

The Web: Working hard or hardly working?

Are you wasting time when online? Or working? A new study released this week showed that about 20 percent of government staff, while on the job, in one Malaysian state utilized the Internet for purely personal activities -- like downloading porn, games and music. This was one of the main causes of poor work performance in the Johor state, Bernama, the state news agency there said, quoting a top government official, Norsiah Harun.

Experts tell United Press International's The Web that the Internet productivity problem is global, and that cultural changes are needed to ensure that people are hard at work, rather than hardly working, as our parents' generation used to say.

That being said, it is also true that personal tasks are easier than ever to perform online. Though some employees may be looking at illicit images during the work day, others are checking their bank balance online, or ordering milk and bread for the home, said Karissa Thacker, president, Strategic Performance Solutions Inc., a management consulting company based in Rehoboth Beach, Del., who has worked with Ford, Morgan Stanley and UPS. That draws people away from their work -- even if only momentarily.

For some companies, the Internet itself may not be the primary problem -- management thinkers say -- but rather the fact that workers aren't being properly challenged by the firm's work culture.

"Often employees waste time when they feel bored or unchallenged," said Justin Menkes, author of "Executive Intelligence: What All Great Leaders Have" (Collins, November 2005).

If that's the case, there are some quick answers to the problem.

"When assigning tasks, bosses should avoid dictating a solution and allow their people to participate in reaching the answer. As a result, employees feel more engaged and essential to the group's success," said Menkes, who studied under the late Peter Drucker and has a doctorate in organizational behavior from Claremont Graduate University.

There are other issues, though, directly related to the Internet itself as a business tool that impacts productivity.

Forthcoming research from Rearden Commerce (www.reardencommerce.com), an Internet technology developer, indicates that employees often get distracted when they have to visit more than one site on the Internet for their business services, such as shipping or booking travel reservations.

Current customers of Rearden include Motorola, Whirlpool, Cingular and JDS Uniphase.

For the forthcoming survey, 500 employees -- employed by businesses with annual revenue totaling at least \$100 million -- were surveyed, the company said. The results indicate that many of today's business employees feel their days would be more productive if they were able to purchase all of their business services from just one site, rather than having to roam around the Web. What's more, many responded saying that they spend far more time today than they did five years ago arranging for business services online.

According to Rita Gunther McGrath, an associate professor at Columbia University's Columbia Business School and co-author of "MarketBusters: 40 Strategic Moves that Drive Exceptional Business Growth," solving business problems, like wasting time online, may be an opportunity for smart companies.

"One of the companies that caught my eye is a company called Websense," she told the Web. "They have

hit a sweet spot for growth by making products that allow employers to optimize their people's use of the Web. With respect to wasting time, they have software that allows an employer to permit or block sites, to control how much data exchange is permitted and to permit or halve bandwidth-hogging applications and file sharing."

The company's Web site (www.websense.com) has some telling stats on the impact of wasting time online at American organizations, including the following:

- Internet misuse at work costs American organizations more than \$85 billion annually in lost productivity.

- Thirty-seven percent of at-work Internet users in the United States have visited an X-rated Web site from work.

- Seventy percent of all Internet porn traffic occurs during the 9 to 5 work day.

"Websense, by providing tools that let organizations monitor and control how their people use the Web, has enjoyed explosive growth -- 48.9 percent last year alone. The company's story shows how entirely new market moves can pay off handsomely for companies adroit enough to capitalize on them," said Gunther McGrath. "So one solution to the conundrum is to use technology to combat technology, and a growing number of organizations are utilizing this solution."

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