



Can Google+ replace your company's intranet?

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(Editor's note: Curtis Smolar is a partner at Ropers Majeski Kohn & Bentley. He submitted this column to VentureBeat.)

A reader asks: With all of the buzz surrounding Google +, I've been contemplating using it to replace my company's intranet. I realize there are likely some risks that go with the savings this will create, but are there any legal implications?

Answer: Google+ introduces a paradigm shift from a walled garden to an open web in the social media space. With it, Google users now have easy access to telephone, video conferencing, document creation, social networking, instant messaging, maps and search engine capabilities from any computer – whereas normally this collection of activities would require one to interface with multiple equipments and applications.

Coupled with Google's Android strength, the company is really in a position that no company has been in since Microsoft in the 1990s in terms of owning operating systems for all computers – which today includes smartphones. This means that instead of simply being a new cool social networking application, Google+ is changing the way we do business – period.

This shift creates a myriad of legal issues, most of which are not unique to Google+, but instead apply to cloud computing in general. The legal implications

associated with the use of cloud computing and social networking applications are fairly new and uncharted legal territory, but here are a few prominent legal issues to be aware of:

Security - Google, undoubtedly, is actively taking measures to prevent security breach or hackers from accessing cloud stored data. But no third party can conclusively say how safe it is. We have to take [Google's word](#).

Your IT professional is critical here in ensuring that the latest security patches are downloaded and that you're protected your hardware from malware, viruses, etc. Any IT pro worth their salt should be able to guide you to more secure cloud computing these days.

To protect yourself from losing data – should you be the unfortunate victim of an account hacking – you can download your entire Google+ profile. This is incredibly valuable. Now, the user owns the content and Google is simply the channel on which it is broadcasted. Fellow social network Facebook has zealously prevented users from doing this.

Privacy - Google has dealt with privacy issues many times with its older applications (Gmail, Google Docs, and Buzz, to name a few). The company mantra appears to be that if you want things to be private, make sure your account settings are configured correctly. So, when using Google+, it's imperative to double-check those settings. (That's the only way to prevent unwanted users from seeing your information.)

Also, be sure to read updates from Google regarding any changes in privacy settings. With Facebook's ever-changing policies of the past few years, the clear lesson is "be vigilant about web privacy."

Many users complain that the privacy-setting feature on Facebook is overly complex and cumbersome. Google+ offers a couple fixes: The "Circles" function, allowing users to segregate their contacts into "Friends," "Professional Contacts," and more and users are allowed to edit their own contents.

Another Google+ distinction is that only the user knows which “circle” the contact is placed in. Crucially, Circles allow you to create business only groups that keep employers/employees from seeing information about you.

Intellectual Property – For small businesses planning to use Google+, the intellectual property issue may be the most important. (Technically, companies aren’t allowed in Google+ right now, but employees of small companies could, conceivably, use the service in the purpose you inquired about.)

The Google Terms of Service clearly spell out that the creator of the intellectual property owns it. That said, there is also a perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide license for Google to use it – but this is a bit misleading because it refers to the consumer Google information.

As for the enterprise versions of Google services, Google clearly states that it does not have any rights to the intellectual property of the other company. Assuming the individual user Terms of Service governs Google+, though, using it could pose a significant risk of granting an unintended “perpetual, irrevocable, worldwide license” of your company’s valuable intellectual property for Google to use.

Startup owners: Got a legal question about your business? Submit it in the comments below or email Curtis directly. It could end up in an upcoming “Ask the Attorney” column.

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