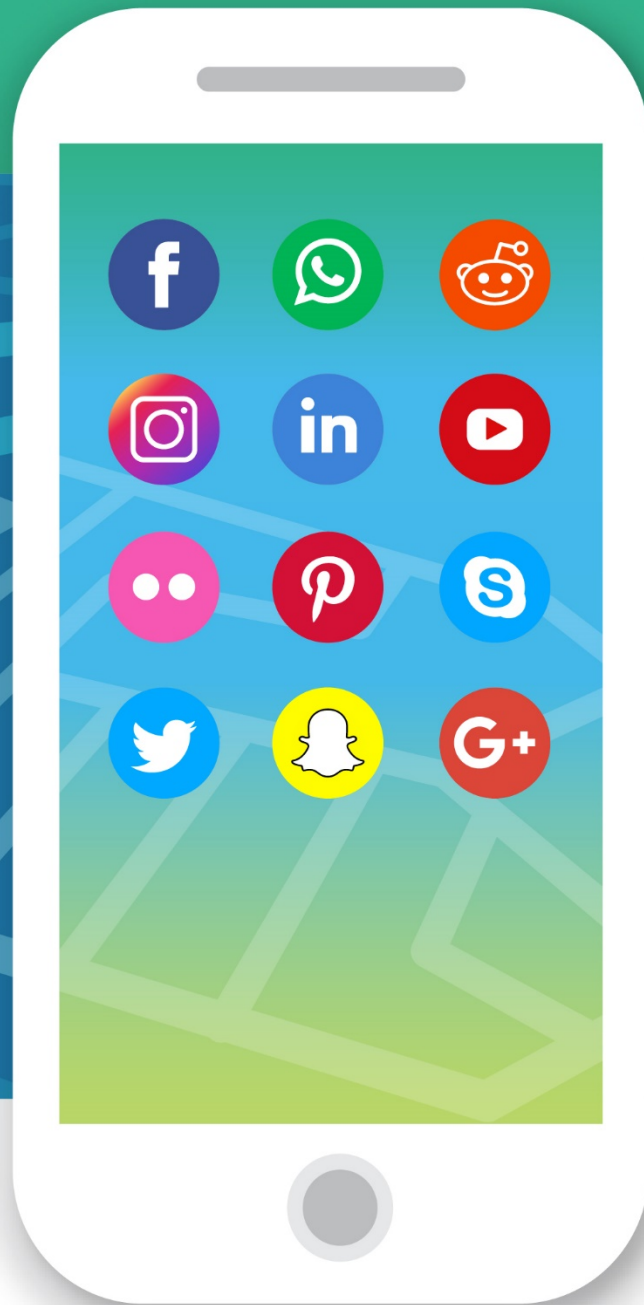


SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

for BC Public Service Employees

Questions and Answers



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In 2010, the BC Public Service was the first public service in Canada to provide guidelines to employees for *professional* use of social media, the [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media by Public Service Employees](#). Since then, social media and the ways we use it have evolved, and the guidelines for official government social media use have been updated. As part of our ongoing efforts to ensure integrity and ethics continue to guide all aspects of public service duties, the Public Service Agency took the updating of the GCPE guidelines as an opportunity to create a companion set of guidelines to address the employees' *personal* use of social media. These new *Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees* are the latest priority to ensure ethics remain top of mind.

General Questions

Q: What is the purpose of the Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees?

A: Employees have indicated they're not always sure how to make sure their social media activity is consistent with the [Standards of Conduct](#) and other applicable [human resources policies](#), [legislation](#), and guidelines. These guidelines have been created to help employees think about their social media activities in the context of their employment.

While the guidelines for personal use of social media are new, the expectations they reflect are not. They explain how the Standards of Conduct and other existing policies apply in our use of social media, just like they apply to other aspects of our lives as professional public service employees.

Our social media activity as employees, individually and collectively as an organization, for personal use and official business, can impact public trust and confidence. It's important for the public to be confident they can trust employees to deliver the best service possible. That's why we all have a shared responsibility to ensure our presence online separates personal interests from professional obligations to avoid conflict and supports the work of government.

Q: Are there other guiding documents that apply to personal use of social media?

A: The Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees are not new policy. Rather they are a new resource for employees to help understand how the Standards of Conduct and other established policies apply in our use of social media. In addition to the [Standards of Conduct](#), the guidelines also help employees think about other applicable [human resources policies](#), [legislation](#) and guidelines and policies that employees must consider. These include, but are not limited to:

- [Core Policy Objectives and HR Policies](#) (e.g. Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace – Policy 11).



