

Survey: Half of Local Companies Have Social-Media Policy

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Five months ago, the U.S. Army published its social media handbook online. For once, the Army was a little late getting to the front lines.

More than half of area businesses surveyed have a social media policy in place, according to OperationsInc and Performance Solutions Group, with the Stamford companies polling some 100 employers locally. Of that number, seven in 10 allow employees to access Facebook at work and fully one-third said they have experienced some kind of issue with the improper use of Facebook by an employee.

“I was surprised at the number of companies that have not dealt with this in a direct way yet,” said David Lewis, CEO of OperationsInc. “It’s got so many facets to it. It’s a huge distraction.”

If a huge distraction, it also is a huge new channel for companies to market their brand, people, products and services – creating what would seem to be a conflict as employees must hit Facebook more often to connect with suppliers or clients and otherwise keep up to speed on their own industries.

Obviously the trend includes the use of Twitter, which even Stratford-based Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. began using at the Paris Air Show last month to get the word out on new sales, partnerships and other business and technology initiatives.

About six in 10 local businesses surveyed allow employees to use Twitter and some 35 percent allow their sales and marketing staff to use LinkedIn, though at least half are somewhat concerned an employee would take their LinkedIn contacts with them to another company.

Lewis thinks social media in the workplace could be the biggest flash point in human resources in 30 years – particularly since the Supreme Court’s view is still unclear regarding the balance between the rights of the employer and an individual’s privacy rights.

The National Labor Relations Board is pursuing multiple cases against employers who fired workers due to comments or photos they posted on Facebook, only to have those people file suit. In February, NLRB settled an action filed by a former employee at American Medical Response of Connecticut, with AMR agreeing to revise its social media policies but not rehiring the woman.

In the case of the U.S. Army, the 40-page guidelines won wide notice from the private sector, which has been wrestling with the problem of

online employee communications dating back to the advent of blogs and instant messaging that loosened lips further in the immediacy of instant communications.

The Army allows soldiers to use social media as long as any communications are in compliance with the Uniform Code of Military Justice that governs Army law. At the same time, the Army asked officers and noncommissioned officers to clearly communicate their expectations with regard to social media and asked soldiers to above all else maintain professionalism in any online postings whether personal or Army business (on the latter front, among those “following” the Army on Twitter is Sikorsky).

For now, the Army policy leaves a lot of gray areas and OperationsInc’s Lewis said it is hardly alone in the foxhole.

“Just like a lot of businesses, I’m in a weird place,” Lewis said. “I’m the one everyone is coming to with the questions, and the answer is, ‘I’m not sure.’”