



# **Guidance for Public Servants on their Personal Use of Social Media**

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personnelle des médias sociaux

# Guidance for Public Servants on their Personal Use of Social Media

From: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

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## Introduction

Social media is how we stay connected, consume news and entertainment, express ourselves, and much more. It's everywhere, which can bring challenges: how do we separate the personal and the professional? How much do our responsibilities as public servants influence what we can or should post online?

These questions do not have easy answers. Different public servants will have different considerations depending on their specific circumstances, such as responsibilities, lived experiences and level of seniority. However, we need a common understanding.

Public servants, like all Canadians, have the right to freedom of thought, belief, opinion, association and expression under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. As an inclusive public service that strives to be representative of the public we serve, our diversity and varied lived experiences enrich our overall ability to deliver excellence for Canada and Canadians.

However, we also have responsibilities because of our role as public servants. Our work is essential to Canada's well-being, and a professional, non-partisan, and impartial federal public service is integral to our democracy. As public servants, we are expected to uphold the trust and confidence of Canadians in the government and the public service.

There are many positive uses of social media. Public servants have built vibrant communities to share best practices and foster collaboration. When we share our success stories, we show an effective and highly skilled public service that delivers excellence for Canadians. These activities foster trust both within and outside of the public service.

But we need to be mindful of risks. When Canadians see a social media post from a public servant, they might perceive that post to be representative of a government position. Or they might question whether the public servant who posted it is able to act in a non-partisan and impartial manner. When colleagues see a post with disrespectful language, it can harm our trust in each other. When a public servant's posts that contain partisan language get amplified in some way, such as through media attention or going viral, it can diminish the confidence that elected officials have in the public service.

Personal actions can have significant consequences. This is especially true online where our social media footprint is essentially a permanent record. As we have seen many times over the past decade, social media posts can have impacts that we never intended or imagined: posts can go viral unexpectedly, screenshots can be taken and disclosed publicly, and information can be taken out of context.

Ultimately, public servants need to have good judgment online. This guidance supports decision-making in two ways:

1. There are reflection questions to help public servants understand the risks of online activities. These questions can also help foster dialogue about social media use in our organizations.
2. There are examples of types of online activity that are considered potentially appropriate, risky and inappropriate. These examples are illustrative and non-exhaustive.

This guidance aims to help us understand how our online activities can impact public trust, team cohesion, our professional credibility, and the confidence of the government. It's about how we live up to our values and ethics every day.

# What is this guidance document and why was it created?

In September 2023, the Clerk of the Privy Council formed the Deputy Ministers' Task Team on Values and Ethics to lead a conversation with public servants on how to bring our *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* to life in a dynamic and increasingly complex environment. The Task Team received requests from public servants for guidance on the use of social media and recommended in their December 2023 report that such guidance be developed for public servants.

This guidance document aims to bring together information about our responsibilities as public servants when we use personal social media, on personal devices, on non-Government of Canada networks and on personal time. It does not set out new policy or requirements as the requirements are set out in the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector*, organizational codes of conduct, the *Directive on Conflict of Interest*, the *Public Service Employment Act (PSEA)*, *oath or affirmation* and other legislation and policies. This guidance clarifies how they apply to our personal use of social media as public servants.

It is not meant to discourage personal use of social media platforms; rather, it aims to create understanding of how to live up to our responsibility as public servants and promote a professional, non-partisan, and impartial public service that inspires the trust and confidence of Canadians while respecting our individual right to freedom of expression.

The requirements for the use of official federal government social media accounts or use of government networks or devices are available in:

- *Directive on the Management of Communications*
- *Directive on Service and Digital*
- *Guideline on Acceptable Network and Device Use*
- *Guideline on Service and Digital*

## Public service non-partisanship and impartiality

A non-partisan and impartial public service has been a guiding principle since the coming into force of the *Civil Service Amendment Act, 1908*. As described in the Public Service Commission's report *Public Service Impartiality: Taking Stock*:

Impartiality is integral to the calling of a professional public service in Canada's federal government. An impartial public service allows Canadians, regardless of their political views, to expect fair, objective treatment from public servants. It also provides a great measure of stability for a country whose parliamentary system means governments can be

long- or short-lived, since large sections of the public service are not replaced following elections. The knowledge and experience of professional public servants are vital to Canada's system of democracy.

