

Private E-mails

FROM THE "Did You Know?" EMAIL SERIES PROVIDED BY THE NOVA SCOTIA UNION OF PUBLIC & PRIVATE EMPLOYEES

If you send non-work related e-mails using your employer's computers and/or e-mail system, be careful. It may not be as private or confidential as you think. Sending or receiving inappropriate material may end up with you in hot water.

Arbitrators have found that employees cannot expect the same kind of privacy for e-mails sent through an employer's e-mail system as they might for private telephone conversations and letters sent through a private mail system. In many cases, employers are permitted to monitor e-mails, especially in those workplaces where e-mails are copied directly to a mainframe. Even e-mails that are deleted may be fair game for an employer to look at and take action on.

So what's inappropriate material? Pornography, sexually-explicit and racist jokes and even personal comments that were highly critical of a supervisor have all been found to be the basis for employee discipline. Basically, it's a common sense test: Would the message be perceived by others as creating a hostile working environment? If so, it's probably inappropriate.

If someone sends a questionable e-mail to you at work, your best course of action is to contact that person and request that she/he not send such material to your work e-mail. If you send your request by e-mail, then you will have created a record indicating that you had taken steps to prevent such material from coming.

Finally, your employer may have a policy on e-mail and computer use with more specific rules than those noted above.

NOTE: The "Did You Know?" series is general information only. For advice specific to your workplace or personal circumstances, please contact a union representative. Comments are welcome at nsupe@ns.sympatico.ca