



The use of “Social Media” has become a common tool for marketing and communication for many construction companies in Canada. The following paper, which has been provided by a member of the CDBI executive, provides advice and consideration for your firm’s management of social media issues. The paper is also provided as a follow up to Mr. Stocco’s presentation on this very topic at CDBI’s 2012 annual conference.

The Risk Management Committee of the Canadian Design-Build Institute will continue to circulate articles of this nature to members as they become available. We trust this will be found to be of interest and beneficial to the members.

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF SOCIAL MEDIA¹

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Technology has changed how construction companies perform their work. Social media has changed how construction companies do business. Technology facilitates instantaneous exchange of information. While this can be beneficial, there are also some risks that construction firms must manage effectively in order to avoid the pitfalls created by social media.

Construction firms face a new set of challenges due to the proliferation of social media.

A construction firm’s online identity becomes the identity that many people associate with the firm. Information posted about the construction firm, or its clients, on the firm’s website, or on third party websites like Facebook, means that the information could be viewed by countless persons around the world. Furthermore, when personal commentary is posted online, a firm’s identity is often shaped by this online commentary. While individuals enjoy freedom of speech, clients and the public might find their confidence shaken by inappropriate personal postings. Without a carefully considered online strategy, the online image of a construction firm can harm a firm’s reputation, operations and ultimately impact on a firm’s profitability.

¹ Follow up paper to the presentation given at CDBI National Conference, *Connect, Conceive, Construct* on Thursday October 11, 2012.



Privacy is hard, if not impossible, to maintain. Once information is posted online, it becomes public. Information shared with a “friend” is typically easily transferred and shared with the “friends of a friend”. Attempts to restrict access to information may not be effective against “friends of a friend”.

Workplace efficiency may also suffer. For example, the ability of employees to access social media during the work day, either on company computers or on their own personal electronic devices, may lead to “time theft” by the employee. While cracking down on time theft may be one approach to the problem, it could give rise to other problems. For example, disgruntled current, or ex-employees, can communicate and disseminate their grievances online. Regardless of whether the criticism is fair or true, the fact remains that one person’s views can be immediately communicated almost everywhere.

Even if social media usage occurs outside the workplace, it can constitute cause for dismissal or discipline. Online anonymity is almost impossible to maintain. Email and twitter postings can be traced and inappropriate comments (e.g. insulting, discriminatory, harassing or insubordinate comments) can form the basis of employee termination or other forms of disciplinary actions. Further, online postings by an employee may give rise to employer duties. For example, if a construction firm becomes aware of inappropriate postings by one employee, which postings are directed at other employee, the firm may be required to take action against the offending employee.

Court discovery rules require production of electronic information as well as hard copies. Therefore, anything posted online is potentially evidence which can be used in a court proceeding. For example, online videos of “rule breaking” activity, or photographs of reckless behaviour while on vacation, can be introduced in a court proceeding. Furthermore, electronic investigative tools can help discover and mine information that may have been previously inaccessible.

Taking a heavy handed approach to employee access to social media may be ill advised. A more thoughtful approach may actually bring about some positive outcomes. The internet and various social networking sites are now recognized as an essential business tool. Disallowing their use will be seen as a negative for present, and potential, employees. However, the challenge to any construction firm is how to avoid the pitfalls associated with social media.

Some considerations are as follows:

- Because social media is here to stay, a construction firm must have a thoughtful and considered social media policy
- The social media policy should be part of the firm’s culture and the policy should work hand in hand with the firm’s overall communication strategy



- The social media policy should also be part of the employment contract
- Management and employees must appreciate that the ease and speed of information exchange means that trust and transparency between managers and employees must take on a higher priority—an enlightened approach to social media will help foster a better work place environment