

Dear Mary Pat: Should Staff Be Allowed to Use The Internet on Their Smart Phones at Work?

I think so.

But I know I'm probably in the minority. Many managers do not approve of employees using their phones for social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) at work, but I am actually okay with it when used with discretion. Unlike computers, with smart phones you do not need to worry about viruses infecting the office network.

Most managers accept and allow employees who smoke to step outside at least twice a day to smoke a cigarette. Doesn't it seem fair to allow everyone else to take a phone break to check messages, make calls and text a few people?

Here are some objections I've heard to allowing staff to use their phones at work, and my answers.

"They'll never get any work done if you let them play on their phones all day."

My Answer: I only hire adults. I expect adults to have a reasonably well-formed work ethic that is demonstrated by doing work first, and doing non-work on breaks and briefly other times. If the practice can't run without me peeking over their shoulders every hour or so to see if they're working, then I am not a very good manager.

Performance measures are a great way to set guidelines for what work must be done. If the employee is meeting their performance goals appropriately, why shouldn't they be able to

take a micro-break to catch up on life?

“Employees should do work at work and save their home life for home.”

My Answer: Employees are people with busy lives, lots of commitments and lots of responsibilities outside of work. Every single one of us needs to attend to our personal lives for some part of the day. Most of it can be dealt with at lunch or during breaks, but sometimes people need to attend to their lives at work. I want them to be able do that, within reason, because it is a realistic response to life in 2010.

“What if staff using the Internet on their phones puts the practice at risk?”

My Answer: If you have done a good job of educating your staff about confidentiality and HIPAA, you should have no worries. In short, staff should not reveal any patient information (via spoken, written or digital communication) to any third party for any reason besides those dictated in your Notice of Privacy Practices (NPP). Your HIPAA education plan should be reviewed and updated annually to include any policy changes due to the use of social media for personal and practice purposes.