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***Hiring to Firing Podcast — Emoji Etiquette: Navigating Professionalism and Connection in the Workplace With *The Emoji Movie****

**Hosts: Tracey Diamond and Evan Gibbs**

**Guests: Shana Beldick**

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**Tracey Diamond:**

Evan, we're going to venture into the world of emojis in the workplace today. Always fun. Right?

**Evan Gibbs:**

That's right. That's right.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Tell me, what is the emoji that you use the most?

**Evan Gibbs:**

I think one of my most frequently used emojis – and I'm actually looking at my phone as we record this, and I see the one that I use a lot is the fire emoji or the flame emoji. I use that one a pretty good bit. Do you know what that one means, Tracey?

**Tracey Diamond:**

I don't. And I have to say, I don't think I've ever used the flame emoji. What do you use it for?

**Evan Gibbs:**

I use the flame emoji, and I think this is the proper usage, is if something is really good, really great, really excited about something. If I were verbalizing it, I would say, "Oh, that's fire." And so, I use the flame emoji in place of saying that, "Oh, that is – flame emoji."

**Tracey Diamond:**

Like you're on fire? That kind of thing?

**Evan Gibbs:**

No. It's more like that thing is great.

**Tracey Diamond:**

That thing is smoking.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. Like a really good song comes out. And a friend sends it to me. And I listen to it. And I could respond with the flame emoji. Or like five of them.

**Tracey Diamond:**

This is a perfect example of what we're going to talk about today, emojis that could be subject to misinterpretations.

[INTRO]

**Tracey Diamond:**

Welcome to *Hiring to Firing*, the podcast. I'm Tracey Diamond, Labor and Employment Attorney at Troutman Pepper. And I'm here with my co-host extraordinaire, Evan Gibbs. Together we tackle all employment issues from *Hiring to Firing*.

Today we welcome Shana Beldick, Chief Human Resources Officer right here at our very own Troutman Pepper. It's so nice to have you, Shana.

**Shana Beldick:**

Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Why don't we start by having you tell us a little bit about your role at Troutman? And we'll go from there.

**Shana Beldick:**

Great. Thank you so much for having me. I, as you said, am the Chief HR Officer for Troutman Pepper. I've been here for about eight years and oversee all things HR, including benefits in HR systems, employee relations, that type of thing. And, also, our legal support administration function here at the firm. Prior to that, I spent about 15 years in another large law firm and also in a professional services firm in a variety of HR roles. And that's my story pretty much.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Well, we are a pretty big place these days. So I know that your job is mammoth. And we really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.

**Shana Beldick:**

Great. Thank you.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. How many employees do we have anyway? I'm genuinely curious. I know rough attorney count. But I'm not sure what the staff number is these days.

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah. Well, in total, we're over 2,000. And so, about 2,200 actually. And so, we're about half and half lawyers and staff.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Yeah. For folks that don't know, our listeners, we are over I think 1,100 attorneys. And we're in 23 cities. We have a really fun topic today. And our topic is emojis at work. And before I get into the movie, which is, of course, *The Emoji Movie*, I just want to ask each of you, what's your favorite emoji?

**Evan Gibbs:**

Oh, my gosh. I'm a millennial. And I feel like I took this test recently and it was like what generation are you? When you text, what generation texter are you? And I got like a solid mix of Gen X, a dash of Boomer, and like some Millennials. No Gen Z. I don't use a ton of emojis. It's like on the iPhone, there's like the favorites that you use frequently. And those are pretty much the only ones that I use. I use, gosh, just the – I guess it's the sort of plain smiley face a pretty good bit. I do the cry face with the big tears sometimes.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Although, the cry emoji kind of looks a little bit like he's smiling through his tears, which always confuses me.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. Some of them, I don't know what they are. Some of them, I look at them and I'm just not really sure in what – there's one, it's like a face with a dotted outline. I don't know if you know. It's like a dashed line. And that one, I have absolutely no idea what that one – the context for that one. But, yeah. I'm pretty basic. Thumbs up. That sort of thing. Pretty basic.

**Tracey Diamond:**

How about you, Shana?

**Shana Beldick:**

The first one that came to my mind that I like but I don't really find a reason to use it that much is the one –

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**Tracey Diamond:**

The runner?

**Shana Beldick:**

The one that's kind of like in that motion, like they're trying to run the other way. Or the one that's like the flamingo dancer. I tend to use the one that's like tilting its head to the side and sticking its tongue out like "eeh". But I'm kind of like Evan. I have to admit, I'm not the most creative emoji user. This is going to be very educational for me.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Well, I would say I probably use emojis the most when I'm wishing someone a happy birthday and then it's like a long string of a glass of wine, a balloon, a birthday cake, some confetti. That kind of thing. Otherwise, it's usually thumbs up or smiley faces for me. Or maybe the winky face here and there.

