

Personal Internet Usage and Quality of Worklife

P

Pruthikrai Mahatanankoon
Illinois State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

The management of Internet usage in the workplace is becoming one of most important productivity concerns of the modern workplaces. Through proper use of Internet technology, organizations reap the benefits of efficient communication and information sharing among employees, managers, and organizations' customers. The Internet is an essential necessity, as global business expansion requires networked organizations that can understand and predict future market trends, analyze competitors' movements, and identify vital environmental factors that could be affecting their competitive position. For this reason the Internet has provided many added benefits for organizations, and modern workplaces have equipped their employees with access to the Internet and provided individual e-mail accounts.

Not until recently, Internet usage in the workplace has received a negative view from the business community. The issue of employees spending their work time on personal activities is not new to management. In some ways, spending time on personal telephone conversations, taking longer break times, or chatting with colleagues in the office is similar to personal Internet usage. Unfortunately, publicized cases of Internet abuse in the workplace, such as pornography, employee harassment, information leakage, and software piracy, have generated different and increasingly more serious ethical, legal, and productivity concerns for many organizations.

A study conducted in the year 2000 by NFO Interactive indicated that one out of three employees spends at least 2.5 hours of work time per week on non-work-related Internet surfing. Recent online industry studies suggest that such Internet usage in the workplace costs U.S. organizations approximately \$1 billion annually in lost productivity (Foster, 2001). When Internet usage policy (IUP) or broad communication regarding proper Internet usage between employees and management does not work, stronger practical solutions are implemented to handle Internet abuse, such as reprimanding employees, deploying Internet monitoring and filtering software to restrict non-work-related Web site access, even restricting the hours of access. Although these strategies have shown improvement in employees' productivity and reduction in occurrences of Internet abuses, a thorough

understanding of their impact on employees' job satisfaction and quality of work life still requires further investigation.

Evidence shows that Internet filtering and monitoring tools have led to employee dissatisfaction and other productivity debates. Urbaczewski and Jessup (2002) suggest that employee motivation generally plays a significant role in productivity, performance, and satisfaction in the workplace, but employee dissatisfaction increases with any type of organizational monitoring, including Internet monitoring. Management finds it difficult to maintain a workable balance between proper behavioral controls and employee empowerment. Because both stringent control and little control generally lead to abuse, management of Internet usage in the workplace requires developing a balance of human resource strategies with individual psychological considerations to maintain and improve employee satisfaction and well-being overall. To identify the appropriate balance, it is important to understand and examine the various Internet usage behaviors.

BACKGROUND OF INTERNET USAGES BEHAVIORS

The literature related to non-work-related Internet usage in the workplace can be classified into three categories: pathological, personal, and abusive. Influenced by various individual and social psychological aspects, each category deserves a research area of its own, involving different sets of determinants and consequences related to each behavioral category.

Pathological Internet Usage (PIU) involves excessive Internet usage from people who use the Internet as a means of coping with their personal problems or current personal difficulties (David, 2001). Psychology literature defines any extensive usage of the Internet where users have no control over their behaviors as "Internet addiction" (Greenfield, 1999; Young, 1998a). Internet addiction is currently being viewed as similar to substance abuse or a gambling addiction (Young, 1998b). PIU causes a specified number of psychological symptoms, such as altered moods, denial of responsibilities, guilt, and craving (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Brenner (1997)

claims that Internet addicts have a higher tolerance level, withdrawal symptoms, and craving for the Internet as compared to normal Internet users. However, the addictive symptoms happen only to a minority of obsessive and/or compulsive users (Griffiths, 2000). In general workplace settings, occurrences of PIU or Internet addiction are atypical; organizations can deal with problem employees specifically. Research finds that normal employees utilize the Internet for its usefulness, information content, ease of use, and communication (Stevens, Williams & Smith, 2000), whether the access is work-related or not.

Personal Web Usage in the Workplace (PWU) is defined as voluntary online Web behaviors during working time where employees use any of the organization's Internet resources for activities outside current customary job/work requirements (Anandarajan & Simmers, 2002). These activities include any leisure and/or personal use of the Internet at work; for example, using the Internet to escape from work by spending work time on the Internet searching for news and entertainment information, shopping online, booking personal vacations, and using a personal e-mail account to send messages to friends and family (Mahatanankoon, Anandarajan & Igbaria, 2004). In some cases, personal Web usage is also now referred to as cyberloafing (Lim, 2002), cyberslacking, or Internet abuse (Anandarajan, 2002; Young & Case, 2004).

