

# Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use for BC Public Service Employees

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## Why these guidelines were created: Purpose and scope

From [Facebook](#) to [LinkedIn](#), [Reddit](#) to TikTok, [X \(Twitter\)](#) to [Glassdoor](#), social media use plays a role in the personal lives of many BC Public Service employees. To help navigate the complex social media landscape the BC Public Service has created two sets of social media guidelines, the [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media \(PDF, 229KB\)](#) and Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use (this document).

The [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media \(PDF, 229KB\)](#) establish best practices for official government use of social media. This document, on the other hand, supports employees in making appropriate choices about their personal use of social media both in and outside of the workplace.

## Leading though public service values

BC Public Service employees are united by a shared commitment, not just to deliver programs and services, but to do so in ways that uphold our [ethical commitments](#) and [public service values](#). By making positive choices, both at work and outside of work, we can contribute to an ethical workplace culture and further promote public trust and confidence. Personal use of social media is one area where informed, ethical and conscientious choices contribute to the BC Public Service's overall goals while also making the public service a better place to work.

## What's the same, what's different?

BC Public Service employees make thoughtful choices every day, for example about how to interact with colleagues, talk about work outside the workplace and share information. When it comes to social media activity, the obligation to make those thoughtful choices remains the same. As public servants we need to comply with all employment-related obligations at work and outside of work. These include standards for workplace behaviour, privacy, confidentiality, conflict of interest, serving impartially, political activity and public comments as outlined in the:

- [Standards of Conduct](#)
- [HR Policies](#) (for example, HR Policy 11 - Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace)
- [Oath of Employment](#)
- [Appropriate Use Policy](#)
- [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act \(FOIPPA\)](#)

- [Election Act](#)

The obligations in these policies and legislation apply to social media use, including employees' personal accounts unaffiliated with the workplace. Just as the Standards of Conduct apply to employee conduct outside of work, so too do they apply to social media use outside of work.

At the same time, what we say and do online is different in some key ways. For example, it can reach bigger and broader audiences, and the steps we take to restrict audiences for our online activity are different than simply looking around to see who's within earshot. Other differences to consider are:

- How quickly and easily words and images can be circulated and reproduced as "soundbites" out of context
- The long shelf life of online activity (extended by sites like [The Wayback Machine](#))
- How fast social media platforms and how we use them evolve (for example, privacy settings)
- Diversity in how people use and think about social media as a way of connecting with others

## What do these guidelines cover?

There's no new policy in this document: the purpose of these guidelines is to alert BC Public Service employees to key considerations when using social media for personal use to ensure conduct remains in keeping with the Standards of Conduct and other already-existing policies and guidelines.

These guidelines cover social media use:

- During the workday for personal use
- Outside of work hours on your own computer or device (off-duty conduct)
- About work (posting about your work or coworkers on your personal social media accounts)
- In potential conflict of interest situations
- When using work equipment (for example, social networking using your work-issued computer or cell phone)
- Where employees face discrimination, bullying or harassment online because of their employment
- On workplace platforms (for example, ministry intranet)

These guidelines are relevant to all BC Public Service employees, including employees of agencies, boards and commissions governed by the [Public Service Act](#).

## Principles

The following principles should guide employees' use of social media and of these guidelines:

1. When engaging in social media activities outside of work, employees must still consider what they have committed to in the [Oath of Employment](#) and the [Standards of Conduct](#)
2. Employees are expected to exercise appropriate judgement in any online activity that might impact their public service commitments

3. These guidelines won't cover every situation. You will always need to use your best judgement in applying the Standards of Conduct and other policies to the ways you use social media
4. Employees should err on the conservative side in applying the Standards of Conduct and other policies to their social media behaviour. For example, don't assume things you post online won't become public, even if you don't intend them to be
5. In addition to considering intent, employees must consider perception (how might people reasonably interpret their actions), especially in relation to conflict of interest situations and their role in government
6. When employees interact with colleagues on social media, they should consider the impact those interactions may have on the workplace environment
7. Social media use using government equipment must consider information security and the potential to introduce vulnerabilities into the government system and/or devices
8. Through informed, ethical, and conscientious social media choices, employees have the opportunity to contribute to a positive workplace culture and improve trust and confidence in government
9. If you're unsure whether a particular social media behaviour is appropriate or if you are unclear about how BC Public Service policies apply to your social media use, reach out to your supervisor or ministry [ethics advisor](#)

# What you need to know

## The Standards of Conduct and the BC Public Service Ethics Framework

All BC Public Service employees agree to follow the [Standards of Conduct](#) when they swear or affirm the [Oath of Employment](#) upon joining the public service. Upholding the Oath of Employment and the Standards of Conduct is a condition of employment. It's important to remember the following statement which can help us guide our social media choices:

“Employees will exhibit the highest standards of conduct. Their conduct must instill confidence and trust and not bring the BC Public Service into disrepute. The honesty and integrity of the BC Public Service demands the impartiality of employees in the conduct of their duties.”

