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Today's heated political climate creates new set of potential internal/external conflicts

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Although the World Cup has traditionally been divisive on a country basis, people in the U.S. have generally retained their civility. The same cannot be said about the impact of today's highly charged political climate on the U.S. middle-market workplace. It is creating new internal and external corporate divides with the potential to cause significant harm to businesses, including everything from their corporate culture to their bottom lines.

Increasingly, companies big and small are struggling with many of the conflicts nations are facing — with the added pressure of ensuring they do not encroach on their employees' freedom of speech while they manage any potentially damaging conversations.

Consider when Delta Air Lines moved to end a discount for National Rifle Association members, a Republican politician spearheaded a fight in the legislature to kill \$40 million in jet fuel tax breaks for the airline. Similarly, politics is causing companies to lose long-term customers, simply because business owners or employees have made their political views known.

Employees today are trying to shape who their companies do business with based on their own political or religious views. Some have voiced disapproval with doing business with governmental agencies, including the US Defense Department. Do we want countries like China having access to the best technology people and the U.S. not? These are complex, controversial issues.

Currently, if you and/or your company share political views on social media, your company might be judged for it, and you may lose valuable employees, clients, and community partners. For some, expressing their political views and standing up for their principles has become more important than retaining employees or clients. The key is to make conscious decisions and be prepared for the consequences.

Following are some considerations and guidelines based on our experience working with middle-market business owners:

First, you should decide whether and how your business will become involved in what might become controversial issues. Evaluate the companies that have gotten involved on both sides of the immigration issue and how this has impacted their businesses. For many businesses, expressing political viewpoints and/or taking sides is part of their culture and they should perhaps continue. Appropriate company policies — including rules for employee behavior on social media and other public forums — should be developed.

Companies of all sizes are beginning to learn this the hard way. Following its widely publicized firestorm last year after an employee circulated a memo regarding the role of gender differences in keeping women underrepresented

in the technology industry, Google introduced new rules for internal company debate within its hallways and online discussion forums, according to news reports. The rules are designed to help minimize the fallout of future controversies by managing the conversations before things spiral out of control publicly..

Effectively implementing policies will require mutual understanding and buy-in. Company-wide workshops should be considered.

If you are finding divisiveness among your employees and decide that you should get involved, consider sensitivity training or developing ways to help them find common ground. Political debates can be healthy when the participants respect each other and understand that everyone does not have to agree. Everyone should strive to understand each other's viewpoints and ultimately make their own personal decisions. If the discussions become divisive, they should simply agree to stop talking about it from a company standpoint and continue working together productively. Civility is key.

Clearly, unlike with the World Cup, there are moral and political issues at stake that have significant impacts on people, their lives and our country. Companies that implement the right policies and protocols to manage the differing viewpoints will protect their best interests and position themselves for continued success — no matter how divisive our political climate continues to become.

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