INTERNET AND EMAIL GUIDANCE POLICY

Reasons for this guidance

Many employees find themselves with access to the Internet and email, but with little understanding of either the potential problems or the real benefits that this can bring. The purpose of implementing this guidance is to ensure that employees understand the way in which they should be used. This enables us to gain the maximum value from the Internet, and informs every one of the consequences of misuse by employees (i.e. disciplinary action)

Employers are responsible for their employees' activities when using the internet. For example, if software for use in an organisation is obtained illegally, the employer is liable, even if it was obtained without his or her knowledge or permission.

Similarly, information on an organisation's website or in its email can give rise to legal action against that organisation. Employers are responsible if employees send email messages which are defamatory or which breach confidentiality or contract. Any such messages will be disclosed for the purposes of legal action. In order to reduce liability, employers must be able to prove that they have a policy in place to prevent illegal actions and that appropriate steps are taken to enforce this policy.

Note: The following guidance statements apply to computer equipment whether used on or off the premises, and to personal computer equipment (i.e. personal laptops and floppy disks) if used on the premises or for official business.

Access to computers and the internet

Computer terminals should be used only by employees, except if specifically authorised by the Business Manager.

Each employee is responsible for the security of their computer and must not allow it to be used by an unauthorised person.

It is not permitted to make use of loopholes in internet, or websites' security systems to access, damage or alter any files held on any computer or website (according to the Computer Misuse Act).

Browsing the web

All employees are permitted access to the internet for work use. One problem with browsing the internet, even for work purposes, is that it can become unfocused and time-consuming. This wastes employees' time and, even where it is done in their own time, it ties up resources and may be costly in telephone charges (if the organisation in question is on a modem connection).

Remember that alternative sources (e.g. library, directory enquiries, advice lines and other information providing organisations) may often be able to provide the information you need quicker than you can find it using the internet.

The playing of games on the internet is banned, as is gambling and the use of 'chat' lines. Excessive or inappropriate use of mailing lists is not allowed.

Credit card transactions (whether personal or business-related) should only be made online

with the approval of the Business Manager or Centre Manager.

Downloading information: Obtaining inappropriate text and images

Downloading offensive, obscene or indecent material from any source is forbidden and may be grounds for immediate dismissal. The storing and transfer of such images using equipment is forbidden.

Copyright law
Much of what appears on the web is, or claims to be, protected by copyright. *If so,* only the owner of the copyright is allowed to copy the information. Any copying without permission, including electronic copying, is prohibited. Copyright laws apply not only to documents but also to software. If in doubt over the copyright of an internet document, ask the Business Manager for advice.

Obtaining incorrect or poor quality information
One of the main benefits of the internet is the access which it gives to large amounts of information which is often more up-to-date than in traditional sources like libraries. Unfortunately, as the internet is uncontrolled, some of this information is less accurate than it may appear and some of it is wilfully misleading. Check that any information on the internet is:
- Current: look for a date
- Reliable: look for the name of a trusted organisation and for an address and phone number.

Time wasting
As with browsing, downloading information from the internet can be very time-consuming and waste resources. It is not acceptable to download large files from the internet unless there is a valid need for them (e.g. it would be acceptable to download a large government report but not large pictures).

Viruses
The introduction of a virus when downloading software or other files from the internet poses a risk to all the organisation's computers. Anti- virus software is installed on all machines and must not be removed or disabled. It provides an element of protection but care must still be taken when downloading files. The greatest risk from viruses lies in downloaded programs and program files (those which end in .exe or .com or .bat).

All software should be obtained from controlled legal sources and no software should be installed or downloaded from the Internet without the consent of the Business Manager. All floppy disks used to transfer data from another system onto the Dudley Community Church/Dudley Counselling Centre network must be checked by the Business Manager.

Viruses can be carried within email messages. For this reason do not open any emails where the sender is not known to you and where the subject of the email has been left blank or is obviously not to do with our line of work. The 'Love bug' virus played on peoples' gullibility and curiosity by sending a message saying simply 'I love you', but which disrupted computers when opened.

Be wary of opening files sent as attachments to emails, and never open an attached document unless you know who sent it. The deliberate introduction of viruses onto computers or disks is an offence.

Using email
Although email communication has the same speed and apparent informality as using the telephone, it also has the permanence of written communications and, as such, must meet the same standards as other published documents.

What are the advantages of using email?
It is a fast and inexpensive way of delivering messages and documents across long or short distances. Because information can be shared quickly and consistently between any number of people it removes the need to print and distribute information by conventional means.

What are the disadvantages of using email?
If used inappropriately, you and your colleagues may suffer from 'information overload syndrome' i.e. vital information being lost in many messages that are irrelevant. Email can stifle face to face communication or be used to abdicate the responsibility of communicating messages that should be done in person.

Use
Some employees will have access to email and will be provided with an email address for correspondence.

Employees' email address should be used only for business purposes. If an employee has a web-based personal email account (e.g. through Hotmail or Yahoo) then they are permitted to occasionally access their personal account (no more than once a day to check for messages).

It is not permitted to use loopholes in organisational, internet, or a website's security or hardware systems to send anonymous or fraudulent mail messages, or to read the content of others' messages.

Content
Sending offensive email will not be tolerated. It can be a criminal offence. The sender of a message that causes offence will be subject to normal disciplinary procedures. In this respect email is no different from any other interpersonal dispute. The same laws apply to email as to any other written document and therefore they should avoid making any inaccurate or defamatory statements. Employees must seek advice before sending a message if there is any doubt about its contents.

Remember the over-cautious but widely quoted dictum that, when using the internet, you shouldn't transmit anything you wouldn't shout in a crowded room.

Distribution
In spite of the benefits of email, there is a danger of loss of productivity associated with its excessive use. Send only relevant emails and avoid the automatic forwarding of messages to long circulation lists, which unnecessarily increases the traffic and the time spent dealing with irrelevant correspondence.

The sending of large amounts of uninvited email, and the forwarding of chain letters or other unsolicited ('junk') mail is not permitted. Note that this may apply to sending mail shots by email.

Employees who are due to take annual leave should arrange to have emails redirected or for someone to open and deal with urgent messages.

If a message is wrongly delivered to an employee, it should be redirected to the correct person and if the email message contains confidential information, use must not be made of that information and nor must it be disclosed.

Addresses
Email address should be treated as confidential in the same circumstances as a street address and care taken to ensure that private email addresses are not wrongly circulated.

Websites
The Business Manager has overall responsibility for the Dudley Community Church/Dudley Counselling Centre website, what it looks like and what it contains, and is the main person permitted to upload information directly on to the website. Specific parts of the website can be controlled directly by designated members of staff as appropriate.

It is an offence to post defamatory, obscene or otherwise offensive information or images on the website.

Employees may not use the website, internet or email facilities for commercial gain, or on behalf of any external commercial organisation without permission.

Enforcement
Broadly speaking the general disciplinary procedures will be followed. Note that this allows for immediate action in extreme cases.

The right is reserved to monitor internet use to log which websites are being accessed, for what length of time and by whom. The volume of emails sent inside and outside the organisation will be monitored but the content will not usually be monitored as a general rule. However, the right is reserved to intercept and read emails to enable work to be covered during staff absence, as part of a disciplinary enquiry, for audit purposes, or to protect against crime, hacking, unauthorised use or viruses. Emails which are clearly personal and confidential will not usually be read.

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