Chapter VIII

Virtual Absenteeism

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss problems arising from employee use of the Internet for personal pursuits during paid working hours. Since there are both financial and non-financial consequences of such behavior (Friedman, 2000), it is worthwhile to evaluate existing attempts to deal with this problem and suggest some new ones. Nevertheless, virtual absenteeism is not a totally negative phenomenon; hence, one needs to give a fair hearing to the claims of the employees engaged in this activity. It is not necessarily an economic loss to the employer when employees take care of private matters or even play on the Internet, if it is within reason and results in a refreshed approach to the job at hand.

Still, if the employee is excessively occupied with non-business Internet activity, there is no doubt a corresponding decrease in the amount of conscious attention given to the processing of organizational concerns. Moreover, ethical issues emerge concerning the misuse of time, avoidance of responsibility and violation of employee-employer contracts, implicit or explicit. Since the employer is defraying the cost of both the hardware and software involved, Internet misuse results in expenses far exceeding losses from such minor trespasses as personal telephone calls and company stationery misappropriated for personal reasons. Further, diversionary materials such as magazines and games brought to the workplace by employees which were paid out of their own pockets, while clearly resulting in lost time for the employer, at least did not require highly sophisticated and expensive technology to support the diversions. Finally, it is necessary to show that the sheer scale of modern slacking requires very special measures that consider not only financial, but legal, social, moral, and psychological ramifications as well.

Terminology for Preciseness

We should be clear at the outset about certain terms:

Stealing is defined as “To take (the property of another) without right or permission” (American Heritage Electronic Dictionary, 1992).

Virtual absenteeism or cyberslacking involves visiting pornographic sites and news sites, shopping, stock trading, vacation planning, gaming, chatting, in other words, engaging in Internet activities unrelated to the job on company time and using company resources.

Infantilization involves treating people as if they were still young children or condescension towards them.

Addiction implies psychological dependence on something (perhaps involving compulsive behavior) despite its (potentially) harmful effects.

Satisficing is choosing an option that is suboptimal, but which seems justified because of the cost of finding or acting on the absolute maximal option.

Rationalization is the act of proposing reasons to justify one’s behavior to satisfy oneself or an audience, however incorrect the reasons may be.

THE ISSUES

Extent of the Problem

Excessive cyberslacking in and of itself should be cause for managerial concern because of its possible deleterious effects on productivity, but there are serious side effects as well, which receive treatment in other sections of this chapter. The Internet presents a vast array of time-consuming and tempting diversions from business work—more than businesses have ever had to face previously. Of all these opportunities to engage in pursuits not directly furthering the company’s interests, it is probably most galling to employers, when their employees use company time and bandwidth to seek other jobs. However, if an organization is made aware of this tendency in certain individuals, it perhaps would be an occasion for a heart-to-heart talk with the disaffected employee. If job seeking were pervasive in an entire department (Drinkwater, 2000) then, possibly, it would constitute an early warning signal of mass defections or poor management in that department. The company would be wise to draw the relevant conclusions and institute corrective managerial action in that department or with respect to the employees involved. Clearly, to become aware of cyberslacking, an employer would normally engage in monitoring Internet usage with all the costs and risks implied in doing so, such as employee resentment and expensive monitoring technology.

There may be unforeseen benefits stemming from the freedom to cyberslack and, consequently, reason not to curtail it totally, provided that the company is aware of its causes and contexts as well as the nature of the activity. In the final analysis, the company must decide where harmless use (which might conceivably benefit the company) ends and harmful abuse begins.
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