

Safer social networking

This is one of a series of advice sheets for members of NEU Leadership - senior leaders in education in membership of the National Education Union. These advice sheets aim to give you advice on your position as an employee, which reflects your particular position as a leader and manager.

You can read other NEU advice and find out more about NEU Leadership, about the NEU's model of ethical leadership in education and about the NEU's Guild Community, which offers you peer support from fellow NEU Leadership members, at neu.org.uk/leadership

Introduction

This briefing is designed to help NEU Leadership members review their school or college's policy on social networking and avoid the potential pitfalls of use of social media.

Why can social networking cause problems?

Posting online is usually instant. Unless moderated, comments may be visible immediately, very difficult to remove but easy to copy and pass on.

- Modelling appropriate behaviour, even outside the learning environment, means no offensive remarks, scorn or jokes, and assuming nothing will remain private.

Posts can easily bring schools or colleges into disrepute. Breaching confidentiality, cyberbullying or using inappropriate language can all result in complaints and disciplinary action. The implications of postings can be extremely serious.

But following a few simple guidelines can keep matters safe online and avoid misuse of social networking.

Advice to school and college leaders

- Introduce a social networking policy if none exists; or review your existing policy to ensure it is sufficiently clear and robust.
- Raise awareness of your policy and of appropriate use of social networking media throughout the school or college.
- Ensure that the policy sets standards for good practice and offers clear guidelines regarding appropriate online activity, use of school or college social networking accounts, confidentiality, and staying within the law.
- Ensure that the policy covers learners as well as staff - where learners are of appropriate age, ask them to help draw up an acceptable use charter and involve parents as well.
- Ensure staff who use social media as part of their job are properly trained.
- Ensure that communication with learners or parents is through official school or college channels (eg, the school or college's own Facebook page) and has been approved by the appropriate manager.
- Ensure any school or college networking sites and accounts have sufficient security and (even when moderated) state that individual comments are not necessarily representative of your organisation

- Introduce systems for reporting and logging potential misuse and removing offensive material.
- Don't forget to include the appropriate home use of school or college laptops in your policy.
- Consult and seek to reach agreement with the recognised trade unions.

Advice to you as individuals

Please remember, nothing you post online is really private.

- Follow the school or college's official social networking policy yourself.
- Do not add learners as friends or contacts in your own social media accounts.
- Always maintain professional boundaries. Do not engage in discussion with learners online unless through official school or college accounts.
- Think about the potential risks (eg, professional boundaries) of adding parents to your private social media accounts. Some organisations say such contact should only be through official school or college accounts.
- Take care when posting comments or photos of yourself. Anything that someone else deems inappropriate may land you in trouble.
- Never post anything that is offensive or aggressive, even if you are very angry or upset. It can easily be taken out of context.
- If you are tagged in something on Facebook that you consider inappropriate, use the remove tag feature to untag yourself (refer to the Facebook help centre for more details).

- Avoid accepting "friend requests" from people you do not really know. Simply being a "friend" of your own Facebook friend does not mean they should automatically be given access to your information.
- Ensure your profile information on social media accounts is appropriate and check your privacy and security settings.
- If you do intend to rant about teaching, politics, or life in general, consider doing so anonymously, through an account or blog that cannot be attributed to you. Check that anything you post does not identify you, or your school or college.
- Do not make false representations, breach copyright or upload confidential information.

Much of the above is just common sense, but it can be very easy to become complacent. If you do find that you have posted something and then later regret doing so, firstly try to have the material removed, ideally before it may have been shared. If someone says you have caused offence, it is better to apologise in person and if this isn't enough then apologise online.

In need of help and support?

If you have been accused of social media misconduct, are the subject of inappropriate material, or simply need advice on dealing with an issue related to social networking please [contact your workplace NEU rep](#) or contact your local NEU branch or call the NEU AdviceLine at 0345 811 8111 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 7pm) or adviceline@neu.org.uk

If there is a specific issue not covered in this or other advice sheets which you would like the NEU to look at, or if you simply want to let the union know about something from a leadership perspective as an NEU Leadership member, please contact the NEU's National Official (Leadership) steve.cooper@neu.org.uk