

Proactive tech considerations in the era of the virtual workplace

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As thousands of workers continue to clock in remotely each day, many businesses are still learning the ins-and-outs of the virtual collaboration platforms their employees are using.

Microsoft Teams, Slack, Google Docs, BlueJeans, Trello, and, of course, the ubiquitous Zoom, are only a few of the programs that have recently evolved from helpful but perhaps underutilized tech tools, to vital aspects of daily operations.

In the rush to adapt to these new realities, however, savvy businesses should be deliberate when selecting and utilizing virtual collaboration tools.

Though only time can play out the range of virtual workplace conduct that might cause headaches for businesses and

employers, cautionary tales are emerging. For example, one doctoral student at Stockton University in New Jersey found himself facing potential disciplinary action after using an image of President Trump as his screen background during a class being held via Zoom.

Though his apparent political statement was likely intentional, it's not difficult to imagine how one might make an inadvertent statement – political or otherwise – via a video conference background.

A controversial book on a bookshelf or a political poster hanging in a home office might become pertinent, for example, in an employee's suit against a supervisor, or a family photograph of a luxury vacation might raise questions in a collection lawsuit.

In addition, long before the pandemic, businesses have been grappling with managing, storing, and retrieving vast quantities of electronic data.

In the age of telework, the built-in chat functionalities found in many applications allow users to forego traditional email and participate in fast-paced conversation threads that can promote informality and create huge quantities of data that might be mined by opposing parties in litigation.

Video conferencing platforms also often include a "chat" functionality, allowing participants to send private and/or public messages to one another during the course of a meeting, with those chats potentially, and potentially unbeknownst to the participants, becoming part of a memorialized "transcript" following the meeting.

Fortunately, many applications already have built-in features to deal with some of these concerns.

Zoom users can brush up on how to control private "chat" capabilities by visiting the support section of their website.

For fans of Microsoft Teams, Microsoft has a page devoted to mining group chats for discoverable content.

To be truly proactive, however, businesses relying heavily on telework should consider implementing an express telework policy that covers the use of video conferencing and other collaboration platforms.

Employers could include policies stating whether video conferences will be recorded, or requiring that employees use a neutral background during business-related conferences (to make marketing lemonade out of pandemic lemons, many companies have created their own branded Zoom backgrounds).

Additionally, having a policy in place that specifies which programs employees are permitted to use for work-related communications can help streamline the retention and retrieval of important data. Though continuing to do business in the midst of Covid-19 can feel like an overwhelming minefield of uncertainties, proactive businesses can nevertheless adapt and thrive by taking control of their virtual workplaces.

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