It goes on to state:

impartiality is part of the calling of a professional public servant. To preserve the real and perceived non-partisanship of the public service, public servants are expected to serve the Crown (as represented by the government of the day) loyally and impartially, regardless of the party in power.

Lastly, it clarifies that:

Public servants also fulfill their obligation to maintain an impartial public service by refraining, outside the context allowed by the PSEA, from participation in political activities that may jeopardize the perception of non-partisanship or cause people to doubt their loyalty. This should not be taken to mean that public servants cannot participate in political activities. On this subject, the PSEA is clear. Public servants have the right to participate in political activities as long as the activities do not impair, or are not perceived as impairing, the impartiality of the public service. This approach is consistent with the rulings of the Supreme Court, ..., which provide that public servants' constitutional right to freedom of expression should only be circumscribed to the extent necessary to allow them to carry out their duties in an impartial way.

## **Our guide – the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector***

The *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* outlines the values and expected behaviours that guide us in all our activities:

- respect for democracy
- respect for people
- integrity
- stewardship
- excellence

Underlying the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* is the fundamental principle of duty of loyalty, which guides our conduct as federal public servants, including our conduct on personal social media. As public servants, we agree to:

- uphold the Constitution and laws
- serve the public interest

- maintain confidentiality
- practice non-partisanship and impartiality
- demonstrate respect for democracy, integrity, honesty and accountability

The duty of loyalty is a key principle and obligation for public servants. It stems from the core mission to assist the elected government in serving the public interest, in accordance with the law. This duty justifiably limits public servants' freedom of expression, particularly when their public statements could damage the reputation of the Government of Canada. The duty of loyalty is based on the understanding that these statements—especially harsh or persistent criticism of government policy—can undermine the public's trust in the public service's ability to support the elected government effectively.

The duty of loyalty must be balanced with an employee's freedom of expression. Three situations in which the balancing of these interests is likely to result in an exception to the duty of loyalty are where:

- the Government is engaged in illegal acts
- Government policies jeopardize life, health or safety
- the public servant's criticism has no impact on their ability to perform effectively the duties of a public servant or on the public perception of that ability

In situations where you are unsure whether there is an exception that applies, contact your organization's values and ethics office or your manager.

Social media should not be used for disclosing allegations of wrongdoing in the public service, but rather through mechanisms designed for this purpose, as this ensures that complete information is provided and that appropriate measures can be taken in response. This approach helps protect the rights of all parties involved and ensures that the investigation is conducted fairly and thoroughly. There are avenues to disclose wrongdoing in the public service available under the *Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act*. Public servants can disclose allegations of wrongdoing to their Senior officer for disclosure of wrongdoing (accessible only on the Government of Canada network) or to the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner.

Public service organizations are subject to the *Directive on Conflict of Interest* (directive). The directive requires public servants to prevent and resolve any real, apparent or potential conflicts of interest between their official responsibilities and their private affairs in favour of the public interest. The directive also describes the obligation to report any conflicts of interest, whether they are real, apparent or potential.

Lastly, each organization in the federal public service has a unique code of conduct that addresses their particular mandate and their day-to-day operations, in addition to the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector*.

When we join the public service, we all agree to act in accordance with the values and expected behaviours outlined in the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* (and the underlying duty of loyalty), our organizational codes of conduct, and the directive.

## **The employer's responsibility**

The public service is working to create a healthy, safe, inclusive, accessible and respectful workplace. As an employer, the Government of Canada has a responsibility to foster dialogue and understanding about rights and obligations.

The employer should also treat employees fairly and transparently, act in good faith, and be guided by the Constitution, relevant laws and legal precedents in balancing public servants' freedom of expression and freedom of association with their duty of loyalty to the employer.

## **Available support for ethical decision-making**

The document [Values Alive: A Discussion Guide to the Values and Ethics Code of the Public Sector](#) contains a [guide to ethical decision-making](#) that can be used in a variety of situations, including when we are engaging on social media. This document and the [Values and Ethics Discussion Toolkit](#) include scenarios outlining ethical dilemmas involving social media.

