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Using social media



A guide to making comments about the department and the government online

New technology is testing traditional boundaries when it comes to how we, as Australian Government employees, need to behave when making comments publicly about the work our department does, about the government and about the Australian Public Service (APS) more generally.

In 2012 new guidance was provided to public servants about making public comment and participating online. This issue arose again in 2013 and is reflected in the revised APS Code of Conduct and Values; it remains a grey area that requires consideration by all of us before commenting.

To help you navigate the current environment, the department's social media policy is a good starting point for advice on acceptable use of social media, both in the workplace and in a private capacity. It includes information on employee conduct, access and publishing content.

This factsheet provides additional guidance on making comments about the department and the government in your personal use of social media and as an official spokesperson.

It all starts with the APS Code of Conduct

The APS Code of Conduct and Values apply to the use of social media by APS employees in the same way that they apply to all other aspects of professional and personal behaviour. They are your starting point when it comes to deciding how you will behave online – even in your personal life.

Regulation 2.1 of the Public Service Regulations 1999 refers to employees' duty not to disclose information that is not publicly available.

These are reflected in the department's social media policy. Together, the APS Code of Conduct and Values form part of your conditions of employment and define what is acceptable when you use social media and other online forums that enable you to make comments publicly.

Key points

When engaging in a private capacity

Do

- include a clear disclaimer on your platform: 'views expressed are my own'
- assume your work place can be identified
- always abide by the APS Values and Code of Conduct
- know how the platform works and have privacy settings in place
- think before you post
- talk to your manager if in doubt.

Don't

- be seen to speak on behalf of the department or government
- release information that is not otherwise publicly available
- link your account to a departmental email address or website.

What do we mean by making comments publicly?

Departmental employees, like other members of the community, have the right to freedom of expression. However, this is subject to the public maintaining confidence in both the department and government to deliver services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously. If this ability is compromised or is perceived to be compromised, the reputation of the department, the government and/or the APS as a whole is weakened.

Making comments publicly can come about by using social media or other media systems that are available outside our workplace to share information or opinions. APS employees using social media and making comments about the department and government means thinking about how the Code of Conduct applies to the following issues:

- sharing articles that comment on government policy or departmental business and adding your own opinion or point of view
- 'liking' or following groups or organisations that are critical of government policy and/or the department and/or the APS
- commenting about the work you or your colleagues do
- criticising the department or the government.

Private capacity

APS employees may generally make public comment in a private capacity, so long as it is apparent that you are expressing your own personal views and are not a representative of the department or the Australian Government when making them.

In using social media privately, you should remember to behave in a way that demonstrates you will act apolitically in your work and that your ability to fulfil your duties in an unbiased manner could not be seen to be compromised.

What about public comment associated with my profession? If you want to participate in discussions or forums that are about a specific profession that relates to your APS employment—or which may be wholly separate from it—you may make comment in that capacity. For example, if you're a scientist you may use social media to discuss academic work in your own time and outside your APS role. Or you may participate in a social media group run by your professional association or industry group.

Whenever making comments publicly using social media it is important that it is made clear that you are not representing the department or the government.

Official capacity

Sometimes employees use social media as part of their job. This involves providing comments on behalf of the department on social media or in other public forums online. Approval by the Governance Branch and your SES is required to make public comments in an official capacity.



Quick Fact

- If you wouldn't put it on the office noticeboard or say it in the elevator, think twice about posting it online.
- When commenting online in a private capacity be mindful that if you mention or identify the department, it could be seen to connect your private online comment to your employment.
- All APS employees are subject to the APS Code of Conduct and values at all times. 'Anonymously' posted material does not remove the expectation that you will abide by the APS Code of Conduct. Always remember it can still be traced to a particular individual. Security settings do not guarantee privacy, and online material can be easily replicated.
- Be mindful that even if you don't identify yourself as an employee of the department or the APS, you could still be easily recognised. You should assume that at some point your identity and the nature of your employment will be revealed.
- Material posted online is effectively permanent, and may be replicated endlessly and sent to recipients who you never intended to see it, or who may view it out of context.
- The department's social media policy is the best place to start if you are looking for more information on use of social media. This also links to other resources to guide you in your social media activities.

