

Monitor Workers' Online Behavior

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



Sometimes you just have to scratch your head and ask: What was he thinking?

A situation was brought to my attention recently that illustrates how an increasing number of workers erroneously believe their employers' computer systems and online services are theirs to use for their personal needs.

The situation involved an employee of a local company, who was making plans to set up his own consulting business that would compete with his employer. Emails stored on the company server revealed the man was soliciting business from his employer's customers. And, he stored a detailed plan for his new business on his company desk top computer.

It's not surprising that when the employee's activities were detected – and plenty of computer evidence collected – the man was fired.

But duplicitous workers are not the only ones that employers should guard against when it comes to non-business use of company computers. Improper activities, such as web surfing and logging onto social media sites, are time-wasters that erode productivity.

In addition, workers who click onto inappropriate sites can jeopardize a company's reputation, or expose a company to hostile workplace and harassment accusations. And security problems can result. Viruses can be introduced into a company's computer system and confidentiality can be breached.

Often company managers hesitate to come down hard on workers' personal use of company computers. They shrug: What's the harm in an occasional email, or online purchase of an L.L. Bean shirt? While those acts may be trivial, it's foolish for a company to just look the other way and hope for the best.

Employers should establish and enforce policies regarding personal use of company computers. Workers should be told about the policies and understand that their online behavior will be monitored.

Some steps employers can take:

- **Develop a written policy.** Involve employees, managers, lawyers and human resources consultants in developing a policy that is practical and legal to enforce. Describe how the policy will be enforced and the penalties for violations.
- **Explain the policy.** Make sure all employees are told about the policy. Have existing and future employees sign forms agreeing to comply with the policy.
- **Use technology.** A variety of automated systems exist to help monitor online behavior. No company can afford to dedicate a manager to being a full-time watchdog. Automated systems

can be installed which will generate periodic reports and alert managers to potential problems. The key is to read the reports that are generated. Look for abnormalities. And address them.

- **Consider overall behavior.** Online computer use generally is just one factor in an employee's overall behavior and productivity. If the quality and quantity of an employee's work is lacking, find out why. The distraction of online activities may be to blame. It's likely there are a number of causes that will require the supervisor to intervene.

The goal should not be to create a workplace where big brother is always watching, but to create a workplace where workers are encouraged to respect their employers and their coworkers by differentiating between their workplace and their personal activities.

This article written by Holly Culhane first appeared online and in The Bakersfield Californian on Tuesday, August 14, 2012. Holly Culhane is president of the Bakersfield-based human resources consulting firm P.A.S. Associates. She can be contacted through her website www.pasassociates.com and through the [PAS Facebook](#) page or by phone at 631-2165.

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