

# An employee guide to social media best practices

This best practices document on the use of social media expands upon the [Executive Order 1089 for Social Media Use](#) for all employees within the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) on the use of social media sites.

## Purpose

WSDOT compiled these best practices to assist staff when working with social media in official, professional or personal capacities. Social media offers the opportunity to interact with the public and employees in new and dynamic ways that facilitate transparency, interactivity and collaboration. These tools engage populations differently than traditional media and enhance existing communication strategies.

Best practices with social media. WSDOT uses social media for agency business purposes as a way to offer opportunities for outreach, information sharing and interaction. These best practices provide general information about the culture of social media and how to be a good citizen of the social media environment.<sup>1</sup> WSDOT staff who are engaged with social media should educate themselves about effective, responsible and safe use of these tools.

## Types of use of social media

This document addresses three distinct uses of social media and provides guidelines for each:

- **Official use.** Official use of social media is defined as use of social media as an authorized component of an employee's WSDOT job duties. Examples of this would be authorized tweeting on behalf of WSDOT Twitter account, posting content to WSDOT's Flickr, blog, YouTube and Facebook accounts.
- **Professional use at work.** Employee's professional use of social media only for approved business purposes, including professional networking, to support the agency's mission provided the WSDOT policies are followed. Employees may occasionally be asked by WSDOT or the Governor's office to participate in online forums to express their personal views or opinions. Participation in those forums is considered to be for official state purpose and an employee may use work time and/or state agency owned equipment to participate.
- **Personal use of social media at or outside of work.** Personal use of social media is defined as social media use on an account registered to an individual and their personal (non-WSDOT) email address that is not for WSDOT business purposes. Personal use of social media is NOT ALLOWED on WSDOT work time, equipment or resources.

## Related policies

Employees are required to follow applicable WSDOT policies, including [E 1021 Employee Use of Electronic Communication Systems](#) and [Information Technology Manual - Chapter 960.09 Internet Monitoring/Filtering/Blocking Procedures](#).

<sup>1</sup> This document's content is adapted from the Attorney General's Office Social Media Best Practices, [Guidelines and Best Practices for Social Media Use in Washington State](#), which in turn adapted content from [IBM Social Computing Guidelines, State of Utah Social Media Guidelines](#) and the [Washington State Bar Association Social Media Guidelines](#).

## Definitions

See Definitions located in [EO 1089 Social Media Use](#).

## Basic social media principles

These principles are universal when using social media officially, professionally or personally.

**Be aware: communication via social media is powerful.** Social media tools allow information to be communicated almost instantly to a broad audience, perhaps literally around the world.

- Communication via social media (for example on Facebook) is often not anonymous. Privacy settings may not create the level of privacy intended and even “anonymous” posts may not actually be or truly remain anonymous.
- Communications via social media are recorded and widely available for an indefinite length of time.

**Be responsible.** Be responsible for material posted. At times employees may use social media for official or professional agency business purposes; however, employees may be perceived by others as speaking on behalf of WSDOT regardless of intent or authority to do so. Carefully consider content and how it may be perceived. What is published will be accessible for some time and, in some cases, indefinitely.

**Be honest and transparent.** Honesty – or dishonesty – will be quickly noticed in the social media environment. Don’t communicate under anyone else’s name or photo. Don’t use fake names. If social media use is an authorized component of an employee’s WSDOT job duties, use the WSDOT logo.

**Correct errors quickly.** If a mistake is made, admit it. Be upfront and quickly provide the correct information. If appropriate, modify an earlier post to make it clear that the error has been corrected. If an employee makes a mistake using a WSDOT social media account, a supervisor should be notified.

**Be respectful.** When disagreeing with others’ opinions, keep it appropriate and polite. Do not use defamatory or libelous language or engage in damaging innuendo. Do not use abusive, threatening, offensive, obscene, explicit or racist language.

