The Evolving Workplace: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

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Introduction

No one can deny that computers, e-mail and the Internet have had, and are still having, an effect on the way we work. The Internet also offers the opportunity to keep in contact with friends and family daily, check your stocks, and research virtually anything all while sitting in front of a computer screen. But where is this happening? At home? No, this surfing is taking place in an office somewhere right now. You may ask what is the harm in sending a quick e-mail to a friend, checking the stock market and opening an e-mail attachment? There are two issues here: the content of the attachments and e-mails that the employee is viewing or sending and how much time is spent surfing or chatting. The Internet has many positive aspects that can enhance the workplace, but it is having an increasingly negative effect. There is a big difference between behaviour and attitudes in the connected workplace versus the traditional workplace. As we examine some hypothetical practices, the realization that such activities actually occur brings to the fore the issues involved in helping your employees deal with the high-tech workplace.

Monitoring employee Internet activities has become a necessity. At Xerox, where 40 employees were fired for wasting as much as eight hours a day visiting inappropriate web sites, spokesman Bill McKee voiced his concern, "It's how much time they spent. It is the same thing as if you had an employee who disappeared from his desk for four hours. He is not working."[1] The Internet offers the chance to explore the world without leaving your desk, but the downside is that there are no clear lines of division between the work world and personal time. How far does the disconnect spread? The following examples illustrate some patterns that commonly occur in today's workplace.

Scenario 1 – Secret Centrefolds

Ask a typical office worker whether or not they would bring their latest *Playboy* or *Playgirl* to the office and pin up their favourite centrefold. The answer would be a resounding and definite **NO**! This action would create a hostile working environment and make their co-workers uncomfortable. Yet, these same employees do not think twice about using the Internet and the company computers to "pin up" their favourite centrefold.

Some interesting statistics from a recent MSNBC survey:

- One in five men and one in eight women admitted using their work computers as their primary lifeline to sexually explicit material online.

- Six times as many men engage in online sexual pursuits as do women (86% vs 14%)

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[1] *Dallas Morning Star,* 12 March 2000.

- At Compaq Computer Corp. 20 employees were fired recently after it was discovered that the employees had logged more than 10,000 hits each on sexually explicit Web sites.

- A Nielsen Media Research Survey revealed that IBM, AT&T, Apple, NASA and Hewlett-Packard employees visited the online edition of Penthouse magazine thousands of times a month.

- Ernst and Young reported that some firms have calculated that more than 80% of their Internet capacity was being used to access sports, pornography and other non-business Web sites.

These statistics show that pornographic material is being viewed everyday in the workplace. Every time this happens, it creates a hostile work environment and exposes the company to liability.

Scenario 2 – HI-HO, HI-HO, a shopping I will go….

Imagine leaving the office, heading for the local mall, browsing all afternoon and perhaps making the odd purchase. When the work whistle was about to blow, it would be time to head back to the office to pack up to go home. In the traditional workplace, employees would consider such behaviour to be unprofessional and unreasonable, or downright ludicrous. Yet these same employees are doing their shopping from the comfort of their office chairs.

Here are some interesting statistics from the American Management Association:

- Shopping sites reached 18% more Internet users within the workplace than at home.

- Users of the online auctioneer eBay Inc. spent 157 minutes at the site while at work in January 2000 compared with 126 minutes when at home.

- U.S. Internet users at work spend over twice as much time online than home surfers even though they make up less than half the cyber population, according to new data.

- Shopping sites realize their greatest number of hits during work hours.

The faster Internet connection at the office often makes it more appealing to shop online at the office rather than at home. Most people would laugh if you asked them if their boss should pay for an afternoon shopping trip, yet it happens everyday in the workplace.

Scenario 3 – It's a global water cooler – and I can talk all day!

Another office distraction is the instant message or chat service. An employee would not spend the afternoon on the phone with a friend, but has probably let time drift by "chatting" online. It is the invisible water cooler. The only thing that can be heard is the clicking of the keyboard; outwardly it appears that everyone in the office is diligently working.

Here are some interesting statistics:

- San Jose Marital and Sexuality Center conducted a study where 20% of men and 12% of women admitted to accessing chatrooms at work for the purpose of cybersex.

