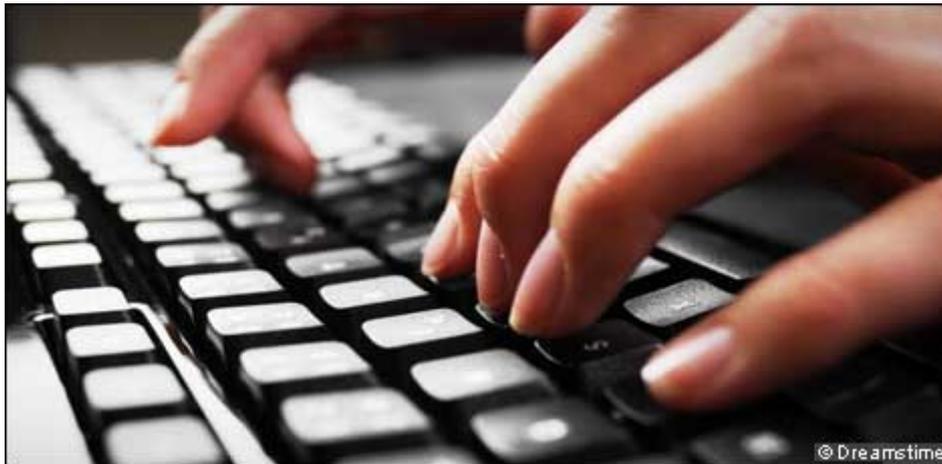


Workplace blogs present a risky proposition

Rhymer Rigby



Mini Microsoft, the anonymous blogger widely believed to be a well-informed employee working at the software company's Redmond headquarters, heavily criticised this year's Microsoft annual employee meeting. He gave a two-zero rating to Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's chief executive, and described Stephen Elop, head of Microsoft's business division, as "suck[ing] the life out of the entire stadium".

In spite of such barbs, Microsoft's attitude to employee blogs is relaxed. Steve Clayton, who works for Microsoft International's business strategy division, says the company regards its bloggers as a positive thing. "We have 5,000 to 6,000 people blogging, and we do have a fairly straightforward set of guidelines," he says. "Basically, blog smart. If you'd be concerned about it appearing in a newspaper, then don't write it in a blog. If you're heavy-handed you get people's backs up."

The London Ambulance Service take a similarly pragmatic attitude to Neenaw, a blogger who writes about life in the service's control room. A recent entry, for example, was an affectionate obituary of a vexatious drunk who used regularly to test the patience of ambulance crews. "We're aware that quite a few of our staff write blogs, and we recognise the value that these provide in helping the public to understand what we do and the challenges we face," it says.

Such tolerant employers are, however, the exception rather than the norm, as Heather Armstrong is all too aware. In 2002, after a year of blogging about the dotcom start-up for which she worked, she was sacked. Her blog Dooce led to the coinage "dooiced" – to be sacked for blogging. Ms Armstrong wrote at the time: "I was fired from my job for this website, because I had written stories that included people in my workplace. My advice to you is BE YE NOT SO STUPID."

Similarly, Ellen Simonetti, a Delta Airlines flight attendant, was fired in 2004 for posting pictures of herself on a company plane on her Queen of Sky blog.

"A blog can be career suicide if it is about your current employer and is not sanctioned by them," says Corrine Mills, managing director of Personal Career Management, the career development advisers.

But blogs are not just written by junior staff sounding off. In 2008, the anonymous Patent Troll was discovered to be Richard Frenkel, the director of intellectual property at Cisco Systems.

For obvious reasons, many bloggers try to keep their identities secret. The writer of the blog Waiter Rant disclosed neither his name nor that of the restaurant in which he worked.

Nonetheless, a cult following and a book deal resulted in the loss of privacy for both. "If you become popular, it's pretty hard to stay anonymous," says Mr Clayton.

Why then, when they risk being sacked, do workplace bloggers persist? Some are driven by a need to vent their feelings. Others have more exhibitionist tendencies and a desire for celebrity. Many believe they will gain a book deal.

Simon Benham, a literary agent who landed one such deal for Zoe Margolis, author of the blog *Girl With A One Track Mind*, which charted her sexual dalliances with people in the film industry, says publishers' enthusiasm for bloggers has diminished.

"If all you're doing is whining about your boss, nobody's going to be interested. The blogs that still get published are those that highlight an issue," he says.

Mr Benham cites *Nightjack*, the award-winning blog by a British policeman that examined society through the lens of police work.

Besides, he adds, in terms of hype, blogs have given way to the likes of Twitter – and twittering staff have already been giving employers headaches.

This, says Mr Benham, may be next gauntlet for some enterprising wage slave to pick up. At 15 words per tweet, it would take about 6,000 tweets to make a book. For anyone who can think of an entertaining way of doing this, now is the time.

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