- If you're using a government-issued device (e.g. mobile phone or computer) you also need to abide by the [Appropriate Use Policy](#).
- [BC Human Rights Code](#)
- [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act \(FOIPPA\)](#)
- Ministry-specific policies
- [WorkSafeBC](#)

Q: What kinds of personal social media use are covered by the guidelines?

A: The guidelines cover social media use:

- At work (on work time) for personal use (e.g. using Facebook during work hours);
- 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 (e.g. social networking using your work-issued computer or cell phone);
- Where employees face harassment or bullying online because of their employment; and
- When using workplace social media (e.g. intranets).

For information about using social media for government use, such as for stakeholder engagement, consult the [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media by Public Service Employees](#).

Q: How are expectations of employees on social media different from expectations of them while not using social media?

A: Expectations *remain the same* that employees meet standards for workplace behaviour, privacy, confidentiality, conflict of interest, serving impartially and political activity, regardless of whether activities take place via social media or in some other way. But technologies and how people use them do change: that means there are sometimes new considerations for *how* employees make sure they meet those expectations. Communication online can be different in some ways than some other forms of day-to-day communication. 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. Privacy settings and how social media platforms work can change quickly and people have diverse experiences and attitudes toward social media platforms as ways of connecting with others.

It's important for employees using social media to make informed and thoughtful choices about their social media use.



Q: Is British Columbia the only public service jurisdiction to have social media guidelines?

A: No. Other provincial and federal public service jurisdictions in Canada also have social media policies and guidelines for employees. There is also social media guidance for government employees in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Q: Are these the same guidelines that were released in 2010?

A: No. The Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees are not the same guidelines that were released in 2010. Those guidelines, the GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media by Public Service Employees, focus on official government use of social media such as stakeholder engagement and official government social media accounts. The GCPE official-use guidelines have been refreshed and can be found [here](#).

The Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees cover personal use. They were created as a companion to the guidelines for government use, to address the many other uses of social media where employees need to consider their obligations as employees of the Province of British Columbia.

Q: Why are there two sets of guidelines? What’s the difference between “personal use” and “official government use” of social media?

A: The Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees ensure employees are aware of their roles and responsibilities when they use social media for personal use. “Personal use” refers to an employee’s use of social media such as their personal Facebook or Twitter account. The GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media by Public Service Employees provide guidelines to employees for professional use of social media such as dealing directly with the public, with stakeholder groups and with colleagues to conduct official government business.

Q: My colleagues want to add me as a connection on a social media site. What should I consider?

A: It’s up to you whom you choose to add as connections on social media. These are personal choices and vary widely between individuals. If your own personal policy is to not add work colleagues or to keep your social media circle small, politely communicating that may be helpful.

If employees interact with colleagues on social media—for example, by having people as “friends” or “contacts” in their social media accounts—they should consider the impact those interactions may have on the workplace environment. Your social media activity must be consistent with the [Standards of Conduct](#) and other policies such as the [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#). You need to determine whether your interactions with colleagues are meeting acceptable social standards that contribute to a positive workplace.



Questions about Employee Conduct

Q: Are these expectations about personal social media use new?

A: While the guidelines for personal use are new, the expectations they reflect are not. As public service employees we must comply with all employment-related obligations *in both personal and professional activity*. These guidelines don't introduce any new policies about employees' personal use of social media.

All employees, including co-ops, interns and auxiliary employees are required to honour and faithfully abide by the [Standards of Conduct](#). Just as the Standards of Conduct apply to employee conduct outside of work, they also apply to social media use outside of work.

Q: Do the personal-use guidelines provide a list of activities that are permitted and those that are not?

A: The guidelines don't provide an exhaustive list of every activity that is permitted or not – no such list could cover the complexity of employees' social media activity. Employees are trusted to make ethical choices, use their best judgment and reach out for help when unsure. The Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees outline policies and legislation that must be followed and some guidance, including guiding questions employees should keep top of mind in their personal social media choices and scenarios to help employees see how those may apply in different situations.

In making choices about social media use, employees are expected to use common sense in any online activity that might impact their public service commitments.

Q: I set my settings on social media to private, so why does it matter what I post?

A: Even where an employee attempts to separate their personal online activities from their professional identity, an employee may not be able to control the actions of others and what they do, or how they comment on social media. In making choices about social media use, employees are expected to use common sense in any online activity that might impact their public service commitments.

Remember, too, that some expectations for employees, such as those regarding confidentiality and respectful workplace, will apply regardless of the size of the audience you're talking to.

Q: If I post anonymously, am I free to post whatever I want?

A: Even when posting anonymously, you have the opportunity to positively impact trust and confidence in the public service by making thoughtful choices about what you post. In some cases, the anonymity of the person posting isn't the most important factor in the situation. For example, information that is confidential must not be shared, regardless of whether you attach your name.