- American Online subsidiary Mirabilis maintains the ICQ network where more than 60,000 new users sign up daily. This is on top of their 42 million current users worldwide.

On-line chatting is growing rapidly. Forrester Research Institute predicts that instant messaging will overtake e-mail in 2002. It indicates that within the U.S., there will be 2 billion instant messages sent per day versus 1.5 billion e-mail messages.

Scenario 4 – This is my other job too!

Jane is busy at her computer working away, but it is not company business she is doing; it is her own. She is checking her pay-to-surf account at YoYomail.com. One of hundreds of pay-to-surf sites, for every advertisement you hit, there is a small monetary reward. When you reach a certain level, $20.00 for example, the company will send you a cheque. The problem here is that Jane and other employees are using company resources and time to surf these sites.

Here is an interesting fact:

- iWon.com (a popular pay-to-surf web site) was one of the top ten web sites visited in January 2000 according to a Nielsen/NetRatings survey. Seven thousand employees completed the survey, and admitted to spending an average of 67 minutes at iWon.com.

Bob is quietly working away, not for the company, but on his personal web pages and he is using the company server to host his home page. What is the harm in using the company's resources to support a personal web page? The problem arises when other employees complain that the network is too slow. Pay-to-surf and web-page hosting should not be supported by the company's resources. When the system is taxed users will complain about network performance.

Scenario 5 – Its just one game….

It is Thursday afternoon and everyone in the office seems to be hard at work. Your employees are huddled over their computers, intensely concentrating, clicking away at the keyboard. But what you don't know is that Phil, your top systems analyst, is actually stalking Bob, from accounting, down the hallways of hell. Phil is holding his weapon of choice, a pump-action shotgun, and he hopes those two guys from engineering are not around the next corner. What is happening? The company's network has been hi-jacked by Phil and the other employees to play the latest computer game.

Here are some interesting statistics:

- A survey reported that 90% of 200 (or 18 out of 20) Information Systems managers said they have access to computer games in the workplace. (Information Week)

- When asked how often computer games were played at their office, 28% said almost never, 14% said once a week, 42% said several times a week and 16% said several times a day! (Information Week)

Games can be extremely addictive. Anyone who has gotten absorbed in a good strategy or simulation game knows that hours can slip by before you realize it. A game started at lunch can easily take up an entire afternoon. Even solitaire or minesweeper can be addictive as you struggle to beat the computer just once!

Besides robbing you of employee productivity, computer entertainment eats up your hard disk space, processor time and network capacity. Someone playing a computer game can be hard to detect. Employees often go to great lengths to hide their game addictions. Some games even offer a "boss mode" that pops a fake spreadsheet onto the screen at the touch of a key.

Is it worth worrying about? According to DVD Software, business and government agencies lose an estimated $52 billion a year in productivity due to *online games alone*.

Implementing an Appropriate Usage Policy (AUP)

Companies cannot fall victim to the knee-jerk reaction of dismissing the employee. Dismissing employees can lead to an uncomfortable work environment, as well as additional costs for interviewing, hiring and training someone new. To avoid over-reaction and other complications, companies need to develop an Internet usage policy that reflects the company's culture. This policy should set the company standards with respect to how the Internet can be used, and what type of material can be downloaded. The policy should also outline the disciplinary measures that will be taken if people choose to disregard the policy.

To protect a company from potential legal problems, it should be clearly stated in the policy that the Internet and e-mail systems should not be used to view or distribute any

inappropriate and adult content. The key to the success of a policy is keeping it current and continually educating employees.

Conclusion

The examples of the employee going shopping for the afternoon or the "pin-up" girl/guy illustrate the insidiousness of the problem. Employees do not expect to leave their desk whenever they please to go shopping or have a chat. Yet somehow it has become acceptable to do these things at the office, on the company's computer.

The best way to handle this problem is to establish an online usage policy guiding the use of the Internet at work. Once such a policy is established, effective mechanisms need to be in place to enforce the policy and help ensure a non-hostile work environment. The use of an online activity management software is the most effective way to enforce a usage policy.