

Think before you write, or don't write anything at all

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



The December hacking of the Sony Corp. emails and company records, including pay and personnel files, sent shock waves around the world and embarrassed the international entertainment company.

Many of the Sony emails that were leaked to the public were written by high-placed executives and contained racially charged jokes, harsh remarks about celebrities and unsavory comments about co-workers.

It's not the first time, nor will it be the last time that a major corporation has been embarrassed by these kinds of "leaks."

Some classic examples include the 2014 leaking of a staff memo sent out by the CEO of a prominent online bill-paying company. He was chewing out employees for their refusal to use the company's services.

Likewise in 2013, the CEO of an Internet company reamed out employees in a leaked memo for not using the company's email services. Ouch! If their own employees won't use their companies' services, why would the public after reading these two leaked emails?

In the wake of the Sony disclosures, company officials fixated on finding the source of the leaks. Most attention turned to North Korean hackers, with some cyber security experts believing that the hackers received "inside" help.

A company's first reaction often is to focus on finding and punishing those responsible for leaks. But equal energy should be devoted to finding ways to keep embarrassing disclosures that damage a company's reputation from happening again.

You don't have to be the CEO of a major corporation to be worried about having embarrassing dirty laundry leaked. The owners of even small local businesses can easily find themselves the subjects of embarrassing headlines in local publications, if they are careless.

So, what should you do? Accept the reality that there is no such thing as "privacy" in this digital age. The minute you hit "send" on an email, you really do not know where it will end up. You can misspell an email address and it inadvertently can quickly be in someone else's hands. Or, your email may arrive in the intended inbox, but is forwarded to numerous other recipients that you never thought would see it.

Employees should not expect privacy when using company emails. Some industries, particularly financial industries, are renowned for monitoring employee emails to ferret out fraud and other wrongdoing.

Courts also can order company emails, memos and reports disclosed during lawsuit discovery. Law enforcement may have an interest in taking a peek, as well. Sent and received emails and company documents can remain archived on servers for days, weeks, or infinity, depending on user policies.

To avoid being embarrassed, don't put anything in writing that you would not want to see widely published. Remain professional. Do not badmouth bosses, coworkers or clients. Do not make off-hand, or inappropriate remarks. Think before you write...and maybe, don't write anything at all.

Written communication has its limits. In an email, or memo, you cannot convey your tone of voice or body language. Relevant background information may be omitted. Sometimes it is better and safer to talk face-to-face with someone, or pick up the phone and speak with them directly. Managers and employees should never forget the importance of effective communication.

Separate business and private communications. Don't order Amazon purchases over your company's email. Don't go job-hunting using your present employer's computer system. I know of a woman who was fired after her boss monitored her company emails and discovered her setting up a competing company.

Companies should adopt a written policy defining how a company's email system can be used; how to avoid inappropriate content; and how long emails, memos and documents should remain on company servers.

And if an embarrassing internal exchange does bubble into the public, don't get defensive and shoot the messenger, when asked about it. Acknowledge the mistake, apologize if appropriate and review company policies to prevent future problems.

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