

DRAWING THE LINE BETWEEN EMPLOYEE PRIVACY AND INTERNET ABUSE

As website use on the job escalates, so has monitoring by corporate bosses fearful that surfing will not just erode productivity but inappropriate use could open the company to legal action and other headaches. However, over-snooping by bosses could at the same time result in an infringement of an employee's right to privacy and, therefore, the monitoring of internet and email becomes an extremely fine balancing act, says PAG managing director Lawrence Wordon.

Computing has made it possible to boost productivity in the office but has also opened the door to greater temptations for abuse: bored workers have more time wasters at their fingertips, malicious ones have more options for undermining their bosses or colleagues, and employers can use the same technology to electronically spy on what their staff are doing.

There is no doubt privacy at work is vaporising. A US study looking at the monitoring practices of nearly 200 companies found that 26 per cent of managers monitored employees' online activities all the time, not just when something gave them a reason to investigate.

At the same time, a quarter of the organisations surveyed have no procedures or safeguards to ensure the snooping isn't abused, and almost half of the firms lack written guidelines, policies or procedures for monitoring.

Personal use of the internet at work is dubbed cyberslacking and is widespread. Instead of chatting over the water cooler, workers are swapping emails or instant messages. Instead of going shopping on their lunch hour, employees stay at their desks and hit their high-speed connections.

According to the survey, seven in 10 workers use the office internet to hit news sites and one in four use it for shopping. A third fancy financial trading at their desks, 13 per cent download music and 4 per cent surf for porn. A third admit to an hour or more a day of personal surfing and another three in 10 confess that their web adventures and personal emails decrease their productivity on the job.

Wordon recommends that companies make crystal clear the policies about acceptable internet and email use and make sure that these are understood by employees. But while clear policies are needed, going too far would hurt the company as far as retention strategies are concerned.

"Successful organisations - or those seeking success - require motivated and intelligent staff. They do not require obedient slaves. Individuals faced with no freedom of action will soon move on," Wordon says.

"Moreover, the law generally recognises the right of individuals to 'reasonable' communications with family and friends during working hours. In this respect, the internet is no different from the access to a newspaper or to a telephone during working hours."

The internet is also a vast resource of knowledge that smart firms will want their workers to have access to, Wordon says.