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## Effective Management of Internet Usage at the Workplace

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**Abstract:** The internet has become a basic requirement in the management of organizations today. If an organization wants to remain relevant at this time and age and retain its competitive edge it has to adopt the usage of the internet. One can hardly imagine a successful enterprise operating without an effective website, for its production, marketing, communication and other business operations. In as much as the internet is a good thing to the management of organizations operations, it has its own challenges affecting employees' productivity as it is prone to abuse by the employees who may be engaging much of their time in social networks like the facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Whats' App and browsing different sites during work hours. As much as the internet has assisted in improvements in learning and research; measures need to be put in place in order to ensure that there is control of its usage and that there is a balance between employees' social needs and organizational needs. The internet can be an incredible business tool as well as a potential threat to the achievement of organizational goals. This paper analyzes recent internet developments and specifically investigates the effect of the internet on employee performance and what some of the consequences would be if employees were allowed unrestricted access to these networks.

**Keywords:** Internet, Networking, Internet Access, Monitoring, Challenges, Benefits, Employee Productivity

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### INTRODUCTION

While internet usage has grown tremendously, the way people are using the internet has also changed as there is more interaction through online technology. According to, Dutton Helsper and Gerber [1], 49 per cent of internet users engage in social networking online, up from 17 per cent in the year 2007.

According to the Alexa internet rankings [2], facebook; a social networking site, has over 500 million users worldwide and 26 million UK users in terms of internet traffic with Google search engine having the highest traffic. YouTube came in third and Twitter tenth. This study showed that the use of social networking has grown significantly, but did not provide the implications it has on employment issues.

A report published in August [3] by "My Job Group" on Social media at the workplace which was based on a survey of 1,000 respondents, sought to bring into the light the use of social networking sites in the UK and its effect on workplace productivity. 55 per cent of respondents admitted accessing these sites while at work and in terms of time spent on social media sites, a total of 16 per cent of respondents spent over 30 minutes with 6 per cent spending an hour or more per day.

The web can be an incredible business tool as well as a potential threat. The change that the internet has and will continue to have in the world marketplace

and in life in general is certainly comparable to revolutionary innovations in the past, such as the introduction of automobiles or even the printing press. It is of paramount importance for employers to have some kind of social media policy in place to determine what is acceptable and what is not at the work place [4].

### Why Employees are Interested in Social Media

Recent studies by, Golder, Wilkinson and Huberman [5]; Coyle and Vaughn [6] concur that social networks are typical characterizations of human behaviour to fulfill the need to communicate and connect with people they know, meet new people who share a common interest, collaborate, participate and share information and knowledge as well as gain new knowledge. Generally, these are also the reasons why individuals engage in social behaviour through the internet.

To many, the internet provides effective social networking opportunities and their online behavior includes building individual relationships, expanding their personal network of friends, finding people who have had similar experiences, discussing common topics of interest, dating and finding potential life partners, staying connected to old friends or distant family and virtually meeting peers, including work colleagues, to discuss current issues or topics of interest.

As the use of social media sites becomes even more prevalent, it is commonly understood that employers need to consider how social media sites are likely to impact their organizations. The widespread use of these sites by employees raises inevitable questions. For instance, how can these sites serve the interests of organizations by enhancing productivity and unleashing the potential of social media in the workplace? At the same time, employers must be able to embrace the technology and minimize risks associated with social media.

Bernolak [7] described productivity as a measure of how much and how well an employee produces from the allocated resources. While the internet is a practical tool, it can easily be misused in the workplace. Online industry analysts estimate that over four billion dollars a year are lost due to lost employee productivity and organizational efficiency when workers utilize internet access at work to view new sites, send and receive personal mail, view online pornography, play interactive games, or chat with friends.

#### **Increased Employees' Access to Information**

The rise of new technology and internet use implies that employees can access information about their employment rights and laws in general far more easily than was the case in the past. While increased access to information is a positive development in terms of enabling employees to increase their knowledge and helping them to deal with specific issues concerning work, this may also pose some challenges for organizations and managers.

Employees may prefer to obtain the information in this way instead of talking directly to their managers or obtaining advice from trade union representatives. This can lead to misunderstanding of information gleaned out of context on the internet, and hence making interaction between employees and their employer on specific issues more difficult. Managers need to be aware of these potential difficulties, possibly through targeted training on how to handle the consequences of employees doing their own research on employment law issues and rights [8].