**Be relevant and add value.** The best way to get content read is to contribute information that people value. Social communication from agencies should help citizens, partners and co-workers. It can be thought-provoking and should build a sense of community. If social communication helps people improve knowledge or skills, build their businesses, do their jobs, solve problems, or understand the state better, then it is adding value.

**Be conversational.** When communicating via social media, use the same approach that one would use when talking to a person on the phone. Bring in personality to personalize the voice/tone of the agency. Use plain language and avoid using government jargon or acronyms. Consider content that is open-ended and invites responses. Encourage comments. Broaden the conversation by referring to others who are commenting about the same topic and allowing content to be shared or syndicated. When shortening words to save space, utilize commonly used shorthand.

**Abide by social media provider rules.** By joining a particular social network or service, an employee agrees to abide by that provider’s terms of service, so review those terms carefully and run them by our agency’s Assistant Attorney General as needed.



Communication via social media is often not anonymous.

Make sure you check and update your social media privacy settings.

## Official use of social media

All agency-related communication through social media should be conducted in accordance with all applicable WSDOT policies, practices and expectations. Wherever possible, consider the following:

**Authorization.** Employees should not participate on social media websites or other online forums on behalf of WSDOT unless authorized to do so by the agency Communications Director. If a division or office would like to request a new social media tool, send an email to the agency Communications Director that includes: the name of the requestor, the office or program name, the social tool requested, reason(s) for the request and a justification for why this tool should be added to our current social media tool set.

**Confidentiality.** Whether using social media for agency business purpose or for personal use, employees should not post or release proprietary, confidential, sensitive, or personally identifiable information or state government intellectual property. Social networking and social media are not an appropriate forum for any type of confidential communications. Employees using social media should also be aware of and adhere to State Information Technology Security Standards. See the [Office of the Chief Information Officer's State Technology Manual, Section 141](#) and [RCW 42.52.050](#) regarding confidential information in the State Ethics Law.

**Links.** Employees should take extra care in posting links. For example, consider possible ramifications or perceptions in light of the intended use when posting links to commercial sites on behalf of WSDOT. Sharing or posting links that support/oppose ballot measures or initiatives or are associated with political purposes/campaigns are prohibited due to state ethics law ([EEB Advisory Opinion 04-01](#)). Linking to an outside company website could be perceived as promoting its products or services and could also violate state ethics law.

**Identify yourself clearly.** When creating social media accounts that require individual identification and when posting or exchanging information on social media forums, authorized users speaking on behalf of the agency should identify themselves by: 1) Full Name; 2) Title; 3) Agency/Division; and 4) Contact Information, if possible.

**Employee privacy.** WSDOT monitors Internet usage on its network. Furthermore, there should be no expectation of privacy when publishing information via social media concerning the agency.

**Understand first amendment rights.** Although WSDOT can moderate social media sites that accept comments from the public (such as Facebook and blogs) to restrict speech that is obscene, threatening, discriminatory, harassing, or off topic, we cannot use the moderation function to restrict speech with which WSDOT merely disagrees (e.g. subject matter restrictions). Users have First Amendment rights in posting content to public social media sites hosted by state agencies. Moderators must respect those rights by posting all comments other than those excluded for specific legitimate reasons, such as those identified in [WSDOT's Terms of Comment](#). When in doubt, consult the department's Assistant Attorney General.

**Don't feed the rumor mill.** Employees should merely say, "No comment" to rumors. Do not deny or affirm them—or suggest either denial or affirmation in subtle ways.



### Know the difference:

- ✓ Official use
- ✓ Professional use at work
- ✓ Personal use of social media at or outside of work

**Handling negative comments.** The purpose of many social media sites is to engage and get feedback from the public. One should expect that some of the feedback received will be negative. Some effective ways to respond to negative comments include:

- Providing accurate information
- Respectfully disagree
- Acknowledge that it is possible to hold different points of view

**Stick to your area of expertise.** Provide a unique, individual perspective. Post meaningful, respectful comments that inform, educate and engage citizens. Do not just repost press releases. If employees get questions on topics that aren't in their area of expertise, make every effort to contact the content owner for clarification before responding. Example from [Guidelines and Best Practices for Social Media Use in Washington State](#): An environmental agency might post information it has developed regarding endangered species, share information from other sources about natural resources, or comment on another source's information on carbon footprints, but wouldn't post information about licensing foster homes.