**Evan Gibbs:**

There you go.

**Tracey Diamond:**

In the movie, the movie follows an emoji who's the Meh emoji, which sort of cracks me up. And Meh is considered dysfunctional because he can't control his emotions and just be Meh. He's supposed to only have one emotion. Each Emoji is supposed to convey just one single emotion. And this guy, our Meh protagonist, really is a whole conglomeration of emojis. He's like the ADD of emojis.

Let's start off with our first clip. In the first clip, the movie starts by explaining why the use of emojis are so prevalent and important in modern communications.

[BEGIN CLIP]

**Meh:**

And as the pace of life gets faster and faster....

**Teacher:**

Phones down in 5.

**Meh:**

And attention spans get shorter and shorter, and you're probably not even listening to me right now, who has the time to type out actual words? And that's where we come in, the most important invention in the history of communication. Emojis.

[END CLIP]

**Evan Gibbs:**

I think the clip does a good job of sort of summarizing the purpose of emojis. And it's really interesting to me how prevalent they've become, because they can convey. Especially, as I've read, for younger generations, they really convey like a wide range of concepts and emotions. A lot of them are used ironically. And it's like a new language, really. And so, I think that that's a good explanation of sort of what they're for and how prevalent they've become.

And we're seeing them more and more in the workplace. And I remember, when you first started having text messages among co-workers, I remember when that really started. And the employment lawyers, we all sort of cringed and we're like, "Oh, my gosh. Managers, why are you texting with your subordinates?" And now it's gone. That's very accepted. And now it's the emojis.

And so, we're seeing these more and more in the workplace. I'm just curious, just the two of you, what do you think it is that I guess drives the use of emojis in the workplace and outside the workplace? Anything in particular?

**Tracey Diamond:**

Shana, why don't you start?

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah, absolutely. I think the world is a very serious place these days. And I think that humor and comedy is a way to connect people and a way to break the ice. And so, I think that it is a way to not take ourselves too seriously when we're connecting with others, even in the workplace, I think. And we have to be choosy about when that's appropriate and when it's not appropriate.

But it can also sort of emphasize a point you're trying to make. Or you sort of find the right emoji of the ones that we were discussing earlier. Or, alternatively, it might be to show that what you're saying, you're trying to make a point but you're not too strong in it. You don't want to come across too strong. And, also, in that first clip, I think they referenced how attention spans have gotten shorter. And it's a way to sort of get to the point very quickly and be very efficient. Here are the sort of the four emojis with fewer words. Those are what comes to mind for me.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Yeah. I think that that's all exactly on point. And it's one of those things a little bit of you know what when you see it. There's something about just sort of firing off an emoji that's able to express an emotion that might be hard for you to otherwise articulate what that emotion is. I

think sometimes if we're not too in touch with our feelings, it's hard to know how to express what we're trying to say. And sometimes that emoji just is exactly that point. In the movie, our buddy, Meh, is trying to figure out what his purpose is. So let's listen to that clip.

[BEGIN CLIP]

**Father:**

Gene, where are you going?

**Meh:**

I'm not going to run away from this. I'm an emoji. And even though I'm not sure exactly which one, I've got to have some sort of purpose here. I know it.

**Father:**

Gene, no.

**Mother:**

Sweetie, please.

[END CLIP]

**Tracey Diamond:**

As Evan pointed out earlier, we are seeing this more and more in the workplace. And Slack and Duolingo have done a couple of surveys about this. In the first survey we looked at, almost 60% of workers surveyed said that emojis allowed them to communicate with more nuance and fewer words. While 54% said they believe that emoji use can speed up workplace communications. That goes to both sort of the two things that Shana brought out. The idea of being more nuanced by using an emoji. And, also, by just sort of getting the point across more quickly. Okay. Evan, I think you're up to the but do you think there is a place for emojis in the workplace?

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I totally agree, Tracey. I mean, I think that my experience, it definitely increases the speed of communications and can help with efficiency. I mean, I know that's true in my personal life. And in it works as well. But I'm curious to hear y'all's thoughts. And I, of course, have my own as always. But I'm curious what y'all's thoughts are on the use of emojis in the workplace. And whether and to what extent they're appropriate.

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah. I'll chime in, if that works. I do think there are situations where emojis are appropriate. And I think one thing that comes to mind is that teams, many teams are really so much more broadly distributed at this point. People are either not in the same office location. Or they're

working remotely. Or they're working a hybrid schedule. And we just all need to find ways to be more intentional about connecting with others. And whether that's up, or down, or across.