According to Mitrou and Kryda [9] employers may have legitimate concerns about security that in some way justifies a degree of monitoring. In attempting to balance competing concerns, Mitrou and Kryda argue that any kind of legal and fair approach to monitoring must fulfil basic principles of data protection. These include;

#### **Principle of Necessity**

Monitoring should only take place where it is needed to prevent illegal or defamatory acts and consideration should be given to any counter-productive effects of the monitoring.

#### **Principle of Transparency**

Employees must be fully aware of what the firm monitors, how they go about it and why they do so.

One way to ensure that monitoring policies keep to these principles is, as the ILO (2001) suggests, making them subjects of negotiation between employers and unions. As with policies on social media usage, negotiated policies are more likely to be accepted as legitimate by both sides than enforced policies.

Social media and the internet are fast-moving worlds and employers need to ensure that policies are kept up to date with the latest developments and trends relating to internet use in their organization. Regular policy reviews involving all key stakeholders will ensure that policies address the organizations' main concerns.

#### **Principle of Finality**

The monitoring must have a clearly stated, specific purpose.

#### **Principle of Proportionality**

The extent of the monitoring must be proportionate to the potential harm of the activity it is intended to prevent.

#### **Time Spent on the Internet**

There is no way to prove that employees waste more time now than before but it certainly stands to reason. Internet surfing is often irresistible, largely because it can be so fascinating and has traditionally been so easy to pull off. Originally people could sit in their offices or cubicles and surf the internet in private; all they had to worry about were prying eyes, which they could usually outmaneuver by minimizing screens or clicking from web pages to open documents.

However, in a US survey conducted by AOL/Salary.com<sup>2</sup>, 47.7 percent cited surfing the internet as their chief source of distraction, in contrast with socializing with co-workers, at 23.4 percent. An International Data Corporation (IDC) survey showed that 30 to 40 percent of internet use at the work place was not work related. Another study showed that 64 percent of employees use the internet while at work for personal interests; and 37 percent surf the Web constantly while on the job. 60 percent of online purchases occur during normal work hours, as does 70 percent of pornography traffic. 45 percent of employees make travel arrangements while online at work; 37 percent search for jobs; and 11 percent play internet games on social networking sites.

#### **Costs to Business**

According to Bloxx website at [www.bloxx.com/costcalculator.php](http://www.bloxx.com/costcalculator.php). Some productivity

costs are not as easily measured but are no less real. These are;

### **Lost Business Opportunities**

Employees are not only hired to fill a job, but to give a return for their salaries. Time wasted surfing the internet is time not spent selling, marketing or developing a product.

### **Clogging the Corporate Arteries**

Even if support personnel are not required to produce revenue, they are expected to sustain day-to-day organizational functioning. These workers operate within interdependent systems, where the completion of some people's tasks is required for the completion of work performed by others. For example, if the person who delivers mail and files to corporate offices is delayed by internet surfing, the people in those offices may be unable to proceed with their jobs. Hence, the company not only pays wages to the non productive delivery person, but also for the wasted time of those who depend on that person's work. To the extent that activities within an organization are integrated, the internet abuse of one person can affect the productivity of all.

### **Productivity and Network Performance**

Many employees need a fast and reliable network to maximize their own job-related speed and reliability. If some employees are visiting YouTube or other social networking sites to stream or download bandwidth consuming videos, share files, or swap bandwidth, network performance can be significantly slowed, and this will delay the work of others.

### **Malware and Productivity**

Social networking, pornography, and even anonymous proxy sites can be sources of malware and viruses. These can diminish network performance and spread throughout an organization to disrupt or crash computers. The Web has replaced email as the primary entry point for malware and spyware.

### **Productivity and Abuse-Related Turnover**

If a company wants to implement an effective anti abuse program, it will need clearly articulated and well publicized rules, as well as a determination and tools to enforce them. Enforcement can sometimes mean dismissing employees, especially if they have been previously warned, have broken the law on the internet usage, or have spent time engaged in particularly offensive abuse such as visiting pornography or hate sites. The negative side is that dismissing and hiring is extremely expensive and time-consuming.

### **Productivity and Legal Liability**

A company may have to spend large sums of money on lawyers to defend against lawsuits caused by employees downloading copyrighted or propriety

material or otherwise breaking the law. This will waste considerable funds that could be devoted to product development, sales, marketing and other revenue-generating activities.