Ask your organization's values and ethics office or your manager or supervisor for advice when you need additional guidance. They are there to advise and assist you in making decisions.

## **Considerations for public servants using personal social media accounts**

There are many factors to consider when posting on social media. You should periodically check the privacy, security and safety settings on your social media accounts, as well as your historical online footprint. Any personal information available online could put your physical safety at risk.

Public servants must not use any official Government of Canada symbols on their personal accounts (see the [Legal protection of the official symbols of the Government of Canada](#) for more information).

It can be helpful to add a disclaimer that your views are your own, but this does not eliminate the risk that your views could be perceived as those of the government.

Here are some things to consider before you post. Your evaluation must take all elements into consideration to form a complete picture:

- How **visible you are to the public in your public service role** and identifiable as an employee of the public service. The more visible your position is, the more weight is likely to be given to what you may post.
- **Your visibility on social media.** You may have more influence on public opinion if you have a large number of followers.
- The **content** you may post online and its relationship to your work, as well as the work of your current organization, the work of other organizations and the work of the Government of Canada as a whole. If your post is specifically about your current work, it is more likely to be seen as representing the views of the government, so make sure the post is authorized.
- The **nature of the content you are creating**, including how it is linked to other online content, such as content that could be seen as discriminatory or harassing.
- The **classification, level and type of position you are in.** Posts from senior leaders and authority figures should be held to a very high standard because they could have greater influence. Think not only about the role you currently occupy, but also the positions you might wish to hold.

While privacy settings and anonymous accounts can seem like effective ways to maintain separation between our personal and professional lives, there are still risks. Screenshots can be taken and disclosed publicly, or employees could be identified.

Even if the public servant's identity is not revealed, anonymous posts can undermine public trust in the Government of Canada's institutions, potentially harming the reputation and effectiveness of the public service.

Anonymous posts that contain strongly negative language—especially harsh critiques about our teams or colleagues—can also contribute to an unhealthy work environment. Employees are encouraged to speak to their manager if they have concerns and to use internal resources such as the [Employee Assistance Program](#) for mental health support and internal recourse mechanisms to help address and resolve workplace issues.

Ultimately, we need to carefully think about how to uphold confidence in our ability to provide advice to the government and serve Canadians in a non-partisan and impartial manner.

# Questions to ask yourself to assess your social media activity

**What is the content of the post? Does it constitute an opinion of a government policy or program?**

**Why this is important?**

As a professional, non-partisan and impartial public service, we provide the government with evidence-based advice and options on policies, programs and actions, and then we loyally implement government decisions. While taking the considerations outlined above into account, we should be careful when commenting publicly on partisan policy proposals or matters that are up for debate in Parliament.

We also should be careful when publicly critiquing (positively or negatively) the government of the day or any political party's policies or positions. Before you post, ask yourself whether your post is an opinion that would cause a reasonable person to question your ability to perform your duties in a non-partisan and impartial manner.

**Can you anticipate how the post will be perceived by others?**

**Why this is important?**

Perception is just as important as reality when it comes to how the public views the public service. Ask yourself how your post could be perceived by a reasonable person. Will they question whether you are able to perform your duties in a non-partisan and impartial manner? Does the post imply criticism of the decisions and policies of the Government of Canada?

**Will your social media activity have an impact on your work environment?**

**Why this is important?**

We want our workplace to be safe, healthy, inclusive, accessible and representative of the public we serve. Social media networks can be a great place to share resources and foster positive relationships. We can celebrate excellence, collaborate and lift each other up.

Public servants must never engage in bullying, harassment or discrimination on social media. Consider the impact that your words will have on your colleagues, past or present, and your work environment. Would you say those words in the presence of a colleague? Would you tell that story in front of your manager?

## **How could this post impact your professional reputation?**

### **Why this is important?**

It is incredibly difficult to erase content from the internet. A post could harm the perception of your judgment or integrity. Consider how a post could be interpreted if you take on a leadership role or new responsibilities.

## **Can you trust the source of the social media content?**

### **Why this is important?**

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the volume of misinformation, disinformation and content generated using artificial intelligence online. Share content from trusted and reliable sources to avoid potentially sharing false or misleading information.

