

Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use for BC Public Service Employees

Frequently Asked Questions

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To help navigate the complex social media landscape the BC Public Service has created two sets of social media guidelines: [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media \(PDF, 229KB\)](#) and [Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use](#).

The GCPE Guidelines for Government Use establish best practices for official government use of social media. The Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use, on the other hand, help employees make appropriate choices about their personal use of social media both in and outside of the workplace.

General questions

1. Who do the Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use apply to?

The guidelines are relevant to all BC Public Service employees, including employees of agencies, boards and commissions that are governed by the Public Service Act.

2. What is the purpose of the Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use?

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

The guidelines for personal use 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 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 is respectful and separates personal interests from professional obligations to avoid conflict and support the work of government.

3. Are there other guiding documents that apply to personal use of social media?

The Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use are not new policy. Rather they are a resource for employees to help them understand how the Standards of Conduct, Oath of Employment 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 policies, legislation and guidelines that employees must consider.

These include, but are not limited to:

- [HR Policies](#) (for example, HR Policy 11 - Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment)
- Ministry-specific policies
- [Conflict of Interest Guidelines \(PDF, 369KB\)](#)
- If you're using a government-issued device (for example, mobile phone or computer) you also need to abide by the [Appropriate Use Policy](#)
- [Human Rights Code](#)
- [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act \(FOIPPA\)](#)
- Occupational Health and Safety [policies](#) and [regulations](#)

4. What kinds of personal social media use are covered by the guidelines?

The guidelines cover social media use:

- At work (on work time) for personal use (for example, using Instagram 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 regarding political activity, working relationships, public comments, human resource decisions, outside work, volunteering, etc.
- When using government equipment (for example, social networking using your work-issued computer or cell phone)
- Where employees face discrimination, bullying and harassment online related to their employment
- When using workplace social media platforms (for example, 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 \(PDF, 229KB\)](#).

5. How are expectations of employees on social media different from expectations of them in other circumstances?

Expectations remain the same. Employees must meet standards for public comments, workplace behaviour, privacy, confidentiality, conflict of interest, impartiality 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 introduce new considerations for how employees make sure they meet those expectations.

Communication online using social media platforms is different than other forms of day-to-day communication. It's important for employees using social media to make informed and thoughtful choices.

6. Is British Columbia the only public service jurisdiction to have social media guidelines?

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.

7. Why are there two sets of guidelines? What's the difference between "personal use and "official government use" of social media?

"Personal use" refers to the use of a social media account unaffiliated with the workplace. "Government use" refers to a BC Public Service professional social media account that is used to conduct official government business. See the [GCPE Guidelines for Government Use of Social Media \(PDF, 22KB\)](#) for more information.

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

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 preference 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”, “contacts” or “followers”, they should consider the impact those interactions may have on the workplace environment. When you add colleagues to social media, you are creating a stronger connection between your online social media presence and the workplace.

You need to determine whether your interactions with colleagues are meeting acceptable social standards and are contributing to a positive workplace.

Questions about employee conduct

1. Are the expectations about personal social media use new?

These guidelines don't introduce any new policies about employee's personal use of social media. As public service employees we must keep our work and personal interests separate, and avoid all real, perceived and potential conflicts of interest.

2. Do the personal use guidelines provide a list of activities that are permitted and those that are not?

The guidelines don't provide an exhaustive list of every activity that is permitted or not. Employees are trusted to make ethical choices, use their best judgment and to reach out for help when unsure.

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

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 exercise appropriate judgement in any online activity that might impact their public service commitments.

4. If I post anonymously, am I free to post whatever I want?

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. Information that is confidential must not be shared, regardless of whether you attach your name.

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

As a 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 comments must not demonstrate disloyalty or a lack of impartiality in the conduct of your duties.

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
- Avoiding all real, perceived or potential conflicts of interest

6. 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?

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, consider asking them not to.

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

Talk with your supervisor or your ministry's [ethics advisor](#).

8. Can I check my personal Facebook/Instagram/Reddit account at work?

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.

9. 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?

BC Public Service employees are united by a shared commitment to deliver services, 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.

10. 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?

Pause doing whatever activity you've realized might be an issue and talk with your supervisor. Review the [Conflict of Interest Guidelines \(PDF, 369KB\)](#) for Employees and seek advice and/or make a disclosure to your supervisor.

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

The BC Public Service takes bullying, harassment and threats to employee safety very seriously, including those which occur over social media.

[Cyberbullying and online harassment](#) includes any inappropriate comment or conduct online that the person knew, or reasonably ought to have known would be humiliating or intimidating.

The [Standards of Conduct](#), [Human Resources Policy 11 – Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace \(PDF, 141KB\)](#) and WorkSafeBC legislation are in place to protect employees in the event that bullying, harassment, or threats to employee safety occur in relation to their employment.

If you experience bullying of any kind, either directly or as a witness, take steps outlined on [Careers & MyHR to address the bullying](#).

12. 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?

It's important to speak up and share your question or concern with your supervisor. How you do that may depend on the situation. If the issue concerns health and safety, see [Urgent support and reporting](#) on Careers & MyHR.

If you believe a social media contact has created a potential information incident (including a privacy breach) by posting sensitive government information online (for example, confidential business information or personal information), you should follow the [information incident management process](#).

If you experience 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 [Address discrimination, bullying and harassment](#) on Careers & MyHR.

If you have a concern and need additional guidance speak with your ministry ethics advisor.

Questions for supervisors

1. I don't use or understand social media. Where can I go to learn more?

To learn more about social media, websites such as [WhatIs.com](#) and [Investopedia](#) provide overviews of some social media basics.

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

On the [Social media guidelines for personal use page](#) on Careers & MyHR you will find:

- A set of PowerPoint slides that will help you inform your employees about the social media guidelines.
- A document titled Social Media Scenarios and Discussion Questions. This document provides hypothetical social media scenarios, guiding questions and best-practice responses to each scenario.

These resources can help you facilitate a broader discussion amongst your staff about personal social media use and [the Standards of Conduct](#).

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

Please contact the BC Public Service Agency via [AskMyHR](#) for guidance on how to address the situation.

For guidance on addressing a conflict of interest disclosure, refer to [Assessing and Addressing Conflicts of Interest: Guideline for Managers, Ethics Advisors, and Deputy Ministers \(PDF, 447KB\)](#) or speak with your ministry [ethics advisor](#).

4. I'm friends with my employees on Facebook/X(Twitter)/Instagram, etc. In accepting a friend request from an employee what should I be mindful of?

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, consider how your social media 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 the BC Public Service Agency via [AskMyHR](#) for guidance.

5. Can I formally require my employees to follow the Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use (in written correspondence or verbally)?

The Social Media Guidelines for Personal Use are intended to help employees navigate existing policies and requirements.

You can require that employees follow all policies and legislation the guidelines reference (for example, Standards of Conduct, Oath of Employment, discrimination, bullying and harassment policy, Appropriate Use Policy, etc.).

Questions about conflict of interest

1. What is a conflict of interest?

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 a public duty and a private interest where the private interest could influence the employee's work or the employee uses their position for personal gain. Any real, perceived or potential conflicts of interest need to be disclosed to your supervisor or ministry [ethics advisor](#).

2. 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 BC Public Service 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?

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. See also the “Profile Choices” section of the social media guidelines. If you have further questions you should consult with your supervisor or ministry [ethics advisor](#).

Once you become aware of a possible conflict of interest, you should disclose this to your supervisor or [ethics advisor](#).