And I think sort of using an emoji or showing some sort of emotion, I think, or finding some commonality that you have with somebody else after you've gotten into to know them shows sort of some vulnerability in a professional setting. And I think that's a real intentional way to – could be an intentional way of connecting with people.

And I think the other thing is that, for people managers, direct reports have a lot of perceived threats with their manager. And one of those is sort of the difference in status just by way of having the manager direct report status difference.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Relationship.

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah. Relationship. And so, if you are a manager, a way to mitigate against the threat of your status is to bring humor, or to show emotion, or to be vulnerable. And that could be done through emojis, or a GIF, or a meme, or something like that. Because when you remove those threats, it really does open the door for people to be more creative. And then when they're more creative, they're more engaged and there's better problem-solving. Who knew what emojis could do?

**Tracey Diamond:**

Yeah. I think that's all really interesting points. I have really mixed emotions of emojis. Emojis about this. Because on the one hand, I 100% agree with you, Shana, that it could really create – we have to try harder these days, particularly in a remote work environment, to portray the human side of who we are. And if you're a manager, to not come off as aloof and to come off as relatable. And emojis could be one way to do that.

But the same issues with sending jokes around. Emojis have that same concern of risk in terms of being misinterpreted and in terms of managers maybe not being perceived as serious people. And so, I think there's a time and a place for everything. And I worry that if employees just have sort of carte blanche to use whatever emoji they think they want to use on a given day, that it could be abused rather than used.

And so, I don't know. I haven't been asked that question by a client yet. But I do worry. And to Evan's point before, like everything else, it's evidence. And so, if it's an inappropriate emoji or an emoji used in an inappropriate way, it could create evidence, let's say, in a harassment complaint.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I think that was the article that I read that was in connection with that little survey that I took was that different generations attribute different meanings to emojis. One emoji can mean something really innocuous and totally PG to me. But then to somebody else, it could mean

something completely different. And I think that there is a risk there. Because I know that there's like 4,000 standard emojis. And knowing, I guess, what meaning somebody ascribes to one or the other can be very difficult. And it seems like it could be easily misinterpreted.

I know that, to me, one of the sort of safe set of emojis just recently, at least for me, was in Microsoft Outlook. They have that band of responses that you can do by the reply bar. And it's like there's a thumbs up. I think maybe like a smiley face and like a confetti thing. There's like five. And those to me seem like really like safe emojis. It's like a safe space. It's like your safe word. Like, "I can do a thumbs up." Right? I mean, that should be safe. But I do worry about that of getting into like some gray areas of how things can be misinterpreted totally accidentally.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Let's stay away from fruits and vegetables.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I think that's right. I think that's right. But I think maybe if organizations are able to maybe limit the number of emojis in Teams, or Slack, or whatever, maybe that one – just an idea to throw out there.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Although, that is a really good idea. But it wouldn't get out when employees are using their cellphones to text each other and to text their supervisors or their subordinates. And it's another whole issue of should text be a proper form of workplace communication? Because there's so much less control over them than Slack, and Teams, and emails.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yep. I think that's right. I think the employment lawyers and the HR folks, I think we've lost that battle.

**Tracey Diamond:**

That's very true.

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah. I would agree, we have lost that battle. And I agree with both of you that you really have to be fairly certain that you have the relationship with somebody that would allow for you to use emojis. And it's not just emojis. But, also, there's such easy access in the different instant messaging like Teams or whatever where you can access all of these different videos and memes and such. And you can save them and copy them in. And less is more. I think be conservative and tread very lightly. And as you said, Evan, start with things that are just the smilees and the thumbs up.

I think one of the things that we try to talk about a lot in our professional development efforts here is, as an individual, you're often thinking about, "Well, what is my style? And what are my



preferences? And are people sort of catering to how I like to be communicated with?" But, really, the key is to kind of listen, and observe, and think about what are other people's preferences and styles. And do they like less words? Do they appreciate humor? And if they appreciate humor, is it appropriate humor?

And so, I think I always say, start with more professional and conservative and sort of ease in and sort of see kind of where the door is open. Because there is a time and a place. And everything that you are putting in a written communication, as you say, it's all discoverable. So, to be very careful.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Very true. To that point about how are your messages being perceived, it was really interesting to read the surveys, because there seems to really be a generational split on how emojis are perceived. In a survey by Survey Monkey, they found that 50% of workers felt that emojis were appropriate at work. And 50% felt that they were inappropriate at work. It was a real even split. And the difference really came down to a generational difference, that younger employees tended to view employees or their co-workers who use emojis as Kinder and more empathetic. While older professionals saw them as annoying, unprofessional, and counterproductive. Really, a very large dichotomy there.