As AI tools become more sophisticated, it is becoming harder to differentiate between real and fake images, audio, and videos. Breaking news of global and domestic crises, controversies, and conflicts frequently comes at a speed and scale that makes fact-checking incredibly difficult. As public servants, we should act with integrity, not spread disinformation, avoid contributing to harmful online discourse, and do our part to safeguard Canada's democratic system.

## **Are you using a hashtag, phrase or expression in your social media posts?**

### **Why this is important?**

Jumping on a trending topic can be a great way to share content and reach more people. You may wish to search hashtags before using them to avoid linking to content you didn't mean to.

## **What type of content are you amplifying or engaging with?**

### **Why this is important?**

Sharing, tagging or liking content carries similar risks to posting the material yourself. As we cannot always predict what will go viral, or how our posts might be taken out of context, we need to be careful about our online engagement, where our actions are more visible, more enduring, and much more likely to affect public trust in the public service—as well as our own professional reputation and credibility.

Posting, sharing, tagging or liking content or photos that may be in violation of the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* or your organization's code of conduct may lead to disciplinary actions.

Examples of inappropriate content include content that is racist, hateful, sexist, homophobic or defamatory, containing or referring to any obscenity or pornography, threatening, violent, intimidating or harassing.

## **Are you engaging in a personal enterprise with a profile on social media?**

### **Why this is important?**

In addition to declaring your personal enterprise and complying with all steps and obligations of the *Directive on Conflict of Interest*, you must ensure that your personal enterprise's social media presence does not call into question your ability to perform your duties in a fair, transparent, non-partisan and impartial fashion. Furthermore, social media activities related to a personal enterprise must be conducted outside of your working hours and using non-government devices.

## **Are you an influencer, streamer, blogger or other social media personality, paid or unpaid?**

### **Why this is important?**

Being in these types of roles on social media may be considered to be an outside activity or employment. You need to ensure that your role does not call into question your ability to perform your duties in a fair, non-partisan and impartial fashion.

You should also assess, with your manager, whether there is any real, potential or apparent conflict of interest between your public service job and your social media role, and comply with all steps and requirements under the *Directive on Conflict of Interest*, as applicable, and your organizational procedures. Remember that the greater your visibility on social media, the more weight and reach your social media activity has.

## Are there other policies or professional codes of conduct that apply to you that can guide you?

### Why this is important?

Some policies and professional codes of conduct may provide guidance about posting or otherwise interacting with content on social media, such as the Scientific Integrity Policy, or the bar association code of professional conduct.

## Guidance on political activities

Our online engagement follows the same rules as in-person acts when it relates to political activities. As a public servant, you can engage in political activities as long as these activities do not impair, or are not perceived as impairing, your ability to perform your duties in a politically impartial manner.

There are a few ways to consider political activities. The definition of political activities under the *Public Service Employment Act* includes:

- carrying on any activity in support of, within or in opposition to a political party
- carrying on any activity in support of or in opposition to a candidate before or during an election period
- seeking nomination as or being a candidate in an election before or during an election period

You must request and obtain permission from the Public Service Commission before seeking a nomination as or being a candidate in an election at the municipal, provincial, territorial or federal level. You must not create a social media presence as a candidate until you have received the permission of the Public Service Commission.

Other activities can be assessed using the Public Service Commission's Self-Assessment Tool. You are encouraged to seek guidance and advice from your organization's designated political activities representative before undertaking any political activities.

## When personal experience intersects with political issues

Public servants are protected by the Canadian Human Rights Act. In the public service, we also uphold our core values by respecting the dignity of all people. We are working to create an accessible, anti-racist and equitable workplace where public servants can live authentically and

feel safe, valued and included.

In our increasingly polarized online landscape, public servants are facing challenges when their own identity factors—such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, lived experience, or disability—become a focus of broader political conversations, or when the issues that we care deeply about are part of partisan dialogue.

Navigating these complexities can be difficult. It remains important to exercise judgement in how we engage on social media. When considering whether to post, like, share, or reply to content, we must balance our public service values and ethics, our duty of loyalty, and our commitment to uphold public trust with our right to freedom of expression.

When it becomes difficult to align personal values with our public service values, we are strongly encouraged to seek guidance. Consider discussing with your manager, your organizational values and ethics office, or Ombud—and make decisions that protect your integrity and that of the public service.

