

In the firing line

Don't get caught out at work, Executive PA takes a look at some of the greyer areas of the law when it comes to the office BY ANNIE WADDINGTON-FEATHER

According to a SmartCompany and Roy Morgan Poll released last year, PAs and sales reps are the most likely staff members to be sacked, so perhaps your job isn't as secure as you thought. So what can you get the sack for, or at very least face a disciplinary? There are a lot of grey areas, particularly in your position and the professional relationship you have with your boss.

Whilst you get on well with your boss, is it really acceptable to 'poke' them on the social networking site facebook.com?

Given that some PAs actually manage their boss's facebook account, one rule doesn't fit all. Sharan Burrrow, president of Australian Council of Trade Unions comments, "We need to be cautious about how much cross over there is between personal and professional relationships and how these are managed at work."

If I write my blog in my own time surely it's not a problem?

When it comes to blogging, you need to think twice before clicking the upload button. Although, blogger Catherine Sanderson (aka 'La Petite Anglaise'), an English secretary in the Paris office of accountants Dixon Wilson, won her unfair dismissal case of gross misconduct, Bruce Arnold of Caslon Analytics warns, "Being able to do a Petite Anglaise by turning misfortune into a book and film deal is very unusual. Most people will get five minutes of media coverage and then be back looking for a job."

"Organisations are indeed becoming unhappy about what PAs (and other staff) are writing in blogs, on social network sites, and in conversations at dinner parties or the pub," Bruce explains. "However, they are dealing with that in-house and they're being smart in relation to dismissals. They don't dismiss on the basis of having a blog per se. Instead they find other reasons to let people go and since the mid-2000s those reasons aren't too hard to find." Further more, 'online' doesn't magic away defamation law. The best advice is "don't write graffiti on the world's biggest notice board," says Bruce wisely.

Could you fall out of favour for accepting a gift from a client?

You've worked hard with your boss on a particular contract and the client wants to show its appreciation by



giving you a luxurious Christmas hamper. Some companies have a policy of not accepting gifts over a certain value. Whilst it may seem unfair to you, it could be seen as potentially influencing your decision in future contracts. "It all comes down to individual company policies," comments Christine Brown, national administration director for the Australian Institute of Office Professionals. "We advise all our members to look closely at the ethics and compliance company policies."

Whilst you're a party animal outside of work, what is the acceptable level of 'letting your hair down' at the office party?

Spokesman for the Community & Public Sector Union (CPSU) Dermot Browne, comments, "We advise all people to act with restraint at work parties, particularly at Christmas. People have lost jobs as a result of getting drunk at a Christmas party and there are certain standards expected of you."

Could your company sack you if you became personally involved with another member of staff or a competitor?

In 2004 a PA was dismissed because she had a relationship with a salesperson associated with her employer's company*. Her employer said she had to "decide where her priorities lay." Whilst the PA won her unfair dismissal in the courts, this case does highlight the issues of 'pillow talk' and although work and play are separate entities there is still a lot of grey area around this matter. "Many people actually meet their future partners through work," comments Dermot. "A lot of it comes down to the way you act. You are a professional and should behave in a professional way." It all comes down to individual company policy so check your contract. ■

* Case study taken from www.rightsatwork.com.au

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Australian Council of Trade Unions
www.actu.asn.au

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