequences social media can have on workplace relations and the company image.

About a quarter of employers surveyed by the [Society of Corporate Compliance and Ethics](#) in 2009 had disciplined an employee for improper activities on social networking sites. But only 10 percent of companies had specific policies to deal with social networking sites, the survey reported.

"Employees for decades have engaged in inappropriate behavior and communication," she said. "Ten years ago, it's probably an inappropriate e-mail. Now it's an inappropriate message on

[Facebook](#)."

Social media has become ubiquitous for many Americans at work and home. [Twitter](#) users create 50 million tweets each day, and Facebook has more than 400 million users worldwide. With the number of users booming, human resource experts say an employee airing -- or tweeting -- dirty laundry about work is a company train wreck waiting to happen.

Employees eager to expand their social media pool may think they are harmlessly exchanging information with co-workers and managers. Some users may not realize what they say on a social media site -- whether it be at home or work, on a company computer or a personal computer -- can be grounds for firing. Recent privacy breaches of sites such as Facebook show that once information is divulged, it may be impossible to control.

Most states are at-will employment states, which means employers can terminate a worker for any reason except for federally protected classes such as race, gender and religion.

This happened at Domino's Pizza last year when a prank video became a YouTube sensation. Two North Carolina Dominos employees uploaded a video where one employee put cheese up his nose while making a sandwich at work. The other employee narrated.

The video went viral. The company was humiliated.

Domino's Pizza was forced to mobilize online against the food preparation allegations. The employees were fired and charged with delivering prohibited foods.

"From the employee side, if there is anything you don't want to see in the L.A. Times, then don't write it in a tweet or on Facebook," says John Anthony, a employment attorney at Carlton DiSante & Freudenberger LLP in California. "It can become public and stay out there forever. Don't post anything you don't want to send to your boss in an e-mail."

Facebook and Twitter have the capacity to instantly reach millions of users, leaving managers in a tough bind, says Brian Uzzi, a professor of leadership at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Managers have a duty to ensure that certain comments that employees post on social media don't offend other colleagues.

"Information on Twitter and Facebook can spread like an infection disease," Uzzi says. "You get this escalation, and it could create an avalanche of negative press."

Uzzi explains there is a dangerous, magnifying effect when a complaint about work is made on Facebook. One disgruntled statement can fuel another employee to fire off his or her own complaints, he said. Once the complaints balloon, stopping the accusations become difficult, if not impossible.

Another problem for companies, Uzzi says, is that social media makes false information difficult to dispel. If heard, read or seen enough times, people who read the incorrect statements might start believing them, he says.

New technology rapidly floods the marketplace and enters the hands of employees. Labor

consultants say companies are scrambling to put together social media policy handbooks before an innocent employee rant goes awry.

Ted Williams, who runs HR Management Consultants, has encountered a spike in the past six months in clients who complain social media is sparking fights between employees at work.

"It's incumbent on the company to state its position and administer its policies equitably," Williams said. "If the company does not, the employee might have a case."

Williams says managers can expect workplace issues with social media to become more frequent since employees are spending more time on social media sites. A [Nielson report](#) found users dedicated about five and a half hours a week on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in December 2009, up 82 percent from the prior year.

Employment attorneys say they expect the issue to be confronted in the courts. In a groundbreaking case last year, servers at a Houston's restaurant launched a password protected [MySpace](#) group where they vented about work.

Sometimes the online remarks became offensive and sexual. A manager gained access to the MySpace group and began monitoring the posts. He fired the servers, who responded by filing a privacy lawsuit against the company.

The servers said they were "just joking," according to court documents. A New Jersey jury sided with the employees and found a company was guilty of violating privacy laws since the group was password protected.

Some companies are writing clearer policies and are cautioning employees about putting work gripes online.

Still, there are some employees who view social media as a personal outlet for complaining.

In September, a server named Timothy at a California Pizza Kitchen got upset with the style of the restaurant's new uniforms. In protest, he tweeted: "@calpizzakitchen black button ups are the lamest [beep] ever!!!"

California Pizza Kitchen fired him for tweeting complaints about the workplace, according to [Mashable.com](#), a news blog focused on social media. He responded with a [YouTube](#) video.

But the power of social media doesn't always have to be perceived as negative in the workplace, says Steve Rubel, who specializes in social media at the public relations giant Edelman.

"On the flip side, if you find people who are champions of the company, it can have very positive effects in moving the company forward," he said.