

---

# SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE PLANNING PROFESSION

*A guide to online professionalism for all Planning professionals and students*

---

Publication date: 1 July 2011

Planning Institute of Australia  
PO Box 5427  
Kingston ACT 2604  
Phone: 02 6262 5933  
[www.planning.org.au](http://www.planning.org.au)



Planning  
Institute  
Australia

---

# Social Media Guidelines.. An Introduction

---

As the world moves to embrace technology and information is becoming more readily available Planners must consider their actions when accessing any forms of online social media. This includes Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Discussion Boards, Blogs and email.

Previously we would conduct our social lives through sending out party invitations by the post, hand writing a letter or picking up the telephone. Now we are able to upload a photo or video, distribute an invitation or send a quick letter update on our life for the whole world to see. We would also come together at the same venue to discuss issues. Discussion Boards now mean anyone worldwide can be involved.

Social media is an exciting new world that enables new and old friends and colleagues to connect from across the street or around the world. It can bring people together to share ideas and to network, when in ordinary life they may never get the chance to meet. It bridges borders and continents, enabling both personal and business communications and new ventures to be established in a way that has never before been possible.

Social media has also proven to be a valuable way of connecting people in times of crisis; transmitting messages rapidly across networks to people on the move, in ways that more traditional forms such as radio and television have not been able to achieve. It also provides access to social networks and information for people who are isolated, physically and socially, providing a valuable community service. Social media can also be quite damaging, with the spread of misinformation, both innocent rumour and malicious intent. With the high rate of take up of social media technologies the potential adverse impacts are also being more apparent, particularly for young people and children.

More and more evidence is emerging that these forms of communication pose a risk to Planning Professionals. Online behaviour can affect your personal life as well as your business integrity. Our perception of professional behaviour must adapt to these ever changing forms of technology.

The Planning Institute of Australia is committed to assisting all Planning professionals uphold a high level of professionalism. To assist with this, these guidelines have been created to help you enjoy the online community but to stay safe.

If you have any feedback on this guide please provide your comments to [webdesign@planning.org.au](mailto:webdesign@planning.org.au).



---

# You Are A Real Person Not A Robot

---

You might be sitting behind a computer but that does not mean people you connect with do not consider your comments to be your actual thoughts and beliefs. Participating in online discussions is often the most direct way to contact people. This includes friends, family, clients and employers.

The difficulty with electronic communications is that your audience are only receiving part of your message; just the words. They are not hearing the tone or inflection in your voice, witnessing your facial expressions, hand gestures or body language, all elements that form a large part of informed communication.

If you spoke to a person face to face you would typically be polite. You typically would not make rude, racist or nasty comments to that person. The same applies when online. Remember that people read comments differently compared to when they are said verbally.

You are not being marked on what you tweet, Blog or post, but it can reflect on you as a professional. Elements such as incorrect grammar and spelling, as well as the use of shortcut language, can be taken as a reflection on your capabilities and make you difficult to understand.

When you speak you talk only to those who are immediately around you but on the internet your

conversation can potentially go global. This means that anything you write may be read by anyone in the world who has access to the internet.

You may belong to numerous online groups. Each has a different perspective on life, which you may or may not share fully, however your membership to various groups and forums can be perceived by others as your perspective or position on the issue.

## Example 1:

You are working for a small local council and have had a meeting with a member of the public regarding their DA application. The meeting did not go as planned and there was some heated discussion. Upon returning to work you update your Facebook status telling your friends about the meeting and use derogatory words to describe the member of public.

A colleague of yours is a cousin of the member of public and sees your update. They in turn advise the member public. The update is brought to your employers attention and although you try to explain there is a negative outcome as your employer now believes that you may have an issue with particular members of the community.

## Defamation

A potential risk of online comments is defamation.

Do not:

- Publish information which will damage the reputation of a person
- Identify particular people
- Publish information about a third party

## Implications of the PIA Code of Conduct and Social Media updates

A planner's responsibility to the community must take precedence over sectional interests. More than most professions, planners are subject to strong and conflicting pressures from different sections of the community. In particular, almost all of the work that planners do involves the public interest as well as the sectional interest of their client or employer.

Consider your thoughts prior to putting them online. Consider the types of groups, pages and causes that you 'like' or join. Some of your posts may breach the PIA Code of Conduct and in turn, should a complaint arise, disciplinary action.

---

# Be Friends, But Not With The Whole World

---

There is no such thing as a 'private' group, Blog or Social Media site. Boundaries are crossed when employees and employers interact online. Normally you may not allow your personal life to be seen by all, this too applies online.

In the workforce there is a power balance. This should be maintained online. Many employees have lost their job through 'online friendships'. Through social media, if your employer has access to your complete profile, ability to view your personal life or see the perhaps controversial Discussion Boards that you are a member of can open up professional boundaries which may jeopardise your employment.

This is the same for clients, customers or other stakeholders. Being too close to clients can potentially cause issues with applications or projects and may be seen as a conflict of interest.

If you have an area of expertise that you would like people to discuss, then create a professional online profile where work related matters can be discussed or join a recognised discussion board. You may also wish to consider using an alias, however that may not prevent people from identifying you.