If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination on social media from another public servant or from a member of the public because of your position as a public servant, you should report this to your manager, who will consider with you the appropriate course of action in the circumstance, which may be engaging with your organization's human resources or security division or possibly law enforcement.

The [Employee Assistance Program](#) can offer mental health support if you experience harassment or discrimination on social media.

## **Ensuring personal social media accounts are not mistaken for official Government of Canada accounts**

Regardless of your level of responsibility, expertise or visibility, you should make every effort to ensure that your personal social media presence is not perceived as official or representative of the Government of Canada. For example:

- do not add [official symbols of the Government of Canada](#) to your social media avatar, profile photo or to any posts
- do not use your work-related user ID or password
- do not use your government email address in your account profile
- do not copy the naming conventions that officially represent the Government of Canada or the title of your position with an organization abbreviation or GC)

For information about the use of official accounts or use of government networks or devices, consult the [Directive on the Management of Communications](#) and the [Directive on Service and Digital](#).

## Examples of appropriate, risky and inappropriate use of personal social media accounts

The following are some non-exhaustive examples of social media use that have been categorized as appropriate, potentially risky or inappropriate.

### Appropriate use of social media

Examples of appropriate use of personal social media accounts (always only if the content does not call into question your non-partisanship and impartiality):

- networking and building connections with other public servants
- celebrating excellence, such as sharing news of awards and recognition
- sharing factual and publicly available information about government programs, events or initiatives
- sharing job opportunities
- sharing publicly available content from trusted sources, such as news articles, academic journals or other professional content relevant to your field, while respecting copyright
- activities to inform yourself as voters such as following a party or candidate, tuning into a stream of a town hall or debates
- sharing pictures of or information about your pet, vacation or a family event
- sharing recipes, tips, hacks and other information not related to your work

### Potentially risky use of social media

Examples of potentially risky use of personal social media accounts, where public servants should exercise judgment:

- debating emergent or controversial issues, such as social or geopolitical issues
- commenting about our own or another jurisdiction's government or leaders
- liking, sharing or responding to content from partisan social media accounts
- creating political posts
- creating, signing or sharing a petition in protest of the Government of Canada, policy area, or minister

- creating or participating in an online community critical of your organization, policy area, or minister
- creating, sharing or liking posts criticizing decisions of your organization

## Inappropriate use of social media

Examples of inappropriate use of personal social media accounts:

- bullying, discrimination, aggressive behaviour, or maliciously sharing the private information of another person (doxxing)
- representing personal opinions as those of the organization or the government, including creating posts or content that include the official symbols of the Government of Canada
- deliberately posting or sharing content about the Government of Canada you know to be false or misleading
- communicating about Government of Canada business to benefit a friend or family member, for example, information on an upcoming program or grant opportunity that has not been released to the public yet
- sharing Crown copyrighted content without properly indicating the source
- endorsing or providing an unfair advantage to a vendor, business, stakeholder or individual in their interaction with the government
- sharing non-publicly available business information, sensitive information or personal information held by the Government of Canada (including photographs)
- criticizing a specific manager or colleague's work, ethics or behaviour in a manner that results in workplace tension
- using personal social media accounts to avoid requirements that apply to official accounts (security, use of both official languages, information management, *Access to Information Act* or the *Privacy Act*)
- engaging in political activities during working hours, on government premises or using government resources
- conducting work on your personal account, such as answering questions about your program

Public servants who engage in any illegal activities online, including defamation, copyright infringement, hate speech, harassment or violence, are responsible for their actions under applicable laws.

# Evaluating online history

You should review your online footprint periodically, for example, when you join the public service, when your role within the public service changes (e.g., you receive a promotion). If you are concerned about previous or historical online posts, seek guidance from your manager or your organizational values and ethics office.

## Where to go for support

In some instances, evaluating risks may be complex or challenging. You are encouraged to discuss with your manager, your organization's values and ethics office ([Senior officials for public service values and ethics](#) (accessible only on the Government of Canada network)), or your designated senior official for conflict of interest ([Departmental officers for conflict of interest and post-employment measures](#) (accessible only on the Government of Canada network)).

