



Tip Sheet

Inappropriate Use of Social Media and Internet Use at Work and Home

Health care workers who use the workplace Internet for inappropriate purposes not only risk discipline by their employers, but can put their professional licences at risk as well.

The rapid growth of social networking websites, such as MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, and personal blogs (opinion pieces that are posted online), have opened up many channels to communicate with coworkers, friends and family.

According to recent statistics, approximately 43 per cent of adult internet users in Canada go online while at work for personal reasons. This seems to be particularly true of younger professionals who have the habit, left over from school days, of regularly checking social networking sites and e-mail.

Social media include but are not limited to: MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogging.

What you post can become *very public very quickly* and can be viewed, forwarded and printed virtually anywhere around the world by anyone – including your employer. In fact, more and more employers are accessing social networking sites to screen potential employees.

As well, many employers have the ability to determine what websites you are visiting while on the job.

There have been an increasing number of investigations and discipline, up to discharge from employment, imposed by employers related to the misuse of such internet sites. This is in addition to pre-existing cases where employers, including hospitals, have performed audits resulting in discipline of professional employees, who use workplace computers to access the internet to view or distribute offensive material, such as pornography, sexist, racist or other inappropriate material.

That's not all that's at stake. You can be found guilty of professional misconduct, disgraceful and/or dishonourable conduct by your professional college for inappropriate internet use.

Colleges' Discipline Committees will not decline to discipline because an employer has already taken action and will not consider factors such as widespread abuse in certain workplaces or the condoning of internet abuse by employers. The colleges indicate professionals also cannot use ignorance as a defense.

ONA members must exercise caution and careful judgment when it comes to internet use or use of social media while at work.

ONA issues the following recommendations to ensure you don't find yourself in an unwanted situation:

- Do not use your work computer for your personal communications, including web browsing. Most employers have policies that prohibit personal use of workplace computers.
- Never use your workplace computer to access offensive material, such as pornography, sexist, racist or other inappropriate material.
- Never post information about your patients/clients/residents on social networking websites or personal blogs. Privacy is crucial in health care and must never be violated.
- Remember that public criticism or slander of your workplace can be grounds for discipline up to and including discharge. Every employee has a duty of fidelity (e.g. loyalty) to her or his employer.
- Never forget that personal communications sent from any computer, including your home computer, can become public.
- Do not assume that using a nickname instead of your real name on your personal blog grants you anonymity. It doesn't.
- If in doubt, don't do it! If your internet usage on the job doesn't have anything to do with the normal daily routine of work, steer clear.
- You cannot agree to be "friends" and/or "like" on Facebook or other social media with patients, clients, residents and/or their families, either at work or personally, because it violates the therapeutic boundaries of the nurse/patient relationship regardless of whether you try to "friend" them or they try to "friend" you.
- ONA is working on providing information about YouTube and videotaping ONA members during their work.
- The issue should be raised at Union-Management or Agency-Association Committee meetings to determine if there is an employer policy in place to deal with these issues concerning the use of social media and cyber-bullying.

Please note: This tip sheet is intended to provide an overview of inappropriate use of social media and internet use at work and at home. For more specific information and guidance, please speak to your Labour Relations Officer (LRO).