We tend to be wildly fallible creatures, and sites like Twitter and Facebook are like mythological sirens, seducing us to type things we’ll later regret. Companies have to find ways to balance employees’ free speech rights with concerns over their own reputations or brand names.

But Michael Zimmer, a law professor at Loyola University Chicago and an expert on employment law, said that’s no easy trick. “Companies are in a tough squeeze at the moment,” Zimmer said. “Everything is moving so fast and the law isn’t clear.”

A Connecticut woman fired from her job as an ambulance driver after calling her boss a “scumbag” on Facebook recently had her federal labor lawsuit settled before it went to a hearing. The ambulance company wound up agreeing to change its policy, which restricted employees from discussing work when they’re not on the clock.

That was a high-profile case, one that will make it hard for companies to specifically outlaw work chatter on social media. So Dave, you have your work cut out for you.

Zimmer suggested keeping the policy positive: “You want to say to people, ‘Remember, you’re an employee of company X and we want the best possible public image that we can have. So when you’re engaging in social media that could be attributable to our company, just remember that we’re all on the same team.’”

Zimmer added: “If you start cracking back on them, some people will just say, ‘Well, to hell with you.’”

And they could well get away with saying that, since the law remains so unclear.

The takeaway here is that whatever social media policy you write shouldn’t hamper the work you’ve done building up a Twitter following. Just try to avoid tweeting when angry. Or drunk. Or tired. Or... well, let’s just be careful out there, OK?

Q: How much detail should my out-of-office reply have? Somewhere between “kiss off” and “investing retirement fund on red 3”?

— Kit in Colorado, via Twitter

A: Personally, I like my out-of-office notifications to say I’ve died. That way when I return a week or so later, everyone thinks it’s a miracle. (My therapist says I have a “messiah complex.” Whatever.)

But a sensible person, like Tammy Conard-Salvo, associate director of the Writing Lab at Purdue University, encourages workers heading off for vacation to take a more conservative approach.

She said she routinely gets questions about automated out-of-office replies when she does workshops on business etiquette. Apparently Kit and I aren’t the only ones who harbor an inclination to leave a funny note. I suppose it’s a way of electronically rubbing our noses in the poor souls who have to work while we’re off sunning ourselves.

“Humor can be quite subjective,” Conard-Salvo said.

“We’re also seeing an increased usage of email by people who are non-native speakers of English, and humor is often lost on people who speak a different language.”

She suggests leaving just the basics: Tell people you’re away, when you’ll be back and whether you’ll be checking messages.

And don’t refer people to a co-worker unless you know for sure that co-worker will respond to the person promptly: “It doesn’t make sense to refer a writer to someone who will simply say you have to wait until that person comes back.”

Purdue’s Writing Lab also has a handy website that focuses on workplace writing at owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/681/01.

Q: How do I let a co-worker know that the only reason I haven’t beaten them to death with a printer is their candy dish?

— Chris in Ottawa, via Twitter

A: This is a simple cost-benefit analysis, Chris. Any economist would tell you that candy is awesome, and since this is free candy, you’re looking at pure benefit, and probably some Snickers. Also, killing is wrong. So steer clear of that.