If in doubt, consider whether your actions will meet this standard. In addition to the Standards of Conduct, employees need to follow a variety of policies and regulations in the BC Public Service's [ethics framework](#) designed to protect: information security, privacy, financial responsibilities, public trust and confidence in government, and employee health and safety. Employees are responsible for keeping all of this in mind when using social media.

As an employee, you are responsible for ensuring your social media activities are in line with the Standards of Conduct.

Other legislation, policies and guidelines employees must consider include, but are not limited to:

- [Appropriate Use Policy](#)
- Occupational Health and Safety [Policies](#) and [Regulation](#)
- [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act \(FOIPPA\)](#)
- [HR Policies](#) (for example, HR Policy 11 – Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace)
- [Human Rights Code](#)
- Ministry-specific policies

Note: The use of social media checks is not permitted as part of the hiring process.

## Scenarios to consider

Consider the following scenarios. Where might these hypothetical employees get themselves into trouble? What choices are they making that may not serve them well in the workplace and as employees of the BC Public Service? If you're unsure of what might cause problems in these scenarios, review the sections of the guidelines that follow, review the [Standards of Conduct](#) and related policies or talk with your supervisor. There are also additional [social media resources](#) on Careers & MyHR.

### Here But Not Here

Raj feels strongly that it's important to be responsive on his personal social media accounts, and when his phone goes off, he checks it and responds pretty quickly. Even in a meeting, if it's something quick, he'll respond. He always gets his work done, but other people on his team have noticed and don't always think he's paying attention or being courteous.

## Passion and Posting

Jeanine is a passionate anti-poverty advocate. On her personal Facebook page, she posts criticisms of what she sees as her ministry's inaction. Her profile identifies her as a "sometimes reluctant employee of a certain very large BC government ministry." She also posts angry comments in response to BC government ads and press releases.

## Social Media Marketing

Jin has a side business and uses X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram for marketing it and responding to questions. She sometimes does this on work time and when she's called in sick.

## What's Keeping Lee So Busy?

Lee isn't always able to turn work around in the timelines her colleagues are hoping for, and they're sometimes frustrated. When they notice that social media sites often show up on her monitor when they walk by, they start to wonder how much she's actually working on work time.

## Gary's Frustration

Gary is part of an ongoing investigation about a complaint he launched about another employee, and he's frustrated with the lack of results. He starts venting about his frustration on his private Facebook account, sharing details he shouldn't. Some of his Facebook friends are also work colleagues and one of them notifies Gary's supervisor about the posts.

## **Viral Video**

Greg has a TikTok account which identifies him as a BC Public Service employee. On his account, he makes a video in response to a recent headline in the news. The video reel contains sexist, misogynistic and racist comments. The reel becomes 'viral' and is seen over 50,000 times.

## **Hint, Hint**

Harley uses X (formerly Twitter) frequently, tweeting under the name "Harlequin." In a recent series of tweets, Harley posted about being proud of a briefing note they wrote about options for assessing cannabis impairment and then hinted about an upcoming press release on the topic.

## **I Heart Your Photo**

Harper "likes" all of the posts on Instagram that show their colleague Jill in them. Harper sometimes makes sexualized statements in the comments of these photos. Jill has told Harper that she is uncomfortable with this and yet it continues to happen.

## **Anonymous Andy**

Andy posts on Reddit under the pseudonym "ABCServant". His posts regularly criticize his direct supervisor and leadership within his ministry, sometimes by name. His criticism often includes inappropriate language and personal attacks on ministry leadership.

# Make informed choices

If you use social media in your daily life, you've made choices about how you use it. Research shows we are constantly building and refining these habits based on who we socialize with and what technologies we're using.