### **Information Technology (IT) Expenses**

Last, but certainly not least, an organization will have to hire extra and/or raise the pay of IT personnel to monitor and prevent internet abuse, clean-up malware, and maximize network performance. Once again, this will require money that could be better spent on more productive endeavors.

### **Benefits of Social Media at the Workplace**

The usage of social media is as varied as the organizations themselves. Most people think that social media sites are time-wasters; but there are studies that have disapproved these findings. Employee productivity may actually be increased or improved through the use of social media. According to Fahmy [10] there are a number of studies that show that employees using social media sites are 9 % more productive. These employees are more social and more connected to others making them more skilled in approaching and solving problems.

According to Wilson [11] some organizations are actively utilizing the power of social media networks to seek for opportunities for new businesses, like-minded people and organizations as well as sourcing for advice and expertise.

Many social media analysts have emphasised the benefits for firms allowing their employees to discuss work-related issues on social media. For example, employee work blogging can promote a company's product, give the firm a human face in the eyes of the customer and encourage professional networking, which leads to improved performance [12-14].

It is argued that firms can only fully benefit from social media in this way if employees are given as much freedom as possible in their usage of social media. For example, Microsoft's social media policy is regarded as successful because it takes a relaxed approach to what employees are allowed to discuss, and as a consequence, around one in ten employees are willing to blog for the company [13].

A good and clear policy on what constitutes an unacceptable use of social media in a particular organization will help both the employer and the employee to understand where the boundaries between acceptable and non-acceptable use lie. It is advisable to carry out some type of research beforehand, involve all stakeholders, including trade unions, and consult the workforce. This will make the policy stronger and more widely accepted.

The joint development of a policy may also enable the parties to strike a balance between individual freedom of speech and actions that could have a negative effect on the employer. Regular review of policies is also a good idea, as the world of social networking and online media is moving at a fast pace.

A prior survey of employee awareness of issues can help to achieve acceptance of future policy. Consultation with staff on the actual policy will help to ensure that it is fair. It may also help to determine what is reasonable within each organization's context, particularly where employees have access to sensitive information on members of the public or commercially confidential information. It will also help build employee commitment to the policy and raise awareness of the fact that a policy is being formulated, which may be important for dissemination.

### **Challenges and Constraints of Social Media at the Workplace**

In as much as the social media has brought about benefits it also poses many challenges as it has changed the way people interact within organizations. According to Wilson [11] organizations face some risks in social networking such as loss in staff productivity, data leakage that may occur as employees gossip freely in an open environment, may cause damage to a business reputation as well as open access to organizations information arising out of usage of outdated passwords.

Applicable practices include coming up with internet policies, enforcement, training and monitoring. According to Benzie [16], some employers have banned the use of social media sites like facebook during working hours but unproductive employees will still find ways to be unproductive even without visiting social media sites.

The most effective tool to use according to Cornelliuss, (2009) is establishment of proper supervision and performance policies. According to Young and Case [15]; 65 % of companies offer unlimited internet access whereas 35 % have internet policies in place.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion clearly indicates that it is foolhardy to try to stop the inevitable. Instead of ignoring the need for responsible guidelines, organizations of all sizes should begin to define their strategy regarding social media, and most importantly, the rules for employee engagement. By doing so, management can take advantage of the benefits offered by these new communication channels while mitigating undue risk.

Hutley [17], says that it is far wiser for organizations to embrace social media, sponsor social

media platforms, and institute policies, procedures and security to control how these tools are used in the workplace. Uncontrolled and unmonitored social media is a security risk; however, controlled and monitored social media will enrich the organization's work processes, boost collaboration and ultimately enhance collaboration. This will ensure that employees are aware of what is permitted, what risks are involved from a professional and personal point of view and what the technical implications are. There is need therefore to put in place management and enforcement techniques to reduce misuse and abuse of internet [18].

An organization should ensure that the sites that employees can access are acceptable, rather than the time spent on the internet. Certain types of websites, such as pornographic sites and gambling sites should be blocked. The other alternative is to provide cyber cafes where employees can access the internet during their own time, i.e. during breaks.

The policy on internet/social media use should be drawn up in consultation with staff, either through their representatives, if present, or directly, if no representatives are present. Organizations should therefore establish strategies to address internet usage issues such as personal usage, business relevance, site restrictions and information confidentiality without restricting employees to benefit personally as well as professionally from this social web technology, thereby ultimately benefiting the organization through its potential positive effect on employee productivity.

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