

Talking Ethics



Can Personal Social Media Use Affect Our Professional Lives?

by Donna Wells, RDH, BA, CDHA manager of professional practice • dwells@cdha.ca

Fifteen years ago, if someone had used the term “social media,” would you have known what it meant? I know I wouldn’t have. The evolution of social media platforms in that short period of time has changed how we interact with one another. Some of the most popular social media platforms today are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and TikTok. On the positive side, social media allows us to connect or reconnect with people no matter where we are in the world. It can give us a sense of community where we can find support and encouragement. It helps keep us up to date on the lives of our friends and family, and on what’s happening in the news. On the negative side, social media can spread misinformation and lead to miscommunication, cyberbullying, and employee disciplinary action. We’ve also seen the rise of “keyboard warriors,” those who feel so comfortable behind their computer screens that they make hurtful, demeaning posts knowing there is little recourse. Let’s take a few minutes to examine how our social media use may affect our employment and what new ethical responsibilities we may have both as private citizens and as professionals.



Before discussing responsible social media use as an employee, let’s explore how your social media content can affect whether you are offered that job you’ve applied for recently. Did you know that in 2006 only 11% of employers screened employment candidates using social media? But according to CareerBuilder, in 2017 that number jumped to 70%!¹ It might be a good time to review your social media presence and determine if you’ve outgrown some of those posts from earlier days. And remember: just because you’ve shared a post, a picture or a video on your private page, or within a private group, it does not mean that it will stay private. Ask yourself, “If an employer were to review my social media presence, would the content deter them from making me a job offer?” Before posting anything new, ask yourself, “Will this post cast a negative light, either directly or indirectly, on my place of employment or on me as a professional?”

As an employee, it’s important to review your employment contract or office manual to determine if it includes a social media clause. Check if the contract clause or office manual policy prohibits you from making social media posts that may be deemed negative towards your place of employment and what disciplinary action may be taken if the place of business is defamed by the employee. Ensure that you’re not putting your employment at risk by making posts that could be considered disparaging by your employer.

Generally, the law is well established that an employee’s out-of-office conduct should be of no concern to the employer. This can change if a connection is established between out-of-office conduct and the place of employment.² An employer may discipline an employee for



their social media use if they can prove the existence of at least one of the following factors establishing its connection to the workplace.

- Other employees were upset or affected by the employee's social media posts, which led to disruptions at the workplace and conflict among employees.
- An employee identified their workplace, co-workers or managers (or individual clients) in their social media posts.
- Social media comments made by an employee disparaged the employer's main clientele.

Recently in Ontario, a case, *York University Staff Association v. York University*, was brought to arbitration.³ York University had terminated an employee for discriminatory posts on his personal Facebook page. The arbitrator found that the employee, although using his personal page, inflicted reputational harm on the employer, as the employer was identified in his Facebook profile and his posts. The termination was upheld. Keep that in mind if you have your place of employment listed on your social media profiles.

Dental hygiene Facebook groups can be a wonderful way for members of the dental hygiene profession to share information, connect with colleagues, and support one another. We have seen an incredible amount of support and empathy among our dental hygiene colleagues, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, but pre-pandemic as well. Unfortunately, there are times when posts can spiral

into a negative whirlpool and leave some feeling attacked, dismissed, and/or alone. When you're making a social media post, ask yourself, "Would I say this if this person were standing in front of me?" "Am I contributing to negativity or am I offering solutions and guidance to others to make my online community a more positive place?"

Social media can be a platform for positivity, support, and community. Let's make sure we're doing our part to keep that positive energy flowing.

To learn more about best practices for managing your digital footprint as a health care professional, watch CDHA's free webinar, *Social Media Engagement for the Dental Hygienist: Risk, Reward, and ROI*, available at www.cdha.ca/webinars.

References

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2. Keeler I. *Disciplining Employees for Off-Duty Social Media Use: When is it Appropriate?* [Internet]. Charlottetown, PE: Cox & Palmer; 2019. Available from: <https://coxandpalmerlaw.com/publication/disciplining-employees-for-off-duty-social-media-use-when-is-it-appropriate/>
3. *York University Staff Association v. York University*, 2018 CanLII 41354