**Handling media inquiries.** WSDOT social media identities may lead to increased inquiries from the media. If an employee is contacted directly by a reporter, refer media questions to WSDOT Communications.

**Respect proprietary information or content and confidentiality.** WSDOT must own or have a clear right to use all content that is published. Always give people credit for their work. Make sure WSDOT has the right to use material (text, photos, etc.) with attribution before publishing. It is a good practice to link to others' work rather than reproducing it on our site. If posting photos or videos, be sure to have people in the photo or video (including agency staff) sign a release or ensure that a signed [video](#) and [photo](#) release is currently on file.

**Respond quickly.** When a response is appropriate, reply to comments in a timely manner. Be sure to have enough staff time to review comments on a regular basis and have identified one or more individuals who are authorized to respond on behalf of the agency.

**Keep social media use in perspective.** Agency business use of social media, including professional networking, should further WSDOT's mission and values. If an employee is authorized to use social media as part of their job duties, be sure use meets your supervisor's expectations and is targeted to those duties.

## Professional use of social media

**Permitted use.** Staff may use social networking for approved state business purposes, including professional networking, to support the agency's mission provided they follow [WSDOT's Social Media Use Executive Order](#). Use of social networking for personal purposes is not permitted when using state resources (which includes but isn't limited to time, equipment, and contact lists). Employees may occasionally be asked by WSDOT or the Governor's office to participate in online forums to express their personal views or opinions. Participation in those forums is considered to be for official state purpose and an employee may use work time and/or state agency owned equipment to participate

**Recognize that professional opinions may be interpreted as an agency policy or position.** Make clear when possible that opinions do not necessarily reflect that of WSDOT. For example, employees should use this disclaimer on personal and professional social media accounts: "The views and opinions



If you have social media accounts and identify yourself as a WSDOT employee, you may be contacted directly by a member of the media. If that happens, refer them to WSDOT Communications.

expressed on this site are my own alone and may not represent the views of my employer.”

In addition:

- Know and follow all applicable WSDOT policies.
- Be aware of and follow any other applicable laws or rules, such as [state ethics laws](#) and [rules](#), the terms of service of social media providers, and intellectual property laws.
- If an employee uses a personal account (e.g. LinkedIn) to participate in a professional networking group for WSDOT business, this may make their content on the social media site subject to discovery in the event of litigation or a public disclosure request.
- Use of professional networking sites to search for jobs is allowed when an employee has been authorized by HR and the employee has received an at-risk letter indicating that approval.
- Be careful of links on networking sites. Some links found on social media sites will spread viruses or malware. Contact IT Support if a questionable link is clicked.

## Determining personal vs. professional and official use

Please refer to the agency policy for definitions of official, professional and personal use of social media tools. The examples below illustrate these definitions.

- A WSDOT employee uses LinkedIn to locate resources for a topic being considered for an upcoming continuing education credit. This use supports WSDOT’s mission and is permissible using state resources.
- A WSDOT employee uses LinkedIn to search for employment opportunities outside of the agency. This use is for the benefit of the individual employee, not the agency, and is thus prohibited as it is considered a personal use of social media.

## Personal use of social media

This section pertains primarily to the personal, off-duty use of social media. Remember that personal use of social media is **NOT ALLOWED** on WSDOT work time, equipment or resources.

These best practices **do not constitute agency policy**, but provide general information about the culture of social media and how to be a good citizen of the social media environment. The goal is to educate and provide employees with suggestions on how to avoid pitfalls when using social media outside of work.