These choices will vary. For example, one person may check Instagram once every few days; another will respond to photos and messages more frequently and have alerts sent to their phones. The ways people use social media can often become ingrained, making people less conscious of the choices they're making.

Social media can be a powerful tool to build relationships and reputations. However, in the workplace, or when using social media to talk about work, you might need to use it differently than you would in other situations. Some actions you may take automatically may put the employer, or other employees, at risk.

Choices we make and habits we develop in our personal lives with regard to social media may not be appropriate in the work setting.

Consult the principles in these guidelines and be on the safe side; you are responsible for making informed choices. If you'd think twice before saying it to a colleague in the lineup at Tim Hortons, think twice before posting it online. You wouldn't announce to a crowd of people at a job fair that you think your boss is incompetent, so don't do it on an online recruitment site like Glassdoor. It's up to you to consider whether you should refrain from posting or sharing something; whether it's possible to present yourself in

your social media interactions in a way that won't result in people questioning whether you can do your job impartially; or whether you might be in a conflict of interest.

## Trust and consequences

Employees are trusted to make ethical choices. You're responsible for using your best judgement and reaching out for help when unsure.

Remember:

- Sometimes violations of these policies and regulations arising from personal social media use come to the attention of other employees, supervisors and the employer.
- If other employees or members of the public see social media activities that constitute a conflict of interest or other violation of the Standards of Conduct, they may speak up and share that information with the employer.
- In some cases, investigations and discipline may result from online activity.
- Employees observing unethical conduct on social media can speak with their own supervisor or their [ministry's ethics advisor](#) for guidance.
- Supervisors have an obligation to respond to violations of the [Standards of Conduct](#) and online bullying.

If you are a supervisor with concerns about an employee's social media activity in relation to their employment, please contact the BC Public Service Agency via [AskMyHR](#) for guidance.

## Think about: Profile choices

Could you be easily identified on your personal social media accounts as a BC Public Service employee? If so, that may contribute to some unintended consequences.

When people see from your profile or photos that you're a public servant, they'll think differently about what you post.

Remember:

- Your social media name, profile and photos influence how people associate your work identity with your social media activity.
- If you list your job title or place of work or have photos of you next to government vehicles or in uniform, people will draw a connection between your work duties and what you post. What you post may undermine public trust and confidence in the government. You may even be in a [conflict of interest](#) if the social media account is used to promote a side business. Carefully consider these choices when deciding what to post.
- Official government logos or other branding images can be used only for authorized and official government business, not for personal use.
- Disclaimers such as "opinions are my own" may help clarify that the social account doesn't speak on behalf of the BC government or your ministry. This doesn't remove your obligations as a public servant. A disclaimer may not be enough to avoid perceptions that you are sharing insider information, lending weight to opinions through your government position, or in a conflict of interest.

## Think about: Audience and permanence

When you share something on social media, you may only be thinking about a narrow or particular audience. However, your personal social media activities may reach a wider audience than you expect in the moment.

Remember:

- When work colleagues are added to your online social network (for example, added as Facebook friends, LinkedIn connections or following on TikTok), they are now part of the audience for your activities in that network. When work colleagues are part of your social media, there is a stronger connection between your social media presence and the workplace.
- Because social media is social and digital, what you intend to be private may become public. Before posting, consider carefully what would happen if your words or images were visible to a wider audience.
- Even on social media platforms like Snapchat that are designed to be impermanent, your words or images can be captured. Technology may be designed to function in one way, but people may choose to interact with it differently. For example, in seeing offensive content in a colleague's social media, someone might take a photograph or screenshot of that content.
- We have no control over how social media platforms operate, as they are third-party sites. Always err on the side of discretion.

## Ask yourself

When you use social media, consider the questions below. They will help you apply the [Standards of Conduct](#) and other policies to your activities in the workplace and outside of work.

Consider questions like these:

1. Could my comments on social media be seen as disloyal to the BC Public Service and/or bringing it into disrepute?
2. If I comment on a public issue, would I be jeopardizing the perception of impartiality in the performance of my duties?
3. If I post this, would I be using my position in government to lend weight to the public expression of my personal opinions?
4. Would this activity mean that my political activities in social media are not clearly separated from activities related to my employment?
5. Would I be engaging in political activities on social media during working hours or using government facilities, equipment or other resources in support of these activities?
6. Is there any chance that my actions will be perceived as doing any of this (questions 1 to 5)?