Organizations should ensure that managers are prepared to assist employees in evaluating risks thoughtfully and appropriately. Additionally, employees should recognize the importance of discussing uncertain situations and feel comfortable doing so.

Employees generally should not be routinely monitoring other employees' public social media activity and must always respect employees' rights to privacy and freedom of expression.

However, a post may be brought to manager's attention through any number of ways:

- raised in a media query
- comment from a member of the public,
- seen and reported by a colleague
- highlighted on social media
- shared on a professional network page

If you are unsure if you should take any action, you can discuss it with your manager, your organizational values and ethics office, or your Ombud.

The Canada School of Public Service offers a variety of learning opportunities that may help you, for example:

- [Cyber Security Best Practices](#) (DDN250)
- (For professional use) [Navigating Social Media as a Public Servant](#) (TRN125)
- [Outsmarting Social Engineering](#) (DDN2-A29)
- [Untangling Misinformation and Disinformation](#) (TRN506)

Together, we can foster a positive online environment that balances our rights as individuals and our collective responsibilities as public servants.

This document will be updated periodically. Send comments or suggestions regarding this guidance to [Integrity-integrite@tbs-sct.gc.ca](mailto:Integrity-integrite@tbs-sct.gc.ca).

## Terminology

In this guidance, when we refer to “social media,” we are addressing a comprehensive array of online activities across various platforms, websites and applications with varying degrees of public access to content. These platforms include but are not limited to:

- social networking sites like Facebook, X, Bluesky, Instagram, or Snapchat
- professional sites like LinkedIn
- video sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok
- blogs
- online forums such as Reddit
- review websites like TripAdvisor, Amazon or Google
- comment sections on news articles or brand websites

The online activities we are considering range from posting content and uploading photos (including themed frames, avatars or captions) to participating in online petitions, commenting on various posts, sharing memes, liking others’ content, and sending direct messages on networking platforms. When we mention “posts,” “comments,” or “posting” or “sharing” throughout this guidance, we are using these terms as a convenient way to encompass all types of online activity.

In the federal public service, “impartiality recognizes that, for desired expectations and outcomes, various options deserve consideration in the public policy process. This perspective recognizes that ministers require thoughtful and credible advice covering a range of aspects related to the public interest. It also recognizes that citizens and taxpayers deserve services and policies that place the public interest ahead of the personal and ideological preferences of public servants. In practice, impartiality often requires public servants to refrain from opinions, positions or actions that demonstrate a bias toward or against a particular cause or course of action, including the defence of government policies. In analyzing options, public servants will consider the best evidence-based knowledge. They will base their recommendations on the desired outcomes and implement the decisions lawfully taken by ministers, even if these decisions differ from the advice or recommendations provided. A politically impartial public service supports the government of whichever political party the electorate chooses.” <sup>1</sup>

“Partisanship is the act of supporting a party, person or cause. Partisanship refers in general to actions supporting or opposing political parties or biases. Although the primary concern for the public service is “political partisanship,” other types of partisanship should not be dismissed (for example, support for an interest group or cause that is not attached to a particular political party).”<sup>1</sup>

## Guidance for managers

Public servants, like all Canadians, have a right to freedom of thought, belief, opinion, association and expression under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Those rights need to be balanced with our obligations as non-partisan and impartial public servants.

While some instances are clear—public servants should not, for example, engage in hate speech—there are many grey areas where public servants feel conflicted over what they can or should post. It can be very difficult to navigate how we interact with social issues, geopolitical events, international crises, or changes within the public service in online spaces.

This is particularly challenging for employees whose identity factors—such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability—become the subject of broader political discourse and who are directly impacted by the decisions or discussions on what are often considered controversial and sensitive topics.

Managers are an integral part of the public service. You provide guidance and leadership to your teams and are on the front line of ensuring that we are a professional, inclusive, accessible and healthy workforce that can deliver excellence for Canada and Canadians.

As part of that role, you are encouraged to talk to your team about this social media guidance so that they understand why it matters, how it applies to them, how to apply ethical decision-making, and where to turn for additional support.

You are encouraged to discuss how to address cases where a team member is facing harassment or discrimination from another public servant or a member of the public because of their position as a public servant at team meetings.

