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Ugly workplace disputes can harm employers when they spill into public view on career website Glassdoor

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At ScribbleLive, a Toronto-based marketing platform for digital content, employees were left angry after getting hit with tax bills last fall for company-supplied lunches from years ago. In the past, disputes like this between an employer and employees would have been kept largely quiet. However, this tax issue and other internal disputes at ScribbleLive have spilled into public view through fiery posts from current and former employees on the career website Glassdoor.

Negative reviews on Glassdoor are becoming a big problem for employers looking to attract talent to their organizations in a tight job market. In Canada and elsewhere, Glassdoor has become an important gauge of an employer's image and appeal, especially in competitive fields such as software development and engineering. The site is widely used by job hunters looking to vet workplaces, logging about 4.2 million visits to its Canadian site each month, according to Glassdoor, a California company founded in 2007.

Many former employees at ScribbleLive have used the site to criticize the company leadership as well as the tax mix-up. The company gets an average rating of just 1.7 stars out of five in its 115 anonymous reviews.

"Received a letter from CRA saying I need to pay \$400 for 'free lunches' that I had while I was at ScribbleLive. What a joke of a company," a developer who used to work for the company wrote in March.

Sarah Trafford, who worked at ScribbleLive as a user-interface designer for one year, and left in March, 2016, didn't post her experience on Glassdoor, but told The Globe and Mail she was frustrated after she, too, received a CRA notice in December. "I had to pay about \$700 and I didn't even eat the free lunches because I'm gluten- and dairy-free."

But the company, whose legal name is Scribble Technologies Inc., says the reviews lack context. Chief executive Efreem Ainsley said the tax reassessments, which affected about 200 mostly former employees, were the result of a CRA audit that started in 2017 and classified the free lunches as a taxable benefit.

Mr. Ainsley, who became CEO in January, 2018, said no one at the company back then

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As for the other reviews, Mr. Ainsley said the company has restructured over the past year, downsizing to 80 employees from approximately 200.

“What’s happened here is that a lot of people lost their job, and it wasn’t because of performance,” he told The Globe. “The company’s gone from losing money to generating profits, but we had to go through a lot of pain to get here.”

Still, ScribbleLive, like many other Canadian businesses, knows negative reviews can turn off valuable recruits. Mr. Ainsley said the company found that job candidates were going to Glassdoor and then declining interviews and dropping out of the hiring process. Now, he said ScribbleLive makes a point of being upfront with candidates about its Glassdoor profile and the company’s history.

But like other online rating platforms, Glassdoor isn’t immune to entities that try to game its rankings and reviews system. Some companies have come under fire for asking employees to write positive reviews to boost their rating or counter bad ones. In January, a Wall Street Journal investigation analyzed millions of Glassdoor reviews, identifying more than 400 companies with unusually large single-month increases in reviews, including well-known enterprises such as Slack Technologies Inc., Space Exploration Technologies Corp. (SpaceX) and software giant SAP SE.

If the reviews are suspicious, Glassdoor Inc. spokesperson Scott Dobroski said users can “flag a review” to its content moderation team.

“In some rare instances, if we have evidence of employers going to extremely far lengths to suppress opinions or manipulate reviews, we will put a Glassdoor alert badge on a profile, which lets job seekers know there have been attempts to manipulate or compromise reviews,” Mr. Dobroski said.

There are other measures in place to help ensure reviews’ authenticity. He said users must sign into the site using a valid e-mail address or social-media account to leave a review. Before a review is published, it goes through a multitier process to ensure a post meets Glassdoor’s community guidelines. He said the site rejects about 5 per cent to 10 per cent of submitted

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Similar to Yelp, any employer can sign up for a free account and respond to employee reviews on its profile. However, Glassdoor also gives companies the option of paying for an account that lets them access more features, such as the ability to remove competitors' ads from their profiles, promote branded photos and pin a positive review to the top of their page.

“Even if you’re just responding to bad reviews, it shows your openness and transparency,” Ms. Jenkins Townson said in an interview.

Over all, she said companies should be conducting regular engagement surveys and collecting anonymous feedback to catch workplace tension points or areas for improvement before they end up on Glassdoor. While employers can ask staff to write Glassdoor reviews, they shouldn't demand or try to influence them.

“It’s a bad employee experience to ask your staff to write positive reviews,” she said. “You’re going to leave them with a bad taste in their mouths.”

Candidates are also savvy. If reviews are clustered together on the same day or week or if many follow a bad one, it’s a flag to users to be wary.

Still, a trip to Glassdoor is becoming a common step for job seekers. Ms. Trafford, the former ScribbleLive employee, didn't use Glassdoor much a few years ago, but she uses it now.

“For any job I look at, I definitely go to Glassdoor,” Ms. Trafford said. “I’ll only go for an interview if the company has four or five stars.”

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