Also ask these questions about the impact your activities may have on your ability to do your work effectively and the impact they may have on others in the workplace.

1. Is my use of social media during work hours impacting my ability to provide service to the public or to my colleagues, or creating that perception?

2. If I post this, would I be failing to treat other employees with respect and dignity?
3. Is my conduct in the workplace failing to meet acceptable social standards and contribute to a positive work environment?
4. Do my social media affiliations and connections create a potential conflict or reflect negatively on how I wish to be perceived in the workplace?
5. Could my interactions with colleagues on social media constitute discrimination, bullying or harassment?

If a coworker or supervisor overhears negative comments about themselves or people on the team on social media, what impact may that have?

Consider the following questions if you have access to any confidential information, if you are using social media on government equipment, or if you are posting images of your work or colleagues. Always keep confidentiality top of mind.

1. Is there any chance that what I'm planning to post would disclose confidential information that I've received through my employment?  
If I share this document, image or video on social media, would that create an information incident?
2. Could the apps or material I am downloading put the government network or government information security at risk? The [Appropriate Use Policy](#) requires employees to obtain their supervisor's permission before downloading applications or software to their device. Consult the [Software and Application Guide \(PDF, 132KB\)](#) for help.

3. Could the settings on my social media accounts on my work equipment put the government network or government information security at risk?
4. Is it possible that colleagues would have any concerns about what I'm sharing about them on social media (for example, their personal opinions or photos?)

Even an innocent photo can accidentally reveal confidential information. Consider whether photos from work include images of documents, screens or whiteboards that could be enlarged to view personal or confidential information.

If you answer 'yes' to any of the questions above, your social media use may be violating the Standards of Conduct, the Appropriate Use Policy or government's obligations regarding privacy and information management.

It may also create unwanted consequences for your work environment and the public's trust and confidence in government.

If you're unsure about any of these policies and how they apply to social media use, talk with your supervisor or ministry [ethics advisor](#).

# Looking more closely: Special topics

## Conflict of interest

The [Standards of Conduct](#) and [Conflict of Interest Guidelines for Employees \(PDF, 369KB\)](#) provide explicit direction that public servants must avoid all conflicts of interest, whether real, potential or perceived, and disclose any within 30 days of becoming aware of them. Employees must conduct themselves in a way that separates their personal and professional use of social media.

Conflict of interest in the use of social media may take many forms. Some examples of conflict of interest include using LinkedIn during work time or on your work phone to market a private business; campaigning against government decisions or a political party on Facebook when your profile or photos show you're a public servant.

Perception of conflict of interest may be influenced by things like:

- How your profiles are set up
- Whether you post about your work/workplace
- Overlap between your personal activities and the subject of your work
- Who your friends or contacts are

Ask yourself: What might my colleagues, friends or members of the public think or assume about my behaviour and/or online presence?

Would you hand out your personal business cards for your side business at a government event? Probably not.

If you have any questions or concerns, talk with your supervisor or ministry ethics advisor.

## **Political expression, public dialogue and public service impartiality**

Social media makes it easy to seek information, talk about political topics and express political opinions, often in creative and engaging ways. It also allows connection with like-minded people one might not normally connect with. BC Public Service employees, like all Canadians, have a right to political activity.

As a BC Public Service employee, how you engage in public dialogue on topics such as political parties and government policy must take into account some special considerations because of the [Oath of Employment](#) and the [Standards of Conduct](#). Your social media activity must not demonstrate disloyalty or a lack of impartiality in the conduct of your duties, as outlined in the Oath and Standards of Conduct.

Employees may comment on public issues but must not engage in any activity or speak publicly where this could be perceived as an official act or representation of government (unless authorized to do so).

Employees must also not jeopardize the perception of impartiality in the performance of their duties through their public comments or criticism of ministry policy.

Your criticism of ministry policy may create the perception among the public that you cannot faithfully and impartially follow the directives of elected government in your daily role. You must also avoid using your government position to lend weight to your personal opinions. It is important for the public to be confident that they can trust employees to deliver the best service possible.

Employees shouldn't speak out at protest rallies using their public service job to lend weight to their opinions, nor should they be doing that on Twitter or Reddit.

Without trust that public service employees are impartial, citizens may worry about our ability to deliver services and carry out government direction.