If posting anonymously, consider what the impacts would be if people connected your online pseudonym with your real identity. People often underestimate how easily this can happen, and the consequences. Employees should also not rely on the privacy settings of third party sites like Facebook, over which they have limited control and which may change over time.

Even if you post content anonymously, you should consider whether or not you are upholding your ethical obligations. The Oath of Employment says “I will...conduct myself honestly and ethically, in a manner that maintains and enhances the public's trust and confidence in the public service and does not bring it into disrepute.” It doesn't say this applies “unless I'm acting anonymously.” So think about whether or not the content you are posting could bring the public service into disrepute or undermine public trust, particularly if a member of the public could reasonably assume from the content that you are an employee – even if they don't know your name.

Q: How can there be limits on what I say on my own time about my political views?

A: It's important for citizens to have confidence that public service employees serve the government impartially and act with integrity. If citizens don't believe that we can objectively and loyally fulfill our assigned duties and responsibilities, regardless of the party or persons in power and regardless of our personal opinions, it can undermine their confidence in our ability to deliver services and carry out government direction.

BCPS employees may participate in political activities even to the point of running for elected office. As the Standards of Conduct outline, however, there are special considerations for BCPS employees in how we keep our political and work activities separate.

As employees of the BC Public Service, we swear or affirm the Oath of Employment; in doing so, we agree to follow the [Standards of Conduct for Public Service Employees](#). These outline the expectations that all employees must:

- Not jeopardize the perception of impartiality in the performance of their duties through making public comments or enter public debate regarding ministry policies.
- Not use their position in government to lend weight to the public expression of their personal opinions.
- If engaging in political activities, separate these activities from activities related to their employment.

Given that what is shared on social media can easily become public, reproduced, and widely shared, it's especially important when you're posting on social media to remember what each of us has agreed to in the Oath and Standards of Conduct regarding public comments and political activity.



Q: What should I do if my friends tag me in their posts if what they're posting is something I personally would choose not to post because of the Standards of Conduct?

A: You won't be held responsible for content other people post. But, while you can't control how other people tag you, you can choose not to engage with or share the content in question. And if a friend tags you in content you aren't comfortable with, considering asking them not to.

Q: Who do I talk to if I have questions about how the Standards of Conduct apply to my personal use of social media?

A: Talk with your supervisor if you have questions about how the [Standards of Conduct](#) apply to your personal use of social media.

Q: Can I check my personal Facebook/Instagram/Reddit etc. account at work?

A: 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](#), applicable [human resources policies](#), [legislation](#) and guidelines. Talk with your supervisor for direction on what is reasonable.

Q: Checking my social media at work keeps me engaged and I'm good at multi-tasking. Why would other people have an issue with my social media activity at work?

A: BC Public Service employees are united by a shared commitment both to deliver the services and programs and policies of government *and* to do so in ways that maintain and enhance the trust and confidence of citizens. While you may perceive that you are good at multi-tasking, be conscious of how your behaviour is perceived by others in relation to your work. 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.

Respectful behaviour displays personal integrity and professionalism, practices fairness and understanding, demonstrates respect for individual rights and differences and encourages accountability for one's actions.

Q: I just realized that an aspect of my social media activity might be problematic in terms of my job as a public service employee. What should I do?

A: Pause doing whatever activity you've realized might be an issue and talk with your supervisor, manager or [ethics advisor](#). If there are any issues, it's best to speak up to ensure you're able to take steps to address them.

Q: Someone from work that I'm connected with on social media is bullying me by making comments/posting photos/etc.



A: The BC Public Service takes bullying, harassment and threats to employee safety very seriously, including those which occur over social media. Bullying is usually targeted with an intention to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate. Cyber harassment and intimidation involves mobile or internet technology being used to threaten or maliciously embarrass others by terrifying, intimidating, humiliating, threatening, harassing or stalking them. The [Standards of Conduct](#), [Discrimination and Harassment Policy](#) and WorkSafeBC legislation are in place to protect employees in the event that bullying, harassment, or threats to employee safety occur.

If you experience bullying of any kind, either directly or as a witness, take the steps outlined on MyHR to [address the bullying](#). In the case of bullying through social media, please refer also to the “Cyberbullying” section of the Social Media Guidelines for BC Public Service Employees, which provides guidance and safety tips for employees and supervisors to address cyber harassment in the workplace.

Q: I’m friends with some people in the office on social media and I saw something that I think might not be in line with the Standards of Conduct or other government policy. What should I do?

