

# Enhancing ethical awareness in the APS



Australian Government  
Australian Public Service  
Commission

## Reflecting on the Vodcast

### VODCAST 2—ANOTHER LIFE

Advances in technology mean there is considerable interest in the use of online communication as means of consultation and discussion.

At the APS-wide level there is considerable support for a Government blog and discussion forum, and some agencies are experimenting in this area.

To help guide agencies and staff in this new area, the Public Service Commissioner released interim protocols for online media participation in December 2008.

But it is important to remember that use of online media by staff as part of their work, or in a private capacity, is governed by the same rules about using and disclosing information and making public comment that apply with other forms of communication.

Generally, public servants may make public comment in a private capacity, including on a blog, so long as they make clear they are expressing their own views. However, it is not appropriate for employees to make public comment:

- If it could be perceived as being on behalf of the agency or government rather than a personal view—this applies particularly to senior public servants
- If it could compromise an employee's capacity to fulfill his or her duties in an unbiased manner. This applies particularly where the comment is made about policies or programs in the employee's own agency.
- If the comment is so harsh or extreme in its criticisms of government or its policies that it raises questions about the employee's capacity to work professionally, efficiently or impartially. Such comment does not have to relate to the employee's area of work.
- If the comment is a gratuitous personal attack.
- Or if the comment compromises public confidence in the agency or the APS.

### Relevant APS Values and elements of the Code of Conduct

- The APS is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner (s10(1)(a) of the Public Service Act).
- The APS is openly accountable for its actions within the framework of Ministerial responsibility to the government, to the parliament and the

Australian public (s10(1)(c) of the Public Service Act).

- The APS has the highest ethical standards (s10(1)(d) of the Public Service Act).
- An APS employee must at all times behave in a way that upholds the APS values and the integrity and good reputation of the APS (s13(11) of the Public Service Act).
- An APS employee must comply with any other conduct requirement that is prescribed by regulations (s13(13) of the Public Service Act). Public Service Regulation 2.1 imposes a duty on an APS employee not to disclose certain information without authority (i.e. information communicated in confidence or where disclosure could be prejudicial to the effective working of government). The full text of reg. 2.1 can found at [www.comlaw.gov.au](http://www.comlaw.gov.au).

## **Key Issues**

Commenting publicly: Is Will free to write anything he wants on his blog? How might others view Will as a result of what he has written? Has Will breached the Code of Conduct? If so, how? How could Will have done things differently? What were Tracey's responsibilities and role? How could Tracey have managed things better? Are there any other conduct issues raised by the podcast?

## **Tips**

- Don't assume that anything done outside of working hours is not connected with work.
- Get to know how the APS values might apply outside of work. Discuss possible situations with colleagues and your supervisor.
- Find out what your agency's IT policies are.
- As a manager, explain reasons for decisions clearly—beware of making assumptions. Communicate agency IT policies well, particularly new and updated policies.

## **Useful references**

APS Values and Code of Conduct in Practice: a guide to official conduct for APS employees and agency heads (Chapters 3 and 15)  
[www.apsc.gov.au/values/conductguidelines.htm](http://www.apsc.gov.au/values/conductguidelines.htm)

Australian Public Service Commission Circular 2008/8: Interim protocols for online media participation [www.apsc.gov.au/circulars/circular088.htm](http://www.apsc.gov.au/circulars/circular088.htm)