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Ethics Center™

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Faceless on Facebook

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A computer may be one of the most powerful and destructive tools ever created. Think about it: you sit at your keyboard and with a few strokes you can reach millions of people, depending on your website access and interest.

When we learn to communicate on-line, do we really think about the ethics of our conduct and the effect on others? This struck me when I was writing an article on law firm associates' fiduciary duties to their employing law firms. It was amazing how many associates readily posted on websites disparaging information about their employers and co-workers. Although the posts did not typically include the associates' names, the posts prominently featured the employers' names. Because many of the employing firms include thousands of lawyers, the associates apparently were not reluctant to dump information, believing that their individual identities would not be discovered.

Evidently, many Internet-savvy individuals do not fully appreciate the consequences of posting information on the world-wide web. Weekly we learn of horror stories related to damaging posts. Many of these posts do hurt not only others, but also the person who unthinkingly disseminates information and shares pictures. Now there is at least one website devoted to sharing tales of employees who have been denied or fired from jobs, students who have been suspended, and others who have suffered very serious repercussions from posting pictures and information on-line. In addition, to the negative possibilities for people who post, there are countless horror stories related to damage done to others, as illustrated by the tragic accounts of the student who committed suicide following Internet bullying.

A good deal of this conduct suggests that people who unload damaging or disparaging information must believe that we are "faceless on Facebook." Would individuals be as inclined

to spew negative information about others if they had to look at the actual faces and reactions of the people who are the subjects of the posts?

To deter offensive and damaging posts, employers and institutions, including Texas Tech University, have adopted policies and guidelines. For example, the Texas Tech University Intern Handbook Policy on Social Networking explains that TTU supports the use of social networking sites, so long as individuals:

Do not upload offensive or inappropriate text or images;

Do not post comments or links to content that is offensive, inappropriate, dangerous or illegal;

Ensure that the individual's site materials do not violate the law or university codes of conduct, or encourage others to violate them;

Remember that the individual's sites and actions on-line don't just represent you but also reflect on TTU and your employers as well.

Beyond these suggestions, the best guide may be basic tenets of ethical behavior. Mutual respect and public accountability are two applicable ethical principles expressly stated in the Texas Tech Statement of Ethical Principles.

To remember these principles, maybe we need boxes to be checked before we post on social networks and blogs. The box might read, *"I acknowledge that I have seriously considered the information that I intend to post. I recognize that this information may be accessed by countless individuals whom I do not know, including prospective employers. Furthermore I recognize that the information may "live on-line" for many years. Finally, I represent that I have reflected on statements related to other people and that I would be willing to share that information if I looked the subject in the eye. I also acknowledge that what I post reflects a great deal about me and organizations that I represent."*

If more individuals went through this type of examination before hitting "enter" or "send," the world-wide web would be more of a community in which individuals act responsibly in affording others mutual respect and dignity.