

Online social networking sites and work

More and more people are registering with and using social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Friendsters to stay in touch with friends & families. These online social networking sites are growing at a great speed and being more accessible as a means of communication.

When used appropriately online social networking sites can be a great way of finding old friends, sharing information, staying in touch with friends & families and joining interest groups.

In today's world work is a very big part of our lives so it is only natural that people discuss to some degree their public life in private in online conversations. However, nurses, healthcare assistants, students and midwives should be careful as these online conversations are stored permanently and searchable by the public. In other words, it is in the public domain, and can be used by employers against staff if they feel that you have acted inappropriately or breached patient confidentiality.

Like any other profession, you have a right to a personal life. Using online social networking sites whilst fun can be hazardous and confidentiality can potentially be inadvertently breached if employees discuss personal and sensitive things relating to work on online conversations. Some employers are concerned about this and if confidentiality is breached this could be seen as bringing the employer into disrepute. We are seeing a growing number of employees and nurses being dismissed for this kind of breach of practice.

The nurses and midwives' profession is guided by the Standards of conduct, performance and ethics for nurses and midwives (2008), which states that:

- You must treat people as individuals and respect their dignity
- You must respect people's rights to confidentiality
- You must uphold the reputation of your profession at all time.

If you are in doubt about using online social networking sites ask your Human Resources Department for their policy on internet use and social networking.

We have put together some questions and answers which can be used as guidelines.

Question: Can my boss discipline me for using online social networking sites during work time?

Answer: Yes, if you are supposed to be working. Using online social

networking sites in work time could be grounds for initiating a disciplinary process. However, some employers allow employees to use online social networking sites during clearly defined breaks during the working day. If in doubt check to see what policy the trust has on online social networking and work.

Question: Am I breaching the standards code of practice if I post an anonymous picture of a naked body?

Answer: Yes such activity could count as gross misconduct and even result in dismissal. Even when you cannot identify a patient or service user your employer may feel that you have breached their dignity. Also there are strict guidelines about taking images of patients and service users which includes having a signed consent. It's hard because in some environments you may take patients out for trips and your photos may be of this. However, we would always recommend caution if you take photos in these circumstances. Perhaps you could display them on a board in the ward or department with the manager's permission.

Question: Can my employer monitor what I am writing on social network online?

Answer: Your employer is allowed to monitor what happens at work including use of the internet. They can do this with or without your consent – but only if they inform staff in advance what is being monitored. Has the trust got a policy? Check this.

Question: After a difficult shift I sometimes use online social networking to sound off at my friends and de-stress. Can I do this?

Answer: Yes within reason you can, however what you cannot do is to use it to describe a difficult or challenging patient nor should you use it to sound off about your manager or colleague – remember it's all in the public domain and can come back to bite you at some point later.

Question: Can I criticise my organisation on online social networking sites if they are bad?

Answer: No it's not a sensible thing to do as everything is in the public domain. This simple guidance is not intended to frighten you, nor is it intended to control what you do or come across as big brother watching you. It is meant to get you to think and act with caution how you use online social networking sites. It is meant to ensure that you do not inadvertently risk your job and career.

Question: I normally ask my friend who is a nurse and works at the hospital where I am an outpatient to look up my blood results. Is this seen as a breach in any way?

Answer: Yes, if your friend is acting beyond her/his professional duties this will be construed as breaching the Data Protection Act. Your employer would have the right to initiate disciplinary process.

If this has made you think and you want some further advice speak in UNISON **joining is easy** <http://www.unison.org.uk/join/index.asp>. For more information on the nursing and midwifery family in UNISON go to <http://www.unison.org.uk/healthcare/nursing/index.asp>