

Personal Tasks at Work a Problem

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Technology makes it all so easy. If you want to send an e-mail, just type your message and hit send on your computer. If you want information about a movie, restaurant, or anything, get on the internet and find it. The problem is that too many employees use employer-furnished computers to do personal tasks without understanding the significance.

According to a 2007 Harris Interactive poll, 55% of U.S. workers send and receive personal e-mails at work. Even more workers, 69%, access the internet at work for nonwork purposes. Workers ages 18 to 34 are even more likely to use employer-furnished computers for personal reasons. Seventy-two percent of those workers check their personal e-mail accounts while at work and 77% use their work internet personally.

Company monitoring

This personal use of company computers is surprising considering the extent of internet monitoring companies do. A 2001 survey conducted by Bentley College's Center for Business Ethics found that nine out of ten companies check on their employees' internet use while at work.

Companies have ethical and legal reasons for monitoring. Personal use of company provided technology hurts worker productivity. Even more important, monitoring is necessary to protect the company and its employees. For publicly held companies, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 requires the archiving of e-mails. Monitoring protects companies from employees disclosing company trade secrets and proprietary information. It allows companies to protect workers from those who send hostile or discriminatory e-mails. Monitoring also stops some employees from accessing online pornography.

Allegations of misuse

Regardless of the extent of employer monitoring of company provided computers, and the reasons for it, some employees are surprised when employers confront them with allegations of the misuse of company computers. It seems that many employees have unrealistic expectations of privacy at work.

WeComply, a business ethics and compliance training provider, in 2006 conducted a survey of 1,000 business workers on what they knew about business records and internet use. More than one-half did not know that personal e-mails, including unsent files, created on work computers are business records. Two-thirds did not understand that e-mails sent to friends from work are business records. Over 40% of those surveyed failed to understand that personal web searches on company computers are also business records

It shocks employees to learn that their personal messages are company property and the company has a record of the employee's work access to internet sites. Some angrily respond with invasion of privacy lawsuits; most of which fail.

Protective precautions

To avoid problems, including litigation, both employees and employers need to take certain precautions. Employees need to understand that information created on company computers belongs to their employers. Employees have few privacy rights at work. Employees should learn the company's rules on the personal use of company computers and strictly follow them.

Employers need written policies on monitoring. If an employer lets employees make minimal personal uses of the company's computers, explain to employees what that means. If any such use is forbidden, say so in clear terms. Warn employees there is nothing private about their use of company computers. Communicate the company's policy to employees through the company's corporate code, employee manual, or "pop-ups" on computer screens. Communicate the company's policy during employee orientation and give periodic reminders.

Occasionally, employees have successfully sued employers for invasions of privacy. The employees were successful usually because the employers failed to have written policies on the personal use of company provided computers and to alert employees to the company's monitoring program.