

DIGITAL OMNIPOTENCE: What Your Employees Do Can Hurt You

by Lena L. West

How are your employees using their business email accounts? When in the office, what web sites are they visiting? Do you know? If you don't, you should make it your business to find out – and quick! You could be putting the company's security and longevity at risk!

An electronic communications policy (ECP) is a simple document that outlines both monitoring protocol and what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate use of company-provided computers, telephony equipment and Internet/Intranet access. The ECP also outlines disciplinary actions for abuses of equipment and services.

Decades ago, only major corporations needed ECPs but, with the ubiquity of computers, digital services and mobile computing, smaller businesses have to protect themselves as well. Here's what your ECP should include:

1. **Surveillance.** List how often monitoring will take place along with who is responsible for handling monitoring and what activities will be monitored.
2. **Privacy.** Make it clear that company-owned equipment and services are subject to review by company management *without prior notice*. Management should reserve the right to monitor activities that appear to be suspicious.
3. **Personal Use.** Outline what is considered personal use of services and equipment. Be as specific as possible by offering examples.
4. **Banned Activities.** Make a specific list of activities that are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Go over these items early and often.
5. **Ownership.** Stress that company-owned equipment and services are supplied by the company and thus, owned by the company. Reserve the right to take possession of equipment at any time.
6. **Notification.** Let the employee know how and when they will be reminded of the company's ECP. It may be at every personnel review, it may be a pop-up dialog box at log on (these system messages are not affected by pop-up blockers). Whatever method you choose, ensure that your employees see the notification and that they are aware of it.
7. **Intellectual Property.** Outline what is considered company intellectual property. Express how and with whom this information is to be shared. Remind employees that email, instant messaging and blogs are not secure mediums.
8. **Infractions.** Specifically detail the disciplinary procedures if and when violations do occur. Do not waiver from this policy for anyone. All employees, regardless of rank, should be subject to the same rules.
9. **Win/Win.** Explain that the ECP is not a "big brother" tactic that the company is using to keep track of them. Make it clear how the ECP protects both the company and its employees.

Don't forget to have your employees sign the ECP. This will serve as acknowledgement that they have both received and understand the policy.

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