

How to Write Your Company's Small Business Internet Usage Policy

By Joshua Feinberg

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[Second in a two-part series]

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In last issue's "How To" Tips, we looked at how to give your small business employees unrestricted Internet access, without sacrificing productivity, destroying employee morale, or getting your small business into a legal minefield. You can read part-one at <http://www.smallbiztechtalk.com/news/archives/tips061801-ht1.htm> .

Now, as promised, we'll help you gather the requisite details for drafting your company's small business Internet usage policy.

Use the following Top 10 list as the basis for subject headings in planning your company's one to two-page policy document.

Note: As mentioned in part one, <http://www.smallbiztechtalk.com/news/archives/tips061801-ht1.htm> , be sure to check with your attorney and other key parties, such as middle managers and your small business computer consultant, before you implement the policy discussed here.

This article is NOT a substitute for sound small business legal advice. It is merely meant to help you get your thoughts organized, so that you can have a more productive session when you bring your local attorney into the final review loop.

1. Monitoring/surveillance

List what types of activities will be monitored, how often the monitoring will take place, who is responsible for the monitoring and the procedures for how violations will be communicated to company management.

2. Notification

To prevent invasion of privacy claims, regardless of their merit, discuss how employees are initially notified of the Internet usage policy, how this notification is formalized or documented, and how employees are subsequently reminded of the small business Internet usage policy.

Tip: Think about implementing a pop-up disclaimer that's displayed during each user's logon, which reinforces that usage is subject to the company's policy on acceptable small business Internet usage.

3. Expectation of no privacy

Detail how employees should have no expectation of privacy, both internally and externally, and how activities are traceable. Compare e-mail to sending a postcard through postal mail.

4. Deleted e-mail retention

Describe how company e-mail is archived and the length of time that deleted e-mail is retained.

5. Ownership

Inform employees that PCs, servers, LAN, and Internet access are company-owned small business assets and that the company, not the individuals, owns both the physical assets and information stored in all systems.

6. Protection of intellectual privacy

Itemize any specific small business types of intellectual property, trade secrets, client lists, formulas or related data that cannot be sent out through company Internet access resources.

7. Position on personal usage

Spell out detailed examples of what types of personal usage is either acceptable or forbidden. In many cases, you can provide additional clarification by relating the company's policy on small business Internet usage to analogies of personal telephone usage.

8. Acceptable usage of e-mail, web browsing, and newsgroups/message boards

Discuss standards for proper use of company e-mail, including analogies to official company letterhead or memos.

Gives examples of the type of work-related web browsing that is both acceptable and encouraged.

List guidelines for participation in newsgroups and message boards as official representation of the company's opinions and positions.

This is also the perfect place to list if only certain job functions or departments are authorized for specific resources, as well as if special management permission is required for specific resource access.

9. Unacceptable usage of e-mail, web browsing, and newsgroups/message boards

List any specific activities that you wish to explicitly ban.

These might include unauthorized mass e-mail mailings, online gaming or gambling, stock trading, commerce for personal gain, creation or distribution of computer viruses, dissemination of vulgar, racist, or obscene material, violations of copyright law, leaking sensitive or confidential information, software piracy, or attempting to hack into another system.

For any gray areas that are forbidden, listing the small business company justification goes a long way toward employee acceptance.

10. Investigation of and sanctions for violations

If your company has human resources policies and procedures that document behaviors that could lead to termination, discuss how this is related to violations of small business Internet usage.

If your small business has no similar policies and procedures, now is the time to list any investigative procedures and sanctions for blatant, first time, or repeat violations.

The Bottom Line

While you certainly don't want to give your small business employees the eerie feeling that "Big Brother" is watching, it's important to have a concise, clearly defined small business Internet usage policy that's both free of tech and legal jargon.

Give concrete examples of do's and don'ts, in an effort to stave off any perception of ambiguity.

As recommended in part one of this article

<http://www.smallbiztechtalk.com/news/archives/tips061801-ht1.htm> , follow this up with training sessions and reminders at company meetings.

If you don't want your small business' Internet usage policy to be perceived like the removal of mattress tags, it's crucial that you take time to make sure everyone understands the policy.

Use the suggested subject headings in this issue's "How To" Tips as a template for drafting your company's small business Internet usage policy.

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