West Virginia Executive Branch
Privacy Tip: Privacy in the Workplace

You tell a co-worker that you're worried about a lump your doctor saw on your recent mammogram. You tell your manager you need to leave work early some days to attend marriage counseling sessions. You share the good news that you're finally pregnant with your lunch buddy. Later you are shocked to learn that everyone in the office knows what you've said. How could this happen?

We all share private or personally identifiable information (PII) with other people every day – with our friends, family and co-workers. While we may not say "this is private" or "please keep this a secret," we have expectations that our personal disclosures will be kept confidential. Yet other people may not understand these expectations. They may share your PII out of concern for you. They may assume you don't mind. These misunderstandings can create real problems in the office.

How can we avoid privacy problems at work? If a co-worker confides in you, consider the circumstances of the disclosure before you share that person's PII with others. If you aren't completely certain that it's okay to share, ask the person. Or better yet, just keep the news to yourself.

If you feel you must share a co-worker's news with others, share only the minimum necessary. For example, if you want to offer people the opportunity to send a group flower arrangement to someone in the hospital, limit what you say. Simply saying that you're sending Mary a get-well bouquet after her surgery is better than mentioning the nature of the surgery that she's having.

Similarly, before you share your own PII with others, consider the possible consequences. If you tell someone that you are going to be out on medical leave, that person may naturally share the news so that your colleagues can send flowers or bring you a meal. If you are not comfortable with this, either don't share the news or else be clear that the message is private and you don't want anyone else to know.

By being aware of our conflicting need to share what's going on in our lives with our desire to control the flow of that personal information, we can make our offices more privacy-friendly for everyone!

Note: Your agency/bureau/department/division may have specific requirements – always check your policies and procedures. If you have questions, contact your Privacy Officer.