President's page, March 2020

Welcomes

25 February 2020

Social media guidance

Already this morning I have killed a fox with a baseball bat. How's your Boxing Day going?' With that tweet, one well known member of the tax community found themselves not only receiving a huge amount of 'coverage' on social media, but also in more conventional media. It is fair to say that most of the coverage was not particularly positive. This was a salient reminder of how easy it is to damage your reputation – or that of an organisation you represent – through inappropriate use of social media.

This is something the CIOT has been aware of for quite some time. At the January Council, a social media policy covering volunteers using social media was adopted. This policy carries guidance which is important for all volunteers when using social media, whether in a personal capacity or a CIOT capacity. There is specific guidance for when social media is used in the course of a member's role as a volunteer. This guidance will be rolled out to volunteers through the branches and committees with which you are involved, and I would encourage all volunteers to study the guidance when you receive it and ensure you follow it.

As some of you may know, I am active on Twitter personally, though many of my tax followers are probably confused by my tweets on 'The Archers' and vice versa. There is an active #TaxTwitter community, and many lively debates, which I think would be improved if everybody participating followed the CIOT guidelines. There are many excellent commentators; my favourites include @DanNeidle, @JudithFreedman, @iaincampbell07 and @hselftax. However, many other contributors on Twitter also demonstrate that knowledge about how tax actually works is remarkably thin, despite the impact it has on all our lives. One can also see how social media acts not as a forum for discussion but as an echo chamber; it is too easy to simply follow people you agree with and ignore those you don't.

Over the last year in particular I have tried to make sure I follow a wide range of tax opinion, including academics, think tanks, government departments, politicians and journalists, as well as practitioners. I am sure there are many more I could be following, but my timeline seems very active as it is. I do, of course, follow @CIOTNews and @ourATT for excellent and quality tax coverage!
Twitter is not the only platform, of course, and LinkedIn also has a substantial amount of tax content; it is a platform more for information and networking than debate, and I have found it useful for both during my Presidential year.

Campaigners against the loan charge have been very active on social media. Some campaigners have resorted to unacceptable levels of personal abuse of those who disagree with them, which has led to some counterblasts that would fail the guidelines referred to above – and indeed the debate around the loan charge has been one of the reasons the new policy has been introduced. However, in my view, without the concerted social media campaign, I doubt the review by Sir Amyas Morse would have taken place, even if that campaign could have been conducted in a much better manner. This demonstrates the power of social media. I would, though, say to any campaigners reading this that I am highly suspicious of accounts that are set up anonymously, have no discernible following other than other campaigners and 'target' figures such as myself or Ray McCann by mentioning us in their opening tweets. That is not the way to win friends in bodies you may wish to support you.

Overuse or misuse of social media can lead to mental health problems, and I am delighted that Helen Whiteman, our Chief Executive, has put mental health wellbeing at the top of her agenda since joining us. I was pleased to see CIOT and ATT partnering with F=@#! Mental Health and Serenity Therapies to deliver the first wellbeing event for UK tax professionals through our New Tax Professionals committee in February. Friends of mine in tax are no longer with us due to mental health issues – I don't want to lose more tax colleagues that way, and anything the Institute can do to prevent that will have my total support.

Until next month – don't be afraid to use social media – #TaxTwitter is generally a very civilised part of the online universe! But do take care when using it, and in particular, take care of yourselves.