

Reducing Social Media Risk

Social media use is exploding—so is the potential for big problems in data and privacy losses.

This is the fourth article in a series contributed by MediaPro, Inc., in which privacy and data protection thought leaders share best practices. In this edition, ways to prevent losses that could occur through the rapid growth in social media networking are discussed.



Social media is carrying more and more information of all kinds every minute—business and personal, helpful and harmful. The potential for serious consequences to an organization through private and privileged information being unleashed via social networking is increasing dramatically every day.

The use of social media is skyrocketing with no slowdown in sight. Facebook now has more than 500 million worldwide users and experienced triple-digit growth in 2010, as did Twitter. Nielsen reports that Americans on average now spend nearly a quarter of their time on social networking sites and

blogs. Another study indicates nearly one quarter of all employees use social media while at work.

All of this is getting the attention of organizations concerned about the increased risk that social media pose for potential data and privacy losses. Yet many organizations are still struggling to get their social media policies in place, and even fewer are educating employees about the risks that poor social media practices can create for the organization.

Three Steps To Get the Ball Rolling

Alaska Airlines is using a three-step process for addressing social media and the workplace. "Getting organizational consensus and buy-in is a critical first step," says Aileen Cronin, associate general counsel and managing director of privacy and security for the 10,000-plus employee airline.

"Social media can impact the entire organization, and making sure our key managers were on the same page and involved early on was an absolute necessity," she states. "Social media is relatively new in the workforce, and there are company leaders who are advocates and others who are skeptical," Cronin says. "You need to find out your organization's views on social media, gain a consensus and then plan and train from there."

Next, Alaska Airlines developed a strong policy, taking into account the different business needs of its various departments and employee roles.

"Some positions lend themselves toward being social evangelists for a company, while others do not," Cronin says. "That is an important element that should be addressed in a social media policy."

The third step is communicating that policy and providing a training experience that fits the workforce and the company culture.

"Some industries are conservative, and others are more open and progressive in their approach to communicating," Cronin says.

Think Before You Post

Sprint, with 40 million customers and 40,000 employees, encourages the use of social media by its employees.

"Word-of-mouth is still the most powerful form of persuasion, and many employees want to use social media to help their companies," says Krina Snider, Sprint security awareness manager. "While we encourage employees to be advocates for the company online, it is important that they know what information is appropriate and inappropriate to share publicly," Snider says.

Richard Purcell, CEO of Corporate Privacy Group, puts it into perspective, saying, "Long before the Internet, gossip was the enemy of privacy—and it still is. Everyone using a social media site has to think before posting, asking the key questions, 'Is this appropriate and reasonable? Is it clear it's my opinion, not my company's? Can I make it public, or is it confidential?'"

"Often," Purcell says, "people will post before thinking through the implications of what they are saying. It's best to be mindful of how people will receive the message—not just what you want to say."

"We encounter a lot of fear over the potential for social media to become a source of compromised data security and corporate embarrassment," states Michael Spinney, CIPP, senior privacy analyst with the Ponemon Institute. "The knee-jerk reaction is to want to clamp down, but that is often impractical. Instead, we believe it is useful for companies to approach social media policy development broadly and offer employees ethical guidelines rather than try to enumerate a comprehensive list of strict dos and don'ts. Encourage responsible use of social media and raise employee awareness of how their behavior can reflect both positively and negatively on themselves and the brand they represent."

Brand Impact and Social Media Awareness

"Companies are very concerned about the brand impact of social media on the organization," says Steven Conrad, managing director at MediaPro, an information security and privacy training company. "Once a company has a social media policy in place, they should clearly communicate their expectations to their workforce."

Most "best-practice" organizations implement the end-user training as more of a process than a discrete event. "Many organizations use a variety of reinforcement tools and communication methods," Conrad states. "This keeps the message fresh and relevant."

Krina Snider agrees. "As with anything, employees want to know 'how does this apply to me?' We use multiple strategies to communicate regularly and proactively. And, we try to keep our messages simple: 'think before you post' is our mantra," she says.

Alaska Airlines' Cronin asserts that workforce training is a key component to reinforcing a social media policy.

"Everybody has different opinions on using social media, and we're trying to level-set their judgment on using social networking sites. It may be the first time some people even become aware of the risks when they read your policy or when they view your training."

"Achieving your social media objectives will require more than a good policy or training course," says Conrad. "It also involves strong management support, a line-of-sight connection to your organizational goals and an ongoing awareness and reinforcement process to help ensure end-user acceptance and compliance."

It's Only the Beginning

It is an exciting yet anxious time in the brave new world of social media and the workplace. New ground is being broken. Policies are being debated and implemented. Millions and millions of "social" messages are flowing.

There is much to be done as social media norms evolve and information protection methods and approaches are established. It all begins with a solid understanding of your organization's business goals, gaining consensus on the use of social media within your organization, producing a sound social media policy and reinforcing that policy with awareness and education. The growth in social media activity is projected to continue to rise well into the double digits. As this activity rises, so does the risk of serious privacy and data loss. If your organization doesn't have a social media policy or training in place, it certainly should be high up on your radar screen for this year.

The Expert's Advice on Social Media and Data Loss Prevention:

- **Develop a social media policy**
- **Train all employees on the social media policy**
- **Communicate regularly and reinforce the policy message**
- **Provide real-life examples**

MediaPro would like to thank **Aileen Cronin**, **Krina Snider**, **Richard Purcell** and **Michael Spinney** for their contributions to this article. **Steve Conrad** is managing director at MediaPro, an information security and privacy training company. He can be reached at stevec@mediapro.com.