When discussing with your teams, you may want to reinforce the following points:

- When we join the public service, we take an oath and we agree to uphold the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* as a condition of our employment, including the duty of loyalty.
- As public servants, we serve democracy and deliver excellence for Canada and Canadians.
- Upholding public trust and the confidence of the duly elected government in the public service is essential.

- As public servants, we have the right to engage in political activities; however, this must be balanced with our responsibility to maintain a non-partisan and impartial public service, which means ensuring that we are and are perceived to be politically impartial when carrying out our public service duties and functions.
- We also have a responsibility to create and maintain a safe, healthy, inclusive and accessible work environment.
- This guidance is not about stopping public servants from using social media. It is about helping public servants understand the risks and broader implications of online activities so that they can make informed choices that are aligned with our values and ethics.
- Including disclaimers can help mitigate risks, but there is always a possibility that opinions could be perceived as representing those of the government.
- Privacy settings could also help to mitigate risks, but individuals may still be identified, and posts could be shared publicly.
- We need to think about the implications of our actions on our team, our organization, the public service as a whole and the trust and confidence of the Canadian public.
- Posting, liking or sharing inappropriate content could hurt the trust that team members have in each other, and make our work environment feel less safe.
- We should be mindful of the specific roles and responsibilities of our team, and exercise good judgment about engaging with online content related to our area of work.
- We also need to think about the implications for our own careers.
  - Once something is online, it is very hard to permanently remove it
  - Hiring managers could look up someone's digital footprint on publicly available social media for information relevant to the hiring process
  - Public service leaders will be held to a higher degree of scrutiny about both present and past social media posts

Managers should proactively work on creating psychologically safe spaces within their team where issues and concerns can be raised. The [Centre of Expertise on Mental Health in the Workplace](#) has resources to help you.

If an employee comes to you with a complex question and you are not sure of the answer, you can turn to your organizational values and ethics office for help.

Additionally, managers should proactively inform their employees there are mechanisms to raise workplace and interpersonal disputes. This could include organizational values and ethics offices, a dedicated Ombud, human resources, union representatives, or other relevant parties.

**What do you do if you see or become aware of a potentially**

## inappropriate post?

Managers generally should not be routinely monitoring employees' public social media activity and must always respect their employees' rights to privacy and freedom of expression.

However, a post may be brought to your attention through any number of ways:

- raised in a media query
- comment from a member of the public,
- seen and reported by a colleague
- highlighted on social media
- shared on a professional network page

An organization's response to an individual's social media activity should be proportional to the risk that it poses and should be addressed in a respectful and professional manner.

If you need to deal with social media activity that clearly violates the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector* (for instance, a post taking advantage of a public service position for private financial gain, a post bullying a colleague or discriminating against someone on grounds protected by the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, or an unauthorized disclosure of protected information online), follow your organization's protocols for addressing such instances.

If you need to deal with social media activity that could be inappropriate, but you are not sure, here are suggested steps that you could take:

- Take the time to understand the context. Approach the situation with curiosity and openness and avoid drawing immediate judgments or conclusions.
- Be courageous and have honest and open conversations with your teams about expected behaviours.
- Think about the potential for your own unconscious biases to be leading you to make unfair judgments.
- Consider the overall well-being, character and lived experience of the person who posted the content. Sometimes, out-of-character online activity can be a sign that an individual is experiencing personal challenges.
- Ask the employee to share their intentions and goals in making the post to help you assess the situation.
- Refer to the *Guidance for Public Servants on their Personal Use of Social Media*, and consult with organizational experts to determine the correct approach to responding, including whether:
  - the issue is likely to happen again, and whether the employee requires additional guidance or training
  - the post should be taken down

- administrative actions should be taken
- Clearly communicate with the employee your decision, what the repercussions are and what the expected behaviours are going forward.
- Continue to provide support to the individual. This is particularly important if the post has gone viral and the individual is experiencing significant backlash or harassment and requires support.

Depending on the complexity and the severity of the situation, you may need to involve your organizational values and ethics office, Ombud office, labour relations, human resources, conflict of interest office, or other relevant parties. You should consult your organizational code of conduct for additional resources and information.

Overall, your aim in these situations should be to restore confidence, trust and a healthy workplace.

