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TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

How Web 2.0 Could Change Your Firm's Recruiting & More

Has your firm been checking out potential hires on social network Web sites such as MySpace? Or perhaps your CPAs are blogging now about the firm and its services. If your CPA firm is involved with such activities, you are already part of the Web 2.0 revolution.

The possibilities for using social networking, blogs, wikis, and other such means for communication, sharing best practices, building communities, and direct and indirect recruiting and employment branding appear to be just getting started.

AOMAR shares some information in this article that can help your firm as you explore the options to be sure that you are prepared and protected in using these new technology tools.

What is Web 2.0? Web 2.0 is the next generation of Internet use, with a focus on Web-based communities and hosted services such as social networking sites (think FaceBook and MySpace), blogs (short for Web logs), and wikis (collaborative Web sites or the software used to create them).

All Web 2.0 technologies foster sharing and collaboration—which makes them high-potential technologies for use by CPA firms as a way to share information, as well as to explore recruits and build the firm's brand online.

Human resources professionals already had an early leg up in the use of Web 2.0 as they discovered that Generation Y job applicants were

users of social networks—places where it was quite possible to see another side of those applicants.

At large companies—probably including some of your clients—Web 2.0 is being used in internal blogs or social networks. They perform the very useful functions of keeping far-flung employees, teams, and divisions in touch, sharing best practices and other useful information and serving as a way to train. Organizations are beginning to see the value of these arrangements for more formalized training, as well as informal company-wide communications.

An emerging use of Web 2.0 for HR is as a more active application on the recruitment front. Encouraging blogging about your firm as a great workplace is just one more way to get the word out about it and may be a helpful tactic to attract more talent. It can also be a great way for your CPA firm's partners to participate in dialogues with clients and potential clients in specific niche and specialty markets.

Legal issues. If you want to use these tools for recruiting purposes, you should know that the traditional rules apply about avoiding discrimination and harassment and protecting privacy, noted Stanley Pierre-Louis, vice president and associate general counsel for intellectual property and content protection, Viacom Inc. (New York City). He was a participant in a recent panel discussion in an audio conference, *Best Practices for Businesses Exploring, Exploiting, and Expanding in Web 2.0*, sponsored by Pike & Fischer (a division of IOMA, AOMAR's publisher).

Pierre-Louis suggested that in addition to having a policy for the use of Web 2.0 tools, firms should keep logs and documents on electronic activities such as these. A document-retention policy is now a must to cover electronically stored information.

Make it clear to employees who owns the blog: the firm. "Employee training is important—and so is simple language in your handbooks," he said.

Beyond policies for use, there are other legal considerations to be aware of that are related to the use of Web 2.0 tools.

The information that can be put on internal or external blog or network and liability for misuse of information were explored during the audioconfer-

ence. Although it seems fairly clear that a blogger may be able to take advantage of the shield laws protecting journalists in many jurisdictions, this may not be the case in all blog and social network uses. It can depend on what employees are blogging about out there.

Obviously, your firm will want both partners and staff to take care not to reveal sensitive client information in a blog! Guidelines setting forth proper behavior can help avoid any gray areas, whether you are making internal or external use of Web 2.0 tools. Suggestions for a blogging policy are in the accompanying sidebar, which we have adapted from the policy in place at IBM.

Sample Blogging Guidelines

The 11 points listed below are adapted from IBM's *Guide to Blogging*.

1. Blogging activities should follow the firm's guidelines on such issues as revealing firm or client information.
2. Blogs, wikis, and other forms of online discourse are individual interactions—not corporate communications. Firm participants are personally responsible for what they post and should remember that what is written may be public for a long time. Where appropriate, protect your privacy.
3. Identify yourself—name and, when relevant, your role at the firm—when blogging about the firm or matters related to it. And write in the first person to make it clear that you are speaking for yourself, not on behalf of the firm.
4. If you publish a blog or post to a blog and it has something to do with work you do or subjects associated with the firm, use a disclaimer such as this: "The postings on this site are my own and don't necessarily represent [firm's name] positions, strategies, or opinions."
5. Respect copyright, fair use, and financial disclosure laws.
6. Don't provide the firm's or another's confidential or other proprietary information.
7. Don't cite or reference clients, partners, or suppliers without their approval.
8. Respect your audience. Don't use ethnic slurs, personal insults, or obscenity and show proper consideration for others' privacy and for topics that may be considered objectionable or inflammatory like politics and religion.
9. Find out who else is blogging on the topic and cite them.
10. Don't pick fights, be the first to correct your own mistakes, and don't alter previous posts without indicating that you have done so.
11. Try to add value. Provide worthwhile information and perspective.

Your internal blog can be a very powerful networking tool within your organization, but there are some questions about the ownership of that blog, noted Stephen Hollman, an attorney and principal in the Business and Technology Law Group (San Jose, CA) and chairman of the American Bar Association Section of Science & Technology Law's National Task Force and Committee on Blogs and User-Generated Content on the Internet. He was a participant in the audio conference and its moderator.

There have been recent court challenges on the ownership issue related to whether the company supported the blog with its resources and technology. Such support may become key to making a determination of ownership, Hollman noted. Your firm's attorney should be part of any policy-setting initiative.

In the realm of social networks, we find companies are using them as means to brand products. This leads to great possibilities for sourcing new hires by marketing your CPA firm's employment brand. Business networks such as LinkedIn are already building networks among individuals, so it makes sense

that organizations would want to use the technology to recruit.

If your firm wishes to explore this type of sourcing, keep in mind that you would do best to protect the privacy of the contacts you make, just as you would the privacy of any individual sourced by more traditional means. There are lawsuits brewing about the use (often without the knowledge of those who have participated in contacting individuals in a social network) of information to track patterns in purchasing of products, for instance. Again, if there is any question about how you are handling contacts derived from LinkedIn or other sites, consult your firm's counsel for guidance.

Copyright policies. Though it may seem like a great idea to post an article from a magazine about a new training practice on your in-house blog, that action can constitute a violation of copyright laws and the firm—as owner of the blog—will be liable.

There are safe harbors available to protect the organization from legal liability under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. This law requires the use and enforcement of a copyright policy and a way for those who see a copyright violation to alert the organization and have the offending material removed from your site.

Following these requirements can be helpful for protecting user-generated content sites from damages, explained Fred von Lohmann, senior staff attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation (San Francisco). Your attorney can make sure that these protections are in place for your Web 2.0 uses.

For more information:

The complete CD and handouts for *Best Practices for Businesses Exploring, Exploiting, and Expanding in Web 2.0* are available at www.pf.com/events. □

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