

ATL ADVICE



Social networking sites: how to protect yourself on the internet

The growing popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, Bebo, MySpace and Twitter has resulted in an increase in related queries from ATL members. This factsheet provides some practical tips to help ATL members maintain a positive digital profile.

In a joint ATL/Teacher Support Network survey, nearly a quarter of education staff said they or a colleague had been told by an employer to remove something from their social networking profiles. Staff were also concerned about the improper use of the sites for cyberbullying (for full guidance on cyberbullying, see the Department for Education guidance *Cyberbullying: supporting school staff*, which can be downloaded from the ATL website www.atl.org.uk).

While ATL acknowledges that social networking sites can provide a valuable learning resource and are a way of keeping in touch with friends and family, we recognise the need for some important checks and balances.

How to protect yourself

The following advice shows best practice for both yourself and the school/college.

- Act in accordance with the school/college information technology (IT) policy, which should contain a section on the use of social networking sites. If your school/college encourages the positive use of social networking sites as part of the educational process, they should provide clear guidance on what is considered to be appropriate contact with students. Having a thorough policy in place will help staff and students to keep within reasonable boundaries
- Ensure that if you teach in the maintained (state) sector anything you post is in accordance with your relevant General Teaching Council (GTC) code of conduct. Specifically, the eighth principle of the GTC Code of Conduct in England states a teacher must “demonstrate honesty and integrity and uphold public trust and confidence in the teaching profession” (in June 2010, the government announced plans to abolish the GTCE and ATL will update its guidance accordingly when any legislation is enacted).
- Ensure that any contact with students is kept strictly within an educational context.
- Set your privacy settings. Most social networking sites allow you to control who can see your information. For example, at the bottom of every page on Facebook, there is a link that reads ‘privacy’. The linked page is ‘a guide to privacy on Facebook’, containing the latest privacy functions and policies. Set your privacy settings to “only friends”. Settings such as “friends of friends” and “networks and friends” open your content to a wider audience. Your privacy and that of your family, friends, colleagues and students could be compromised.
- Bear in mind that somebody else could post a photo on their profile in which you are named, so think about any photos you appear in. On Facebook, you can ‘untag’ yourself from a photo. If you do find inappropriate references to you and/or images of you posted by a ‘friend’ online you should contact them and the site to have the material removed. If you face disciplinary action as a result of being tagged, ATL can provide advice and assistance.
- Remember humour is relative. For example, posting images and/or text about a recent stag or hen night may be deemed inappropriate. Likewise, a few ‘light-hearted’ comments and/or images about colleagues

or students may not be perceived as such by either the subject(s) of the humour or your employer. The guiding rule is if in doubt, don't post it.

- Make sure you regularly check and refresh your site page to ensure it is free of any inappropriate comments and/or images.
- Remember that parents and students may access your profile and could, if they find the information and/or images it contains offensive, complain to your employer.
- Consider that colleagues, including management, might access your profile. Depending on the comments and/or images it contains, you may face disciplinary action. Any member that does face disciplinary action should contact ATL as soon as possible.
- Remember that there is a growing trend for schools/colleges to access social networking sites before interviewing job applicants. Depending on the comments and/or images contained on your site you may not be selected for interview.
- Be clear who you should contact if you have any concerns about information on your social networking site or if you are the victim of cyberbullying.
- Keep your date of birth and home address to yourself. Identity theft is a growing crime and this kind of information could be used to gain access to your bank or credit card account.
- Mind your language. Abrupt, inappropriate and unthinking use of language may lead to complaints from colleagues, pupils, parents and/or management.
- Be aware of what monitoring, if any, may be carried out by the school/college. Full details of this should be detailed in the IT policy.
- Stop the network provider from passing on your details to other companies for research and advertising purposes. For example, to stop Facebook from forwarding your details, click 'account', then 'privacy settings', then 'search'. Beside 'instant personalisation pilot programme', click 'edit setting'. Make sure the box at the bottom of the screen has not been ticked. To ensure that you do not appear in any adverts, click 'accounts', then 'account settings', then 'Facebook adverts'. Select 'No one' on the 'allow ads

on platform pages to show my information to' and 'show my social actions in Facebook ads to'.

- Ensure that any comments and/or images could not be deemed defamatory or in breach of copyright legislation.

There are many professional and personal benefits to be obtained through social networking sites. Building these simple procedures into your routine should help you get the most from the sites while maintaining a confident and positive digital profile.



Need advice?

Your first point of contact is the ATL rep in your school/college. Your local ATL branch is also available to help, or you can contact ATL's member advisors on 020 7930 6441, email info@atl.org.uk. Don't forget there's lots more advice on ATL's website at www.atl.org.uk.

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