

Internet Usage Policy: Does Your Practice Have One? **Ann Spicer, EVP**

Your office or practice has undoubtedly invested substantial resources in order to make it possible for employees to communicate electronically and seek information via the World Wide Web. These investments help employees do their jobs in a more efficient manner, but can also be used for unacceptable purposes that can ultimately cause you harm.

Do you suspect that your employees might be visiting inappropriate web sites at work, potentially opening your practice to a sexual harassment complaint? Have your employees downloaded software products that your office is not licensed to use in violation of software piracy rules? Are your employees conducting personal or other business unrelated to your practice that costs you time and money?

If your practice does not already have an Internet usage policy in place, you should implement one immediately. Such a policy will define for your employees what is acceptable and what is not when using electronic communications in the workplace.

An Internet usage policy should be a section of your employee handbook/personnel manual which clearly states that electronic communication resources should be used for business purposes only. Several examples of appropriate usage should be listed. Examples of appropriate usage might include:

- Communicating with fellow employees and suppliers
- Conducting the business of "XYZ" Family Health
- Researching topics that are relevant to your specific job requirements.

It should be noted in your general Internet policy that other existing employee policies applying to normal business behavior also apply when sending e-mail and using the Internet. This can be something as simple as being lax with grammar and spelling. People seem to be more careless with electronic communications than they are with more traditional or formal methods of communication. Such carelessness creates an unprofessional image of your practice to outsiders.

Any employee Internet policy guideline should include the following points:

- Any downloaded software becomes the property of the office/practice, and must meet all applicable license and copyright regulations. Any employee who knowingly violates software piracy rules is subject to termination.
- An employee's communication during business hours is not considered to be private. The office/practice has the right to monitor an employee's Internet usage – both in terms of sites visited and length of visits. The office/practice has the right to block sites that it determines are inappropriate or unnecessary. Trying to "unblock" blocked sites is grounds for termination.

- Any employee that continually visits "unauthorized" sites is subject to termination after an initial warning has been issued. Obscene and pornographic sites are considered to be "unauthorized" sites. Display of pornographic or sexually explicit images on computer monitors is a violation of the office/practice sexual harassment policy (another policy that your employee handbook should contain). If an employee receives sexually explicit material from someone outside the office via e-mail, the material should be destroyed and the sender should be advised that additional material of this nature is not welcome. If the sexually explicit material is sent from within the office by a fellow employee, the sender should be warned that they are violating the office's sexual harassment policy and will be dealt with accordingly. The same procedures should apply to materials sent that show bad taste/bad judgment.
- Employees should not use office Internet capabilities to conduct illegal activity.
- Employees should always honestly disclose their identities when using electronic communication resources at work.
- Employees should keep their user identification and assigned passwords confidential.

Having an Internet usage policy in place will encourage employees to make wise use of the resources you have provided for them. In the event an employee abuses these resources, having an Internet usage policy as part of your employee handbook will give you the tools you need to take corrective action and, if necessary, discipline the offender.