## Guidance for executives

As executives, your work is vital to the effective functioning and long-term health of the public service. The decisions you make, the policies you shape, and the way you lead have profound impacts on the well-being of public servants, the functioning of our democracy and the lives of Canadians.

That is why being an executive is a remarkable opportunity to make a real difference; it is exciting, meaningful and rewarding. It is also a privilege. Executives commit themselves to upholding the highest standards of accountability, professionalism and ethics.

This is certainly the case with the personal use of social media. In addition to the guidance provided for managers for handling situations related to social media, executives should consider the following.

### Ethical behaviour on social media

Social media can be an excellent way for executives to reach their professional networks, pursue personal interests, express their personalities, and share important information about the public service. But the nature of your position means that there is a higher degree of visibility, and with that, a higher degree of scrutiny and expected behaviours.

You are role models. Your teams look to you to set the tone and be the example of what is and is not acceptable. A post from you could boost team morale and cohesion, or it could cause employees to feel unsafe in their work environment. To effectively lead, you need to be able to maintain the trust and confidence of those who follow you.

Canadians unfamiliar with the organizational structure of the public service could interpret your position as an executive to mean that you have greater influence on decision-making and government activity than you may actually have. Public service executives are also increasingly being called to testify before parliamentary committees; our non-partisanship, impartiality and integrity must be able to withstand a high degree of scrutiny.

All of that means that executives should carefully consider the implications of what they post, share, like and reply to online.

## **Fostering dialogue**

As leaders, you are an essential source of guidance for your employees. You should encourage and enable discussion.

- Foster a strong understanding of how our values and ethics apply to social media and why this matters.
- Encourage your teams to talk about the implications of social media activity and to consider the different factors outlined in the guidance.
- Make sure employees know what resources are available to them if they have questions, such as talking to their manager or organizational values and ethics office.
- Ensure that employees know about the official avenues for raising grievances and concerns, and for addressing interpersonal workplace disputes.
- Provide safe spaces for public servants to express dissenting opinions.
- Support and empower managers so they can understand and assess the risks of personal behaviour on social media and have useful discussions with their teams.

## **Support for managers**

Managers will play a significant role in helping public servants understand and apply this guidance. They will be the first point of contact when employees have questions or concerns and will help contextualize this guidance in a way that relates to the specific circumstances of their team members.

You can empower and support managers by:

- discussing the social media guidance and the unique considerations of your organization, such as during bilateral meetings, town halls, management committees
- ensuring that managers are appropriately equipped and understand your organization's protocols to address breaches of your code of conduct
- promoting awareness of available internal recourse mechanisms
- establishing dedicated feedback loops for management teams

- being available to provide guidance if managers are confronted by difficult situations

## Responding fairly and proportionately

When potentially inappropriate online behaviour is brought to your attention, you should respond proportionately to the risk that the behaviour poses. We need to strike a fair and reasonable balance between preserving the integrity of the public service and preserving employees' right to engage online on matters of importance to them.

The 1985 Fraser Case from the Supreme Court of Canada offers important guidance on the necessary balancing of public servants' freedom of expression with their duty of loyalty to their employer. It affirmed that, while "our democratic system is deeply rooted in, and thrives on, free and robust public discussion of public issues, ... as a general rule, federal public servants should be loyal to their employer, the Government of Canada."

Any organizational response to an employee's social media activity should consider whether there is a genuine risk to public trust, Canada's democratic system, or the safety and well-being of other public servants.

- If the activity poses low risk of harm, in general, no further action should be taken.
- If the activity poses moderate risk, it may be appropriate for a manager to discuss the matter with the employee. Managers should approach the situation with curiosity and openness. Clearly communicate with the employee about the social media activity in question, what the repercussions are and what the expected behaviours are going forward. Executives should be available to support managers and provide guidance in these instances.
- If the activity poses higher risk, it may be more appropriate to investigate the matter with advice from your labour relations advisors.
- In extreme cases involving severe or repeated violations of the *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector*, the organizational code, or the directive, this may lead to discipline, up to and including termination of employment.

The aim in these situations should be to restore confidence, trust and a healthy workplace.

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## Footnotes

1 Public Service Impartiality: Taking Stock; page 9

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