I guess, kind of begs the question of how do we know how someone on the receiving end is going to feel about receiving an emoji without asking them? Which is kind of a weird thing. Do you mind if I send you emojis? I don't think anybody's going to ask that question.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I think one topic that comes up for us that's on that issue is clients. And do we use emojis with clients? And my answer is yes, quite a bit. It's pretty interesting. We don't get too deep into the emoji territory. But like thumbs up, smiley faces. Some of the ones – I'm trying to think of some other ones. Like the prayer hands. Is that – or the grateful hands? I don't know what you call those. I don't know the name of any of these emojis, by the way. But whatever that's called, those are a couple of common ones that I've seen directly in client communication.

For me, anyway, I'm very open about sharing my cell number with clients. And so, they do text me pretty frequently. If we've got some kind of litigation or something going on and they want some kind of update, it's not uncommon for it to be by text. I get the thumbs up and things like that pretty routinely. I will say, to your point, Tracey, I'm never the first one to initiate the emojis.

**Tracey Diamond:**

It's like anything. When we talk about harassment, you have to think about where's the appropriate time and place for everything and sort of feel out how your actions are being perceived by others. Whether it's a joke that you're talking about or an emoji that you're sending. What do you think some of the risks are with the use of emojis in workplace conversations?

**Shana Beldick:**

I think that there are risks. Because any workplace conversation that is not verbal, that is not live, that is written, it's always left up to an interpretation. And we were talking about that with the advent of email. This is just sort of a continuation of that as there are more and more modes of communication.

And I think that if you have to have a difficult conversation with anyone or you're frustrated, that should not be written anyway and likely not, unless you're trying to specifically document something, which ideally is after a conversation. But especially with the use of emojis, don't just fire something off. Right? Slow down. Think about it. And maybe don't do it at all. Just pick up the phone. Dial somebody on Teams. Because when we move too quickly, things can become – communications can become offensive or can just fuel the fire, if you will.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Yeah. I was looking at the list of emojis and thinking about what could be the emojis that are the most risky. And it seems like there's a pretty long list there. Anything from the fruits and vegetables that we talked about before. To kissing face. Stuck out tongue. Winkies. Smirks. That can be interpreted in a sort of a suggestive way. And then there's the concerns about discrimination where there's certain emojis that you can assign skin color to or gender to, which may be perfectly fine in some context and may be perceived as discriminatory, again, depending on the context. People really need to be careful. Shana, from an HR standpoint, what should employers do to address this risk?

**Shana Beldick:**

Yeah. I mean, first of all, I think that that the workplace policies and firm use of company or firm system policies should broadly address harassment of all types, whether it's through the internet. I am an email where emojis or anything else that's considered to be sexually explicit, or gender-specific, or racially insensitive cartoons, jokes, that should be prohibited in policies. And that is the case in our firm.

And so, racially insensitive or sexually suggestive emojis are still racially insensitive or sexually suggestive should be avoided altogether. And as we were sort of talking about before, we can't control everything. We can't control what people do. But, obviously, when we have policies that we can kind of point to, we can hold people accountable and we can have conversations and try to remind people that there's a time and a place. And sometimes it's not in the workplace.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Yeah. Maybe the answer at the end of the day is talk to each other. Rather than shooting off a quick emoji.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I'll tell you though, I've heard – that's another interesting point. I think it's another generational divide. I have heard that at least some of the Gen Z workers that it's almost considered rude to just call somebody without a text first or without scheduling the call, or

without texting. Just like blowing up somebody's phone out of the blue is considered – I don't know if rude is the right word. But maybe a little forward. Like, "Wow. How dare they call me without texting first?"

**Tracey Diamond:**

It's a very generational split again. Right?

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. I think so.

**Shana Beldick:**

Generational differences in the workplace, it's ever-present. And this is just another example of those differences.

**Tracey Diamond:**

And fascinating.

**Evan Gibbs:**

Yeah. We have what? Four generations in the workplace now? I mean, if you look at our most senior partners and then our most junior associates, I mean, you've got a spread of four generations.

**Tracey Diamond:**

Crazy. Yeah.

**Evan Gibbs:**

It's pretty wild.

**Tracey Diamond:**

It really is. Well, this has been a lot of fun. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us, Shana. Thanks so much for listening, everybody. Please don't forget to check out our blog, [hiringto firing.law](#). And check out other podcast episodes. And shoot us an email. Tell us what you think. Thanks so much.

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