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A Missed Opportunity

Trends in creating, managing, and enforcing cell phone policies—and how HR could be more involved

By: Carol Patton

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The only consistency about cell phone policies for campus employees is that there isn't any. Likewise, the level of human resources office involvement is as different as the kinds of cell phones or data plans that are available today. In some cases, cell phone policies are developed and implemented by IT or the business office. Other times, HR helps create the policy, then stands on the sidelines. Some schools don't even have a policy, or don't request HR's participation at all.



What should HR leaders do? Should their department even have a role?

There's no right or wrong method, but there are various levels of HR's involvement in cell phone policy development and enforcement that work. Even being involved at arm's length helps ensure consistency and fairness among the campus workforce, possibly avoiding employee complaints or grievances down the road.

Consider a few approaches institutions have taken and compare them to how your own school might handle its cell phone policy.

Fresno Pacific University (Calif.)

The VPs of finance, business, and IT joined forces in 2009 to create the cell phone policy for Fresno Pacific's 300 employees, shares Lori Kroeker, who serves as the university's payroll manager, which falls under HR. In the past, the university purchased phones and issued them to employees—resulting in too much confusion and paperwork. Now supervisors decide which employees need a cell phone to carry out job tasks. Each employee buys a phone, fills out an allowance request form, and attaches a copy of the active cell phone contract for monthly reimbursement, which is then approved by the vice president of business and finance.

Since HR was not involved in the initial creation of the policy, Kroeker asked to review it. It's a good thing she did. "The policy lacked language about text-based communication while driving," explains Kroeker, who later approached the VPs, requesting to insert language to cover such issues. For example, the policy now states that employees are not allowed to text while driving or talk on the phone while driving without a hands-free device. She also added that monthly cell phone allowances are taxable and do not constitute an increase in their base pay. "HR has more insight into this stuff than other people do ... and should also be involved in policy management to ensure consistency."

So far, the university has not had any policy issues with cell phones. But problems can erupt if the policy is not consistently applied or enforced. Consider employees claiming inequity—even discrimination—because they were denied a monthly cell phone stipend when others in their department were approved.

"Anything can happen," Kroeker says, suggesting that cell phone policies spell out which job titles or perhaps rankings (like all VP positions) receive cell phone allowances so that such decisions are not left up to a supervisor's discretion. It's also important, she adds, that supervisors consistently write up employees who violate the policy.

Salt Lake Community College

The IT, business, and purchasing departments develop and enforce this college's policy, which applies to 200 of the estimated 1,100 full-time employees, says Douglas Hansen, controller and business manager. Approximately four years ago, the college purchased cell phones for employees, but IRS laws required administrators to have employees painstakingly track how much of the phone was used for personal use for tax purposes. To make matters worse, overages were growing out of control. "We felt there was abuse," Hansen recalls. "Our [monthly] cell phone bills were sometimes \$100,000. The overages got to be consistent enough that we had to do something about it."

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 —Douglas Hansen, Salt Lake Community College

Now the school uses a three-step process developed by a team including IT and business office staff. First, supervisors determine which employees require a cell phone to perform their jobs and select one of three data plans to cover their business needs. (Each year, IT surveys local cell phone providers and establishes reimbursement amounts on a three-tier level.) Next, the department vice president approves the supervisor's request.

Employees receive up to \$75 toward the cost of a cell phone every two years and a monthly stipend for the plan, but pay the difference if the plan's minutes are exceeded.

Since employee responsibilities may change the following year, supervisors complete an annual form, asserting that the data plan for the employee is still appropriate. Also, employees complete an annual certification stating that, on average, they use that level of minutes each month for business calls and that no more than five percent are for personal use.

"I could only see HR being involved if this were considered an employee fringe benefit, but we haven't structured it that way," Hansen says. "The department wants to incur an expense to communicate with their employees and is willing to pay for it. We felt this was just a financial or business decision with employees."

University of Denver

Supporting an estimated 4,600 employees, this university doesn't have an overall employee cell phone policy, explains Ken Pinnock, associate director of employee relations, who also serves on the employee relations panel for the Society of HR Management. The school's approval process for having a cell phone is decentralized and can vary between departments. He says each division head identifies employees who require a phone for business needs. Employees then purchase their own and receive a monthly stipend for whatever data plan is chosen, which is considered taxable income.

"To date, this has been working fine," he says, believing that HR, IT, or the school's business office really don't need to be involved. "Since the organization isn't providing the equipment, it's really about employees using their own cell phones."

University of Dayton (Ohio)

Although implemented and enforced by the IT department, the university's cell phone policy was developed by administrative services, internal audit, and IT for its 2,200 employees, shares Thomas Burkhardt, vice president for finance and administrative services, which oversees HR.

"When we were designing the policy, HR and payroll got a little involved in the conversation because we were concerned about withholding taxes on the use of a cell phone," he says. "HR should be involved, thinking about things that other departments may not think about." The school's IT department acquires the cell phones and phone plans, then issues phones to employees, he says. Division heads approve the use of cell phones, while deans or VPs approve smartphones for department staff.

He believes there are two occasions when HR

must get involved: when phones are being misused or when an employee leaves after several years of using the same phone and phone number and wants to keep both. It would be difficult to determine the phone's worth and how the employee should reimburse the school.

Smart phones offering access to sensitive information must be tightly managed to avoid security issues.

So far, the school hasn't experienced any problems. However, Burkhardt believes that HR should contribute to any policy that directly affects employees.

Why to Get HR Involved

Cell phone policies also have the potential to impact recruitment, says Brandon Hampton, director of MOBI Wireless Management, an Indianapolis-based firm that helps organizations better manage their cell phones. "When people go to find jobs, the cell phone is something they're looking for now," says Hampton, who has consulted with dozens of colleges and universities. "It's a job perk, especially among younger people. ... HR can make sure [new hires] have choices, the latest and greatest technology, and they're not hampered by an overzealous, strict security policy within the university."

What a Policy Might Specify

- Ban all cell phone use while driving (or prohibit use in adverse weather or difficult traffic conditions).
- Direct employees to find a safe place to pull over or park before making or answering calls. Require employees to comply with state/local laws governing cell phone use.
- Discipline employees who violate the policy, which may include termination of employment.

Source: www.drivinglaws.org

However, offering cell phones as perks is becoming more of a challenge, since IT typically prefers phones that store or can access sensitive information to be tightly managed to avoid security issues.

Another reason is employer liability. Without HR's input, Hampton says schools may be setting a dangerous precedent by legally exposing themselves. In 2007, a personal injury lawsuit was brought against the International Paper Co. An employee was talking on her company-issued cell phone when she rear-ended another driver, resulting in the driver losing her arm. The suit cost the company a \$5.2 million settlement.

Ready to make sure your own institution has covered its bases on employee cell phone use? If you don't have a policy, create one. If you do, take a closer look at it. Is the policy clear and comprehensive? Do employees sign off on it?

How is it enforced? Is there consistency? You might be surprised by what you find.

Carol Patton is a Las Vegas-based freelance writer who specializes in covering HR topics.

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