What looks and feels 'public' online may be different from your face-to-face life. It's up to you to be informed and take cautious steps to ensure you're not making inappropriate public comments. All of the below factors must be considered:

- Only making public comments when the topic or issue is not related to your government role or ministry.
- Not using your position in government to lend weight to the public expression of your personal opinions.
- Not making comments that would be reasonably perceived as an official act or representation of government (unless authorized to do so).
- Not making comments that would make a reasonable person doubt your ability to conduct your work responsibilities impartially.

- Not campaigning for a political party or initiative using your government email address or any other self-identification as a public service employee (completely separate your political activities from your work).
- Not identifying yourself as a public service employee through your profile, photos posted, etc. if you are going to be engaging in public dialogue about political topics.
- Not listing your job when signing online petitions.

There are more special considerations when using social media during an election period.

There are specific guidelines for employees during the election period, which includes the interregnum (beginning when the election is called and ending on election day) and transition (from election day until the new cabinet is sworn in). To ensure strict compliance with the [Election Act](#), all Government of B.C. advertising, communications, internet/web updates, social media and citizen engagement activities are limited to public health and safety information, statutory advertising (statutory meaning advertising required by statute, regulation or policy) and responding to the public regarding services.

During this time, ministries are not allowed to publish content that may be perceived as promotional of government priorities, programs, services, policies, etc. For more information, consult the [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media by BC Public Service Employees](#). Employees should also be particularly conscious of their personal use of social media during an election period because personal comments and posts about

ministry work may be perceived by the public as “new promotion or engagement” and therefore contrary to the Election Act.

## Using your own social media accounts on work time

Be conscious of whether the time used for personal social media during the workday is your own time or the employer’s and correct as necessary. As with booking personal appointments or telephoning your bank, if personal activities begin to flow into work time, check in with yourself. If you’re easily distracted, take the steps you need to minimize distraction from social media during the workday such as changing your alerts and settings; consider putting your device out of arm’s reach.

Limited, reasonable use of social media during work hours is permitted as long as it’s in line with the [Standards of Conduct](#), [Appropriate Use Policy](#) and other policies and guidelines.

Employees should talk to their supervisors who will provide direction about what is appropriate. Also be conscious of how your behaviour is perceived by others. For example, checking mobile devices in meetings can be seen as disrespectful to those who are speaking, and overuse of social media on your computer may be seen as misuse of work time. It’s important for the public, and our colleagues, to have trust and confidence in the public service.

In addition to the misuse of work time, using social media in the workplace can also be a problem if your personal interests conflict with your BC Public Service duties. For example, if the social media activities you do at work or

on work equipment contribute toward you earning money elsewhere (for example, online marketing for your private business), that's a violation of the Standards of Conduct.

## Cyber Safety, discrimination, bullying and harassment

The BC Public Service takes discrimination, bullying and harassment (DBH), and threats to employee safety very seriously, including actions which occur over social media.

In the BC Public Service, [cyberbullying and online harassment](#) is defined as any inappropriate comment or conduct online that the person knew, or reasonably ought to have known would be humiliating or intimidating. For more information and examples, review [BC Public Service Harassment Definitions \(PDF, 131KB\)](#).

If a BC Public Service employee believes that have been subject to discrimination, bullying or harassment via social media by another employee and the conduct is relevant to their employment, they should take steps to [address the issue](#) including reporting the incident to their supervisor and reviewing [HR Policy 11- Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace \(PDF, 141KB\)](#).

HR Policy 11 addresses discrimination, bullying and harassment directed towards one employee by another. It does not cover behaviour directed at an employee by persons who are not BC Public Service employees. Such behaviour is addressed by a [workplace violence prevention plan](#).

If a BC Public Service employee is experiencing online bullying and harassment from a client, customer, member of the public or staff from another employer, they should inform their supervisor immediately. With the support of the BC Public Service Agency's Workplace Health and Safety Branch, their supervisor will assess and investigate and take all necessary steps to resolve the issue.

There are steps you can take to help protect yourself and your family from risks. Managing the information available about you via social networks (for example, Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram, Snapchat) is one step.

Consult the Ministry of Child and Family Development's [Social Networking Safety Guidelines \(PDF, 129KB\)](#) for more information.

If you're a supervisor with employees new to roles that directly serve the public, consider including cyber safety as a topic in their onboarding.

For information on general security topics, see the many resources linked on the [Information Security Awareness page](#) on Careers & MyHR.