**Social media is just another platform on which various communications occur.** As a WSDOT employee, be aware that statements and postings on social media may implicate professional ethical obligations or compliance with WSDOT policies. Social networking generally does not allow anonymity. Even if comments on personal social networking sites are restricted to selected contacts (“friends”), this information can sometimes be accessed by others, or can be captured by a contact and passed on. Similarly, comments that have been deleted may continue to exist in backup files or elsewhere.

**Employees’ personal use should not be attributable to WSDOT or to the employee’s job function at WSDOT.** An employee’s use and comments made on a social media site are subject to First Amendment protections. However, personal use of social media sites while at work (for example during break periods) on the employee’s personal device, must be conducted in such a manner that a reader would not think that the employee is speaking for or



**Q: Can I look at WSDOT’s Twitter and Facebook accounts while at work?**

**A: Yes, you can. However, you cannot log-in to your personal Twitter or Facebook account to do so. WSDOT’s Facebook posts and tweets are viewable without having to log-in.**

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**Q: Is it okay for me to watch WSDOT’s YouTube channel while at work?**

**A: Yes, you can! In moderation, of course.**

on behalf of his or her agency employer. **Remember that personal social networking using state resources is not permitted.**

**Must be in compliance with relevant portions of workplace policies, laws and regulations.** Employees' use of social media must be in compliance with WSDOT's relevant policies, including its harassment and discrimination policies, confidentiality policies, ethics rules, code of conduct, and other policies, as well as with state Ethics Law, Federal Copyright law, and other applicable laws and regulations.

**Must not be excessive.** Excessive, personal use of social media on personal devices during work hours may result in discipline or termination.

### Things to remember

- As public servants, employees are under a microscope.
- A bad social media misstep can result in front page news or the loss of a job.
- Conduct or language that would be unacceptable in another forum is similarly unacceptable on personal media sites. For example, divulging confidential information, or using derogatory language based on a person's race, gender or other protected status that would be unacceptable in person, is similarly unacceptable on personal social media sites.
- Don't be misled by the casualness of social media contacts.
- Consider using one networking site for professional contacts and another for social activities, if allowed by the terms of service. Keep title and work information off of social media sites.
- Be aware of perceptions created by "friends".
- Remember that humor (particularly sarcasm and satire) often do not work online. For every person who gets the joke, there will be 10 people who don't and are offended.
- Be aware of geotagging, location metadata indicating the time and location where photographs were taken. Also, some social media applications track location. Stay aware and consider possible consequences of this.
- Be aware that personal updates on personal social sites made during working hours – such as on a mobile device - may convey the perception of inappropriate behavior.

## Know the tools

**Social media is messy.** Across Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social networks, we are connected to a mix of family, close friends, college buddies, high school classmates, co-workers, bosses, former bosses and acquaintances. It's important to understand the particular platform being used.

**Each social media platform has a certain reputation or focus.** For instance, LinkedIn is generally a business site, while Twitter is more "laid back" or open and users may mix professional and personal content.<sup>2</sup>

**Respect the way that people use these sites.** Although use of Facebook Pages by business and government is widespread, adding a professional acquaintance as a friend on Facebook can be invasive, especially if that individual is a traditionalist who uses Facebook purely for personal contact with friends and family. Likewise, asking an old friend for a recommendation on LinkedIn might create awkwardness if the person has no experience with you in a professional capacity.



**Q: Am I allowed to use social media on my personal device while on a 15-minute break or during my lunch break?**

**A: Yes, you can! While doing so, please consider the items to the left.**

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from "5 Rules for Professional Social Networking Success."

