

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

NOTES

1st Quarter 2004

For the REE Agencies, USDA

April 2004

Employee Relations Branch, HRD, ARS

With this issue, ER Notes resumes on a quarterly schedule. Please do not hesitate to call your servicing ER specialist for advice at any time on employee relations issues in your office.

Misuse of Government IT, equipment, property, vehicles.

This issue of ER Notes will focus on the misuse of Government information technology (IT) resources, office equipment, supplies, Government travel cards, and Government vehicles. As a general rule, misuse involves unauthorized use of Government resources. The situations used here are examples, and we urge managers to call the Employee Relations Branch early to discuss specific cases.

Information Technology and telecommunications equipment.

The arrival of telecommunications equipment and services (or IT) in Federal offices has brought a variety of opportunities for misuse. This includes computers, Internet, e-mail, facsimile machines, telephones, and photocopiers. Although relaxed “personal use” policies are in place today, employees must be careful to restrict their use of agency computers and equipment to primarily “official use.”

REE Policy and Procedure 253.4, Use of Information Technology Resources states, “IT resources may only be used for authorized purposes.” However, it allows for limited use by employees during personal time. Supervisors have the management authority and responsibility to ensure the appropriate use of resources within their organizations. The policy

makes it clear that the limited personal use of IT is a privilege, and managers are authorized to revoke or limit this privilege at any time. In addition, be aware that during work hours, employees are expected to perform their officially-assigned duties. Unauthorized and/or excessive personal use of IT resources is cause for discipline.

The key guidance to remember is that limited personal use of agency telecommunication resources is authorized if: (1) it does not interfere with official business, and (2) it involves minimal additional expense to the Government. Limited use should also take place during employees’ personal time such as before or after work, during breaks, or during lunch.

Unacceptable use of IT resources includes:

- Use that causes congestion, delay, or disruption of service to agency systems or equipment (chain e-mail, mass mailings, downloading large file attachments)
- Use involving illegal, offensive, or inappropriate activities (pornography, downloading copyrighted materials, discriminatory websites, gambling, or hate mail)
- Loading personal software or making configuration changes
- Use for commercial purposes or for a personal private business activity
- Outside fundraising, endorsements,

lobbying

- Making personal long distance calls
- Posting agency information to external public forums in one's capacity as a Federal employee without permission
- Making large quantities of personal photocopies
- Sending inappropriate or offensive email messages; using instant messaging
- Personal use of official agency mail systems, envelopes, interoffice mail, and postage, including applications for employment.

Acceptable use includes: occasional use of fax machines, making a few photocopies, occasional personal e-mails, making brief calls to family or doctors.

Privacy issues: Federal employees do not have the right to privacy while using any Government office equipment or IT equipment. Use can be monitored or recorded.

Government Travel Cards

USDA policies and REE Bulletins on the travel charge card program contain information on the proper use of and the misuse of the travel card. Please go to the Web site to find out more: www.afm.ars.usda.gov/ppweb.

Misuse of travel cards can include the following:

- Use of the credit card for nonauthorized, nontravel expenses
- Failure to timely pay the bill
- Unauthorized ATM withdrawals
- Allowing others to use card
- Use for personal gain
- Failure to safeguard card and PIN
- Failure to report lost or stolen card
- Purchase of office supplies

Government Vehicles (GOV)

The U.S. Code defines a vehicle to be a motor vehicle, aircraft, boat, ship, or other similar means of transportation owned or leased by the Federal government. Willful misuse of a GOV carries a mandated penalty of a 30-day suspension (U.S. Code 1349(b)). Government vehicles are for authorized, official use only.

Misuse of a vehicle can include, among other things:

- transporting unauthorized passengers
- transporting firearms or explosives
- storing vehicle near private residence or other unauthorized locations
- not following safety rules (seat belts)
- careless operation of the vehicle
- unauthorized trips or stops

Prevention Tip

A good management practice is to have an annual staff meeting or distribute an office-wide memo reminding employees of the policies regarding official use of agency IT resources, property, vehicles, and travel card, and of the consequences of misuse.

If you find misuse or misconduct, do not wait to take action.

Managers must address misconduct using progressive discipline. Offenses vary in seriousness, and how you address them will be different with each case. Please call your servicing ER specialist for advice.