A: It’s important to speak up if you have a question or concern. How you do that may depend on the situation. If you require immediate assistance with an emergency, call 911 and see [Urgent Support and Reporting](#).

In other cases, there may be an opportunity to minimize damage to government. For example, if you believe a social media contact has created a potential information incident (including a privacy breach) by posting sensitive government information (e.g. confidential business information, or personal information) online, you should follow the Information Incident Management process.

If you're on the receiving end of disrespectful behaviour by a supervisor or colleague or have observed activity contributing to a respectful workplace issue, you need to determine whether that behaviour is acceptable and know when to act if needed. For guidance on respectful workplace issues, refer to [Take Responsible Action](#).

For potential conflict of interest situations, you can refer colleagues to [Disclosing a Conflict of Interest: Employee Guideline & Disclosure Form](#) to learn about the duty to disclose potential conflicts of interest and talk with their supervisor about changes that may be required to the employee’s use social media.

If you have a concern and need additional guidance, speak with your supervisor.

Questions for Supervisors

Q: I don’t use or understand social media. Where can I go to learn more?



A: To learn more about social media, websites such as [Whatls.com](https://www.whatls.com) and [Investopedia](https://www.investopedia.com) provide overviews of some social media basics.

Q: How can I talk to my team about their social media activities and the Standards of Conduct?

A: A set of PowerPoint slides has been created for you to use to inform employees and encourage conversation about the guidelines, as well as other tools to encourage conversation about the sample scenarios.

As well, encourage your employees to become familiar with the [Standards of Conduct](#) and other policies as part of building their overall ethical capacity. The [Oath of Employment and Standards of Conduct Annual Review](#) is also an important part of an individual employee's learning on an annual basis.

Q: What should I do if I'm made aware of concerns regarding the use of social media by those who report to me?

A: Please contact [MyHR](#) for guidance if you're made aware of concerns regarding the use of social media by those who report to you. It's important to seek guidance from a human resource adviser who can review information, tools, resources and processes with you before addressing a situation.

For guidance on addressing a conflict of interest disclosure, refer to [Assessing & Addressing Conflicts of Interest: Guidelines for Managers, Ethics Advisors and Deputy Ministers](#).

Q: I'm friends with my employees on Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, etc./accepting a friend request from an employee. What should I be mindful of?

A: It's important for supervisors to have good communication and professional relationships with employees, foster a respectful team environment, and effectively manage employee performance. If you're connected with your employees outside of the workplace, for example on social media, consider how your activity in those circumstances might impact those goals. Some things to consider include whether you "friend" some employees and not others and the kinds of photos and comments you post. Also consider that if you are aware of [Standards of Conduct issues](#), you are responsible as a supervisor for taking action.

If you are a supervisor with concerns about an employee's social media activity in relation to their employment, please contact MyHR for guidance.

Q: I think my employee spends too much time on social media at work. What should I do and what are my options?

A: Please contact [MyHR](#) for guidance if you're made aware of concerns regarding the use of social media by those who report to you. It is important to seek guidance from a human resource adviser who can review information, tools and resources with you before addressing a situation.



Questions about Conflict of Interest

Q: What is a conflict of interest?

A: The Standards of Conduct define a conflict of interest as a situation where an employee's private affairs or financial interests are in conflict, or could result in the perception of conflict, with the employee's duties or responsibilities in such a way that:

- the employee's ability to act in the public interest could be impaired; or
- the employee's actions or conduct could undermine or compromise:
 - the public's confidence in the employee's ability to discharge work responsibilities; or
 - the trust that the public places in the BC Public Service.

A conflict of interest therefore involves a conflict between the public duty and private interests of an employee, in which the private interests could influence the performance of their official job duties, or in which an employee uses their office for personal gain. A conflict may arise wherever a set of circumstances exists that creates the risk of a real, perceived or potential conflict of interest.

Q: I have a private business and I use social media for marketing it. Is this a conflict of interest?

I use LinkedIn for my freelance work and for connecting with my BCPS work colleagues. Are there any issues with that?

I'm going to be volunteering for an organization and my supervisor is working with me to identify steps to mitigate any potential conflict of interest. What are some steps we should consider?

A: There are special considerations for public service employees when using social media for work outside their public service job. Consult the "Conflict of Interest" section of the social media guidelines to learn more about conflict of interest as it relates to social media use. The "Profile Choices" guidance in the document will also be relevant for you to consider.

Once you become aware of a possible conflict of interest, you should disclose this within 30 days to your supervisor, manager or [ethics advisor](#). You must talk with your supervisor or [ethics advisor](#) about this as part of the conflict of interest process. To learn more about the process to disclose a conflict of interest, refer to the [Conflict of Interest page on MyHR](#).

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Where ideas work