

New social media study probes boundaries between public and private use

April 3 2014, by Niki Widdowson

(Phys.org) —A quick post to Facebook here, a scroll through Instagram there, and a little bit of Twitter somewhere else - our involvement in virtual social networks is a pervasive feature of our everyday lives.

But the use of [social media](#) in the workplace raises questions about how much time spent on such activities is tolerated, what is acceptable content, and what types of online information should be accessed.

A new QUT Business School study, led by Associate Professor Paula McDonald, is asking these questions of employees in a short online survey across Australia and the UK to investigate how people use and manage social media in the [work](#) context.

The study is part of Professor McDonald's ongoing social media at work research in partnership with Scotland's University of Strathclyde.

"We are seeking participants to complete an [online survey](#) that asks them what they consider to be the boundaries between the use of social media in the workplace and in their private lives," Professor McDonald said.

"We are also interested in the job-related social media experiences of employees, and what organisations are doing in terms of developing and implementing social media policies."

Professor McDonald said the all-pervading nature of social media was creating a minefield for employers and employees alike.

"We've analysed media reports, websites and published studies and found four principal areas of potential conflict around social media that have been the subject of recent legal cases in courts and employment tribunals. These are:

- profiling, which involves employers gathering online information about job applicants
- disparaging blogs, where employers dismiss or discipline employees for bringing the company into disrepute
- the private use of social media by employees during work time
- online bullying and harassment.
- "Employers have raised concerns about [employees](#)' use of social media because it may threaten their corporate reputation, reduce productivity, and lead to claims of vicarious liability for damaging online behaviours," Professor McDonald said.

"Employees, on the other hand, are often concerned about their right to a private identity, to voice their experiences and views within and outside the workplace, and to work in a safe and harmonious environment.

"Balancing these perspectives may be complicated by generational differences in what is considered appropriate for private conversation and public disclosure."

"Our ultimate aim for this research is to help build an understanding of the use and management of social media at work."

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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