## **Example 2:**

You get a friend request on a Social Media site from someone who sounds familiar but they have used a cartoon figure as their profile photo. You accept.

After looking through their profile you realise that it is a very prominent client who has been trying to get an application approved.

After several days you receive comments regarding your personal life and photos. They ask to meet outside work and start discussing their issues on a personal level.

Many people will interact with colleagues online. As you need to be careful of what you discuss, post or upload, you must also be aware of how your colleagues conduct themselves online. The behaviour of others can also potentially be damaging to you. If you see something that you feel can be damaging to them, discreetly contact them and let them know. Do not post this on their profile; use a more private and direct form of communication such as the telephone or email.

---

# Where Will My Information End Up?

---

Many Social Media sites, Blogs and Discussion Boards have privacy settings which you are able to change to suit your requirements. It must be remembered that these default settings are set at the absolute minimum.

## Employee background checks

More and more employers are using the Internet to do background checks on potential employees.

Be conscious of your online image. Some images may help with your job prospects but many may be seen as inappropriate.

Ensure that your education matches the claims you have made during your interview. If your profile states you only went to Year 12 but your resume says you completed a degree your potential employer may see this as conflict and could question your credibility.

Consider the discussion groups and Blogs you join carefully. Look at previous posts to ascertain if it will affect you personally. For example, Blogs or Facebook pages set up by specific groups in the community that may be perceived as having extreme views.

Ensure that what you said in the past will not affect your employment prospects. Complaining

continually about work hours or specific colleagues can be interpreted differently. This is the same for any racist, sexist or discriminatory comments. You may think that it is funny, but many employers and potential employers would see this as risky behaviour and it could impact on your career prospects.

## Example 3:

You have applied for a position in one of the largest Planning firms in your State. You are excited and appear to be the most qualified. After the interview you are advised that background checks will be made. The prospective employer is a known advocate against racial discrimination. A photo was posted on Facebook that showed you at a fancy dress party in an outfit which can be seen as racist. You subsequently did not get the job and have damaged your chances of employment.



---

# Privacy Is In Your Hands

---

Many people are unaware how easy their information is to access. Even with the most stringent privacy settings, your information may still be accessible. This can be located through search engines and investigative companies.

The information you put onto the internet cannot be permanently removed. If you do not want information about yourself available to others – DO NOT PUT IT ONLINE. If there is information, including photos and videos, posted about you by a third party you can request to have this removed but this can be hard to stop. Sometimes you may not even be aware that this information exists.

## Some of the issues you need to be aware of

- Facebook updates its privacy policy and settings regularly and numerous people have their settings put back to the default. Be aware that these updates occur and check your settings on a regular basis. Go to 'Accounts' then 'Privacy Settings'.
- Your name, profile photo, friend list, gender, geographic location and pages are publicly available and do not have privacy settings.
- When information or images are removed copies will remain viewable elsewhere if it has been shared.
- The default setting in Facebook is 'everyone'. The 'everyone' setting makes information publicly available to every Facebook user and search

engine.

- LinkedIn default setting is 'Full View'.
- Facebook and LinkedIn cannot guarantee that your information will not be shared publicly.
- Blogs can easily be hacked. Ensure that the Blog you are participating in is secure.

Always read the privacy policies when using online forums. If you require more information contact the site administrator. You can also contact the Office of Australian Information Commissioner – [www.privacy.gov.au](http://www.privacy.gov.au)

## Example 4:

A police officer was sacked from his job for posting sensitive information about his current assignment. He included his job tasks, times and locations and that he was undercover. The officer's Facebook account was private but his colleagues were his friends and they had read his posts.



---

# Have You Ever?

---

Ask yourself if you are comfortable with your current online status. Have you ever:

- Googled yourself. Are you happy with the responses that you receive?
- Posted information about a colleague/client
- Looked through a colleagues/clients information
- Added colleagues/clients as friends
- Placed photos or videos online which show you in compromising situations
- Made comments which can be considered offensive
- Joined groups which may appear racist, sexist or discriminatory.
- Checked your privacy settings in Facebook and MySpace
- Read a posting which you found offensive and told the user
- Joined a Discussion Group without checking the background of the site.

This guide is intended to assist you in thinking about the way your social media activities can impact on your professional life. It is by no means an exhaustive guide and it is not the policy of the Planning Institute of Australia. Your communications with others are your personal choice, but you should be aware of the potential consequences.



---

# Need more information?

---

[www.planning.org.au](http://www.planning.org.au)

## Copyright

© Copyright Planning Institute of Australia July 2011.

Copyright in this publication is owned by the Institute and no part of it may be reproduced without the permission of the Institute.

Publication date: 1 July 2011

Planning Institute of Australia  
PO Box 5427  
Kingston ACT 2604  
Phone: 02 6262 5933  
[www.planning.org.au](http://www.planning.org.au)

## Disclaimer

The Planning Institute of Australia has used its best endeavours to ensure that material contained in this publication was correct at the time of printing. The Institute gives no warranty and accepts no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of information and the Institute reserves the right to make changes without notice at any time in its absolute discretion. The Institute reserves the right to make changes to the programs advertised as appropriate.