Internet abuse is a general term often used mostly by practitioners; it refers to any wrongful or improper use of the Internet in the workplace. Behaviors related to Internet abuse are often more severe in nature, such as viewing pornography, harassing other employees, downloading illegal software, moonlighting, playing online games, online chatting, and so forth.

Although *Internet abuse* and *pathological Internet usage* lead to lost productivity, wasted or overused network bandwidth, and other possible legal liabilities, low to moderate non-work-related usage may in fact lead to positive consequences. There are studies suggesting that some *personal Web usage* in the workplace can be a healthy recipe for a productive work life. In fact, satisfied and productive employees frequently use the Internet (Stanton, 2002). Restricting online recreational activities may prevent employees from using the Internet to its full potential. Therefore, organizations should take actions both to empower and educate employees about the balance between work and play (Oravec, 2002). Others recommend organizations should not restrict personal Web browsing and take the necessary training steps to "facilitate the transfer of learning from the play domain to work-related tasks" (Belanger & Van Slyke, 2002, p. 65). Table 1 summarizes the possible benefits and potential drawbacks of *personal Web usage* at work.

ENHANCING QUALITY OF WORK LIFE

As evidence encourages low to moderate non-work-related behaviors in the workplace, managers and practitioners are left with new issues to maintain an effective workplace Internet management strategy. The solutions deal more or less with understanding the relationship between employees' well-being and employee job performance, and filtering out Web sites that could potentially lead to unproductive employees or legal liabilities.

Because personal Web usage in the workplace may influence the well-being of motivated employees, organizations must take precautions against the restriction of PWU. In some cases, employee training or education, together with effective communication between management and employees, can reduce the impact of Internet abuse. Too much PWU or too little PWU leads to Internet abuse (Anandarajan, 2002). When Internet monitoring is necessary to enforce appropriate social norms, an organizational Internet usage policy (IUP) should be based on maintaining employee job performance without lowering the positive quality of work life. Management can thus create a healthy workforce through use of an "*adaptive Internet monitoring and filtering policy (AIMF)*" (refer to Figure 1).

Adaptive strategy implies that in order to improve employee well-being, organizations should allocate time for PWU when employees have performed up to management expectations or their job requirements. The Adaptive Internet Monitoring and Filtering policy (AIMF) requires a reciprocal sense of respect and fulfillment of an organizational and employee psychological contract. Employees themselves need to have self-discipline and a strong work ethic. In some cases, changing employee behaviors requires organizational support and commitment that is established through Internet training, education, and peer influence. Organizations must also take employees' personal needs and job characteristics into consideration, including the organizational culture, the technological infrastructure, and individual employee roles and statuses. These factors dictate the amount of Internet usage activities performed by each employee. However, the purposes of using the Internet and its usage norms (whether at home or at work) are indeed "co-evolving" (Kraut & Kiesler, 2003), so it is difficult for organizations to examine the relationships between various non-work-related Internet activities, and any individual and organizational outcomes.

Management must decide on the tradeoffs between employee job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational liability. In other words, performing certain PWU

3 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/personal-internet-usage-quality-work/14598

Related Content

The Study on the Needs of English Skills in Economics and Management Industries Based on Mobile Big Data Management and Innovative Applications

Cui Jing and Dianbing Wang (2022). *Information Resources Management Journal* (pp. 1-12).

www.irma-international.org/article/the-study-on-the-needs-of-english-skills-in-economics-and-management-industries-based-on-mobile-big-data-management-and-innovative-applications/304455

Improving Public Sector Service Delivery through Knowledge Sharing

Gillian H. Wright and W. Andrew Taylor (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Second Edition* (pp. 1882-1886).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/improving-public-sector-service-delivery/13834

Early, Often, and Repeat: Assessment and Evaluation Methodology for Ensuring Stakeholder Satisfaction with Information Technology Projects

Lauren Fancher (2009). *Handbook of Research on Technology Project Management, Planning, and Operations* (pp. 296-309).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/early-often-repeat/21640

Building an Online Undergraduate Module from a Graduate Module: A Case Study

Paul Darbyshire and Geoffrey A. Sandy (2006). *Journal of Cases on Information Technology* (pp. 41-54).

www.irma-international.org/article/building-online-undergraduate-module-graduate/3182

The Impact of Technological Frames on Knowledge Management Procedures

Chun-Tsung Chen (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Communication Technology* (pp. 401-412).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/impact-technological-frames-knowledge-management/13386