

After Christmas...

OK, so it is just about Christmas. Half the firm is winding down, while the other half is frantically trying to close their deals before the end of the year. Schools have broken up and the kids are at home, and much more important you have now had the office party...

As usual, photos will have been taken, many of them embarrassing. Except this year they are all digital and there are a lot more of them than usual. With most people carrying camera phones, and many other using tiny slimline digital cameras that coordinate with their party frocks, not to mention the firms who actually employ professional photographers to record the event, there are now more opportunities than ever for recording the event. There is even the odd video clip. Luckily Blackberry do not yet include cameras on their handhelds.

So what happens to all these pictures now? Previously, prints may have been handed around a group of friends, and perhaps some more 'official' picture put up for public display. With electronic prints they can be rapidly forwarded either as image files or as links to a web site hosting the pictures.

Should a firm get involved in any of this process? To a large extent, existing HR policies should cover anything that is problematic or may constitute harassment, but a little extra vigilance may be called for. From an IT perspective, most email systems and web access controls will be set to allow the distribution of pictures, and unless they are very large they do not place a great strain on the system. Again, it is worth keeping an extra eye on parts of the system where a sudden influx of jpeg files from a partner with his 8 Megapixel camera at its highest resolution may cause problems, such as sudden leap in demand for backup resources from laptops.

An approach that firms confident in their friendly and inclusive approach to staff could take would be to provide space on the intranet for some of these photos. Yes, it will take up a bit of space, and a small amount of effort to set up, but then so did the party in the first place, and even law firms allow their staff to have fun from time to time. A coordinated approach with HR, Marketing and IT (which is where it may all go wrong, but that is a story for another day) may be able to extend the goodwill generated in the party season. A slight advantage of a centralised approach, so long as you can stop it being bureaucratic, is that an element of 'moderation' (OK, censorship) can be applied, whether in the background or more upfront. This may allow firms to encourage the good parts of having a laugh without exposing themselves too much.

What needs to be remembered in this digital world is that copying and passing on of these pictures is effortless, and this includes them being sent outside the firm. Unless you introduce a blanket ban on emailing pictures for the holiday season, it would be wise to make sure any pictures that have the firm's stamp of approval on are harmless enough, and are not going to

cause offence to the people in them or to anyone who may see them. Unfortunately issuing a set of rules and guidance to staff (“please do not send pictures around without the permission of the photographer (for copyright) and the people depicted”) is only going to get you a reputation as a party pooper. (Although if anyone does receive such guidelines, please send me a copy as I like a good laugh at this time of year!)

Some companies even go so far as to place pictures of the office party on the web site so their clients can see what normal people they are. I am not sure I would recommend going that far though!

Of course, none of this discussion on digital images covers the modern opportunities of the digital copier or multi function device. Now not only can people take copies of inappropriate parts of their anatomy, but they have a choice of whether to print it, email it or even fax it.

And all in full colour. Have a good Christmas!

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