

Chapter 85

Anonymous Workblogging and Organizational Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the rise of blogging has led to debate about whether employees should be free to talk about their employers on the Internet, and whether they should be able to blog on company time. Several high-profile cases of fired bloggers between 2002 and 2006, drew attention to important labor and civil rights issues that led to debate among human resources and employment law experts in the mainstream media. The negative publicity surrounding the cases of fired bloggers has given rise to an alternative management strategy – a cautious embrace of blogging by employers, who saw the practice as a potential opportunity for marketing and professional development. However, efforts by bloggers to retain their right to blog anonymously signify continuing tensions, revealing the contradictions between workplace surveillance and an “enlightened” management doctrine based on openness and trust, indicating a refusal by some employees to align their blogging endeavors with the interests of their employer. This chapter examines the workblogging phenomenon as an intersection of organizations, technology, and trust, and makes some tentative connections between Guerra et al.’s (2003) concept of “trust-tension” and the critical management literature.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since workblogs – online diaries about work – entered the mainstream in 2002, bloggers’ rights have been controversial, and the fight for blogger freedoms has raised labor and civil rights

issues that go far beyond the act of blogging itself. High-profile cases of fired bloggers have helped to shape the debate and led to discussion about free speech in the workplace, the right of workers to organize, employees’ freedom to do what they like when off-duty, and the encroachment of work into personal space.

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This debate has placed management in an uncomfortable position: employers who have disciplined or fired bloggers in order to remove what they perceive as a potential threat to their company have been subjected to hydra-like retaliation from the blogging community. For business as a whole, the media focus on fired workbloggers has created bad publicity, drawing attention to the economic vulnerability of workers and revealing cracks in a corporate ideology that is ostensibly founded on openness and mutual trust.

The goal of this chapter is to question whether employers have contained the blogging phenomenon, surveying media coverage and blog content, and looking in particular at the limitations of both surveillance and more “trust-based” management strategies that have been used to deter or co-opt bloggers. The study, which is strictly exploratory and not aimed at offering practical advice, situates the practice of employee blogging (or “workblogging”) in relation to the sociological literature on workplace resistance, trust, and blogging. Arguing that the content of these blogs mirrors the criticisms of modern work culture that have been raised by writers such as Hochschild and Ross, the literature review contextualizes workblogging in terms of recent studies of worker recalcitrance. This chapter makes an exploratory connection between this critical management literature, which highlights ongoing employee discontent in today’s “enlightened” workplaces, and Guerra et al.’s (2003) concept of “trust-tension.”

Exploring how organizations have coped with the workblogging phenomenon, the chapter analyzes two key cases: Dooce (a.k.a. Heather Hamilton), a Los Angeles-based web designer who lost her job in 2002 after her supervisor found irreverent comments about the company on her blog; and Petite Anglaise (a.k.a. Catherine Sanderson) whose dismissal in 2006 led to a successful labor tribunal and a lucrative book deal. These cases are set against a backdrop of emerging management responses to employee blogging, which range from draconian surveillance measures to a cau-

tious embrace of the practice by companies such as Yahoo and Sun Microsystems. Looking at these developments, this chapter illustrates how some employees have publicly refused to align themselves with management policies that attempt to co-opt and contain blogging, and traces organized efforts to protect bloggers’ rights to anonymous and non-corporate sponsored self-expression.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge organizations demand free-flowing information, employee autonomy, and flexibility. However, this can create anxiety for the organization in terms of minimizing worker behaviors that might threaten the organization. This chapter examines the workblogging phenomenon as an intersection of organizations, technology, and trust, and draws some tentative connections between the trust literature and the critical management sphere.

The wide-ranging debate about trust and technology examines the relationship between proximity or familiarity with technology and one’s willingness to engage in online social or economic transactions (Dutton & Shepherd, 2006); the impact of the loss of physical cues (Wallace, 2001), and the possibility for alternative trust-generating mechanisms such as the availability of high-quality online information in computer-mediated interactions (Ben-Ner & Putterman, 2002; Riegelsberger, Sasse, & McCarthy, 2003). Of particular interest to this study, however, is Guerra et al.’s (2003) notion of trust-tension.

In their discussion of e-commerce transactions, Guerra et al. emphasize the transfer of data that must take place in order to establish accountability, but point out how this flow of personal information creates anxiety over the potential misuse of the information: “In this way, there is a ‘trust-tension’ between privacy and identity: absence of data impedes trust as accountability is limited, but data gathering creates trust problems regarding the use of the data in question and intrusions on privacy”

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