

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1750 How About Unmonitored Employee WhatsApp Channels?

As employers seek to improve communication among workers, many are turning to informal platforms like WhatsApp. While such channels can be a boost for employees connecting and overall morale, they also pose significant challenges, especially when not monitored by management. I'm Jerry Roberts, and we'll offer up some pros and cons on the subject, next on The Extra Point.

On the surface, giving employees a platform where they can communicate with each other seems like a good idea.

Employees often feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns in an informal setting, which can lead to a more engaged workforce.

In Guam, WhatsApp has become the app of choice for teams. It's on everybody's phone and desktop computer, and is a quick and accessible platform for rapid information sharing. The majority of companies I work with use it in this manner.

Some have official team WhatsApp channels, and some also allow employees to set up a second channel that is not monitored by management.

Let's look at the positives.

This private WhatsApp group offers a place where employees can share concerns, have casual interactions, maybe switch shifts if that's an option, and do a little relationship building — all away from the prying eyes of their bosses.

I have no trouble with this. It lets workers get things off their chest without having to make them "official", they can have fun, maybe be a little goofy, and it's something that belongs to them.

However, all is not positive when it comes to these private employee channels. Sometimes, they are used in the wrong ways.

Now, let's explore negatives.

Just like the issue of workplace gossip, a critical drawback of an unmonitored WhatsApp channel is the potential for misinformation. Employees may rely on hearsay rather than verified information, leading to the spread of rumors that can create confusion or worse.

Additionally, there may be negative discussions about the company or coworkers, undermining morale. Conflicts may also escalate quickly in an informal setting, leading to damaged working relationships.

I was sent screenshots of conversations held in one such WhatsApp group, where several of the workers ganged up on another employee, who was a good worker but not a member of the chat.

I won't repeat any of the language used by these people, all entry-level workers, but I can tell you that it would get them fired in any reasonable company.

Further, the company could be sued over the actions of the employees, if they sanctioned the channel but didn't monitor it; or worse, if they did monitor the activity and allowed the abuse to happen without stepping in.

The company is in the fast-food category and I know the owner. I won't mention names here.

While an unmonitored WhatsApp channel can help with team communication and bonding, there are also risks involved. So where do we go from here? I have three suggestions.

1. Establish a clear code of conduct. It has to outline unacceptable behavior, including what constitutes discriminatory language and abuse.
2. One strike and you're out. If the rules are clear, then breaking them is intentional. Kick them out of the chat with the first offense.

(Con't.)

Most online groups I'm in have gone to this model. Every incoming member clicks a box to indicate they understand the chat guidelines and standards. If you then break them, you're gone.

Disagreements, even the spirited kind, are fine. Abuse is not.

3. Designate a moderator. Somebody has to be accountable for keeping the peace. Offer the task to a level-headed worker who likes chat groups. Toss something extra into their paycheck once in a while for their trouble.

I've seen unmonitored WhatsApp channels that work. They work because mature people use them in the way they are intended to be used.

They also work because the employer sets the mechanism up correctly from the start. If you take the time to do that, you're far less likely to end up with what this fast-food operator has — which is a disaster.

The key to this is that the reason for their group is presumably centered around your business. Therefore, you should have a say in how the group is operated. Give them some structure and you'll probably be fine. The bad actors will likely stay away, or act in a more responsible manner.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3FM, the Ray Gibson Show, and First Hawaiian Bank, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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