

MIKE PITT, employment, company and commercial law specialist, of Oldham's Pearson Hinchliffe, warns employers and employees of "blogging".

A GREAT way of letting off steam after a bad day at work is to write your thoughts in a diary. It's surprising how cathartic it can be to take up pen and paper and express exactly what you think about the boss who always seems to give you a pile of files to deal with just as you are about to leave the office, or the executive whose telephone manner you find so ingratiating.

So long as you guard the contents of your daily journal well out of sight of prying eyes no harm will ever be done. But the modern trend of keeping an online diary – a so-called weblog, or "blog", for short – is a different matter entirely.

In 1998 there was only a handful of weblogs, all kept by internet enthusiasts who had mastered the complicated process of creating one's own website. They used these sites to present links to little-known corners of the web and to current news articles they felt were worthy of note. Often they added their own commentary.

By the turn of the century, software developments had made it as easy to create a weblog as to send an instant message. It then became possible for anyone with access to a computer to write their own weblog. And with the massive expansion in the use of weblogs came a change in their character, to the journal style we now have.

Today's "bloggers" pontificate, remember, dream and argue online. But when they type out what they may think is a harmless account of their day at work, it can end up costing them their job. The term "dooced" has been coined to refer to someone dismissed for something they wrote on their blog or website.

A Waterstone's employee who criticised the bookseller in a weblog was sacked for gross misconduct. And a financial-services firm dismissed an employee for breaching client confidentiality after he made comments about company partners and clients in his weblog. The comments were judged to be "severely prejudicial" to his firm's good name.

Most employment contracts lay down that employees must keep confidential any information related to their employer that they glean during their work. I therefore advise any employee to think very carefully before mentioning work in a blog. Employers, meanwhile, should have a clear policy on computer use in general and blogging in particular, so that employees know where they stand when they commit their thoughts to cyberspace.