## Tips for specific social media tools

### Facebook

- Be familiar with Facebook’s terms of service. All or some of the following may apply to use:
  - [Statement of Rights and Responsibilities](#) (these are the standard terms that apply to individual accounts)
  - The additional [Pages Terms](#)
  - [Amended Pages Terms](#) for State and Local Governments in the United States
  - Other terms or policies may also apply, such as the [Privacy Policy](#) or [Facebook Principles](#)
- Facebook changes its terms and functionality frequently and may do so without notice to users. Such changes may or may not affect use, but employees are responsible for that use and for compliance with the applicable terms.
- Under Facebook’s terms, only one account can be created for each individual although one can associate additional email addresses with an account. Any use of a WSDOT email address must be for agency business purposes only.
- Keep any official state pages separate from personal pages.
- Allow comments to create two-way conversation; interactive Facebook pages are more effective. At the same time, be aware of any records retention, public disclosure, or first amendment/public forum issues that comments might raise and consult with the appropriate assistant attorney general when warranted.
- Post a [comment policy](#) that establishes appropriate limitations. Be prepared to moderate the comments and reserve the right to delete inappropriate content in accordance with the posted comment policy and the Public Records Act. In addition, commenters should be reminded that all comments are subject to public disclosure. Consult with the appropriate assistant attorney general on how to accomplish these tasks.

### Twitter

- Tweets are limited to 140 characters, but ideally should be shorter to allow others to [re-tweet](#) without having to remove some of the original content.
- Use a URL shortener/tracker such as [tiny.url](#), [bitly](#), or [Twitter’s own tool](#) to save space and also to count “click-throughs,” a way of measuring the number of times a site or page has been accessed.
- Consider selectively following back those who follow your Twitter account, except if they have an inappropriate photo or tweets.
- Re-tweet other users’ tweets when the content is relevant and may be of interest to followers.
- Thank those who re-tweet tweets with an [at reply](#) (@ reply).
- Use [hashtags](#) (#) when appropriate to make tweets more searchable.
- Respond quickly to [direct messages](#) (those that aren’t spam).

### YouTube

- Obtain and keep on file a signed [video](#) and [photo](#) release for any non-agency staff in the video. Depictions of children require a release from a parent or guardian; in general, depictions of children should be avoided.



Know the difference between these social media outlets as well as their purpose:



- Follow all applicable copyright laws.
- Use terms in the title, description and key word sections to make video more searchable.
- To spread content to the widest possible audience, embed video on other sites.

## **Blogs**

- Be clear about who is posting each post.
- Use hyperlinks to link to more information as appropriate; consider posting a disclaimer regarding any linked content.
- Allow comments to create a two-way conversation; interactive blogs are more interesting. At the same time, be aware of any records retention, public disclosure, or first amendment/public forum issues that comments might raise.
- Post a comment policy that establishes appropriate limitations for a “forum”. Be prepared to moderate the comments and reserve the right to delete inappropriate content in accordance with the posted comment policy and the Public Records Act. In addition, commenters should be reminded that all comments are subject to public disclosure. Consult with the appropriate assistant attorney general on how to accomplish these tasks.
- Post regularly to build credibility and keep content fresh.

## **Records retention and public records**

Please refer to the agency policy for guidance regarding agency records retention and public records practices.

## **References and useful links**

- [Governor’s Office – Guidelines and Best Practices for Social Media Use in Washington State](#)
- [Use of social media for community building](#)
- [100 Inspiring Ways to Use Social Media In the Classroom](#)
- [Twitter for Educational Purposes](#)
- [Reading Blogs at Work: Why You Should Do It & How You Can Make it Worthwhile](#)
- [Everything you always wanted to know about blogging as an educational tool](#)
- [Corporate Blogging: 7 Best Practices](#)
- [The Social Network that Gets Down to Business](#), New York Times, Sept. 29, 2010 (LinkedIn)
- [IBM Social Computing Guidelines](#)
- [Intel Social Media Guidelines](#)
- [Sharing Mayo Clinic – Guidelines for Employees](#)
- [Designing Social Media Policy for Government](#), Center for Technology & Government, Sept. 2010
- [Friends, Followers, and Feeds: A National Survey of Social Media Use in State Government](#), National Association of State Chief Information Officers, Sept. 2010

*Note: External linked content in this document is provided solely as background information. Linked content does not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the WSDOT.*