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CAREER COUCH

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Write All About It (At Your Own Risk)

Q. You've embraced the daily catharsis of blogging, but given the recent spate of blog-sparked workplace controversies, you're worried that posts about work may jeopardize your job. How can you pontificate about your career in a manner that doesn't end with an unemployment check?

A. The safest way to approach blogging about work may be not to do it at all, said Nancy Flynn, executive director of the ePolicy Institute, a training and consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio.

"Blogging is such a subjective form of expression," Ms. Flynn said. "What you think is a silly little comment could get broadcast into cyberspace, hurt the wrong person's feelings and put you at risk of reprimand or something worse."

Q. What types of work-related posts should you avoid?

A. Nobody likes to be criticized in public, especially corporations that rely on customer support. Ms. Flynn said that bloggers should steer clear of attacks, both implicit and direct, on their employers, as well as personal diatribes about co-workers.

Corporate confidentiality policies may also prohibit employees from blogging about news announcements or topics like products under development or marketing strategies. Ms. Flynn added that to avoid accusations of insider trading, bloggers from public companies should also refrain from posting anything the Securities and Exchange Commission could equate with forward-looking financial statements.

Q. What about seemingly harmless musings?

A. Posts about everyday issues like cubicle cohabitation or communal office refrigerators should not cause much trouble. Sometimes, however, it does not matter what you write — the mere act of opening up could cost you a job.

In January, Mark Jen started a programming job at Google — which, by the way, provides services through its Blogger.com Web site that enable anyone to produce a

blog. Mr. Jen, 22, used a personal blog to chronicle his first week for family and friends. He wrote about the company cafeteria, employee orientation and after-hours get-togethers. When his supervisors learned of the posts, he said, they asked him to remove posts that made them uncomfortable. He said he complied but was fired two days later. A Google spokeswoman declined to comment on his situation, but confirmed that he was no longer employed there.

"I didn't intend to cause trouble," said Mr. Jen, who now works at Plaxo, a software company in Mountain View, Calif. "But because I was more transparent to the outsider than any of my co-workers, I stuck out like a sore thumb and the company didn't like it." Although many Google employees have blogs, most are anonymous, he said.

Q. What about blogging anonymously?

A. If your employer can prove that you wrote critical posts, it may be able to dismiss you.

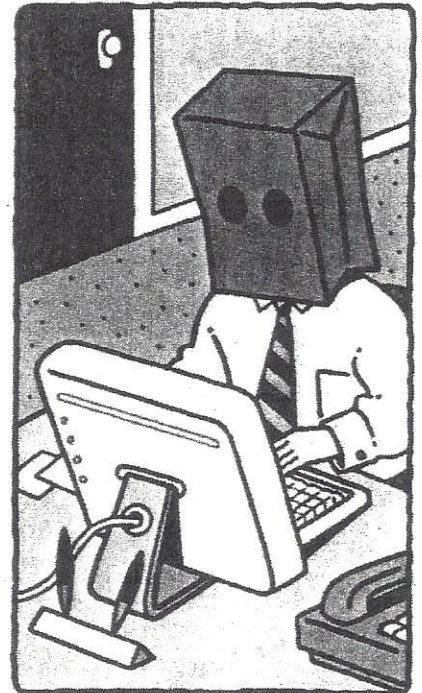
Heather Armstrong, a graphic designer who created the blog Dooce.com, learned this the hard way. In February 2002, while employed at a private software company in Los Angeles, Ms. Armstrong complained colorfully about everything from her boss to obnoxious co-workers. Though she never revealed the name of her employer, a reader figured out where she worked and sent an e-mail message about Ms. Armstrong's rants to company executives. Ms. Armstrong, who now lives in Salt Lake City, was fired immediately.

"I thought that since my blog was my personal Web space, I could say whatever I wanted," she said recently.

Q. Are there any advantages to writing about work on your personal blog?

A. From a psychological perspective, blogging about professional life can be a constructive way to vent after a frustrating work experience, said Alexander C. Halavais, professor of communication at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

And Mike Masnick, chief executive of Techdirt, a technology and business news blog based in Belmont, Calif., said employees whose blogs defend their employers



Chris Reed

against criticism could help counter negative news media attention. "Individual blog entries about a company can humanize it, instead of making it seem like a monolithic organization," he said. He added that positive posts could be a recruitment tool for a company's human resources department.

Q. What if you don't use your blog to discuss work?

A. Keeping work issues off your personal blog does not mean that your employer won't hold the blog against you. "It doesn't matter if you blog about skydiving or pornography," said Daniel M. Klein, a partner at the Atlanta law firm Buckley & Klein. "If your employer feels the blog makes you a poor representative of their corporate values, the executives have the freedom to disassociate themselves from you."

Laws prevent employers from acting against employees on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, age, religion or disability — and, in some places, sexual orientation. Many workers have few other protections, employment lawyers said.

Q. How can you find out your company's stance on blogging?

A. A joint study released in May by the ePolicy Institute and the American Management Association in New York indicated that 25 percent of 526 organizations surveyed had policies on blogging, and Ms. Flynn of the institute said that number had since increased. If you're not sure whether your employer has a policy, it may be prudent to ask first and blog later. □