TRUTH 18

Watch Out for Cyberloafing!

Are employees at their computers always working at their computers? The answer is increasingly, No! The average U.S. employee with Internet access is spending 90 minutes a day visiting Web sites unrelated to his or her job. And Canadian employees are wasting about 800 million work hours a year surfing the Web for personal reasons. These employees are e-mailing friends, shopping online, stock trading, searching for jobs, and playing games. Some of the most visited U.S. sites people access from work include the Weather Channel, Amazon.com, and eBay.

In one recent month, Pogo.com reported that over a million people visited its game site from work. And the average workplace player spent more than 2 hours and 30 minutes per visit glued to a Pogo.com game! As a 24-year-old tech-support worker in Dallas casually put it, "It would never occur to me to play Pogo when I'm not at work."

If the work itself isn't interesting or creates excessive stress, employees are likely to be motivated to do something else. If they have easy access to the Internet, that "something else" is increasingly using the Net as a diversion. Unfortunately, this diversion or “cyberloafing” is costing U.S. employers $54 billion a year in lost productivity.

The solution to cyberloafing includes making jobs interesting to employees, providing formal breaks to overcome monotony, and establishing clear guidelines so employees know what online behaviors are expected. Many employers are also installing sophisticated surveillance software that can monitor the behavior of employees who do their work on computers. Xerox, as a case in point, routinely monitors the Web activities of every one of its employees around the world. In October 1999, the company fired 40 of its employees because they were caught in the act of surfing to forbidden Web sites. The company’s monitoring software recorded the unauthorized visits to shopping and pornography sites, and every minute they had spent at those sites.

Xerox isn’t unique. A recent survey by the American Management Association found that 54 percent of employers monitor their employees’ Internet usage and 38 percent read their employees’ e-mail. Is this behavior wrong or unethical? Not as long as employees have clear guidelines regarding
expectations and know ahead of time that this monitoring is being done. As a manager, you need to be assured that your employees are working and not goofing off; that employees are not distributing organization secrets; and that your organization is protected against employees who might create a hostile environment for women or members of minority groups by sending inappropriate messages over the organization's intranet or Internet links.