Social Media and Law Enforcement

Introduction

Social media has brought about a lot of changes both in the society at large and various work places. Law enforcement organizations have also not been left behind by the impact of social media whereby many law enforcement officers have engaged in the use of social media in nearly every place that they go (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). It has become quite an issue of great concern among the many Law enforcement executives. This has resulted in some law enforcement executives introducing some form of regulation policies on the use of the social media by the law enforcement officers while they are at their work stations and away from work.

*Should law enforcement organizations regulate individual officer’s social media activity?*

Over the years, there have been great technological advancements which have resulted in changes in how people operate and live. One of the major technological advancement is the entry of social media platforms which allows people from different p[arts of the world, profession and even social standings interact with one another (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). Nearly every major law enforcement agency have a facebook account among many other social media platforms through which they interact with the common citizens as they offer their services (Waters, 2012).

The facebook or even twitter accounts are connected to the official websites of the organizations hence it is possible to reach out to large number of people. In the law enforcement organizations, officers have been known to use the social media platform even when at work and to some extent this has crossed boundaries and hence the need for regulation of the use social media by police officers (Conser, Paynich, & Gingerich, 2013). Regulating the social media activities of individual police officers is quite a tricky issue since to some extent it is viewed as infringement on the personal freedom of the officers. However, police officers have the first duty to serve the citizens and hence there is need for regulation of their activities on the social media (Waters, 2012).

Police officers must act responsibly and show with good example. Regulating the individual activities of police officers on the social media is important due to the integrity of the force which is supposed to be maintained (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). When police officers engage in social media activities at their discretion and at any time they want, this affects their work performance which will mean that service delivery to the citizens will be affected (Waters, 2012). The social media as much as it helps in some way, police officers need to ensure that they engage in such activities only when out of work or when using the official facebook page for the communication of important issues of the law enforcement department.

*How do law enforcement organizations regulate the use of social media?*

Social media is important to law enforcement organizations since it opens an avenue for direct communication with the general public and also help in curbing issues of crime and even help in investigations (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). However, if there is misuse of the social media platforms, this can endanger the lives of officers and even cause some form of compromise on cases which are being investigated. To be able to combat the risks which are associated with the use of social media by law enforcement officers, it is important to understand the social media (Shipley, & Bowker, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to adapt to the social media which is affecting the daily lives and activities of the police officers, the benefits which the law enforcement organization will achieve through the social media and the problems that are likely to be faced.

Different law enforcement organizations have different ways through which they are able to regulate the activities and use of social media by police officers (Conser, Paynich, & Gingerich, 2013). To have a policy regulating the use of social media activities by officers it is required to ensure that the policy is more inclined towards protection of the officers as well as the department at large and should not be more of an infringement (Flynn, 2012). To regulate the use of social media by the law enforcement officers, it will be important to have regular checks of officers’ accounts on social media to help prevent:

1. Posting of any videos or photos of officers, evidence, suspects, police facilities, weapons, equipment and uniforms
2. Prohibit posting of any employment issues, work hours, job assignments and any related information that is meant for officers only.
3. Posting of images or derogatory statements or comments about other officers or the seniors
4. Use of unprofessional language or profanities and images that are harmful
5. Use of social media platforms for personal activities while on duty

The way to prevent misuse as observed above of the social media by officers and regulate their activities during and after work hours is through identifying the specific and the official use of the social media by the police officers and the main objectives which are to be achieved through the use of the social media (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). Research shows that lack of specifying the main purpose and use of the social media sites by law enforcement agencies do contribute to the misuse of social media by officers (Flynn, 2012). Apart from setting up a regulation policy that will ensure that the above issues are covered, it is important that police officers are also given training on the use of social media.

Formulation of a policy is not enough if the concerned stakeholders are not well informed hence the need to training law enforcement officers on social media use (Shipley, & Bowker, 2014). The training of the law enforcement officers can be done in two major steps which includes first addressing issues which are relate to general use of computers, social media privacy and security and the internet. Secondly, the officers should be given practical lessons and application of social media policy uses as related to the officers (Conser, Paynich, & Gingerich, 2013). The trainings schedule and curriculum should have an update on regular basis to keep abreast with the latest technology and to provide information that if fresh as well as ensure officers continue to remember and apply the trainings (Flynn, 2012).

Educated officers will mean that they are able to take initiatives of protecting themselves as well as the agencies that they work for. When officers are able to understand the existing problem with social media use they are able to comply easily with the laid down policies that regulate use of social media by the officers (Brunty, Helenek, & Miller, 2013). Apart from trainings to enhance compliance, it is important to notify the officers that during any administrative investigation, there are possibilities that personal social media accounts and activities may be accessed by the agency. Interviews that were conducted with the leaders within the department indicated that social media use by police officers especially when they are on duty has become an issue that if not properly addressed would lead to many officers being charged in court as well as spoil the image of the agency (Shipley, & Bowker, 2014).

The Superintendent of the department observed that most officers use social media regularly but they are not able to control what they post and that is the reason why the superintendent thought it would be best to create awareness considering that young police officers who are joining the law enforcement have easy access to social media sites due to their internet enabled phones (Conser, Paynich, & Gingerich, 2013). During the interview, the superintendent said that the best way that has been effective in regulating the activities of police officers on social media is through training as earlier mentioned in addition to stringent privacy and security policies which help to protect the police officers and the image of the department (Waters, 2012).

Setting up of email alerts whenever there is a word searched or posted by a member of the law enforcement helps regulate activities as mentioned by the superintendent during the interview. Having a social media manager is also a strategy mentioned in the interviews (Waters, 2012). The manager supervises and monitors all activities on the social media sites to check for loopholes and also regulate what members post or sear5ch for on the sites.

*Conclusion*

Research and observations have indicated that social media has contributed greatly to the way law enforcement organizations operate as well as how police officers perform. On one hand, social media has been a blessing for helping improve communication with the public while on the other hand; it has brought a challenge on dealing with activities of officers. Training of officers on matters relating to social media use and also stipulating the conducts which offices should and should not engage in is of great importance in regulating the social media activities of the officers. Knowledge and information is power and hence training of police officers on use of social media for the interest of the department and that of their well being is the best strategy to implement in the efforts to regulate activities of officers on social media.

References

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