Chapter 10

The Impact of Context on Employee Perceptions of Acceptable Non-Work Related Computing

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ABSTRACT

Employees have access to a wide range of computer-related resources at work, and often these resources are used for non-work related personal activities. In this study, the authors address the relationship between employee’s utilitarian ethical orientation, the factors that create the context that influences their ethical perceptions, and their overall perceptions regarding the level of acceptability for 14 different non-work related computing activities. The authors find that time and monetary cost associated with an activity has a negative relationship to perceived acceptability. Results indicate that contextual variables, such as an employee’s supervisory or non-supervisory role, opportunity, computer self-efficacy, and whether or not an organization has computer use policies, training, and monitoring, influence individual ethical perceptions. Implications and conclusions are discussed for organizations and future research.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology today is ubiquitous. Professional employees in business and government are provided with a variety of information technology tools for communication and productivity improvement and their use of these technologies is often unsupervised. As with many new information technology implementations, there are a wide range of expected benefits, but there are also some unanticipated consequences. Distributed information technology creates a number of opportunities for misuse and one of the most common examples is use of organizational
computing resources for personal activities while working. Some of the terms used to describe this misuse of computer resources are cyberloafing, cyberslacking, or non-work related computing (NWRC). Throughout this paper we will refer to these activities as NWRC.

Regardless of how these activities are characterized, it appears to be a significant problem for many organizations. In a recent survey, nearly 64% of employees claimed to use the Internet for personal activities during work hours (Young, 2010). It has also been reported that, in one month in 2010, 57 million people visited social-networking sites from a work computer, spending an average of 15 minutes on them per day (Needleman, 2010). These activities can put a strain on network resources, reduce productivity, create potential legal liabilities, as well as a variety of other negative consequences. Organizations have a wide range of technical and non-technical solutions available to them, but underlying the problem is the need to understand the factors associated with these behaviors.

Technoethics is an interdisciplinary research area that involves the study of ethical issues associated with the development, use, and impact of technology on individuals, organizations, and society. This study focuses on employee perceptions of information technology use, and misuse, in organizations, as well as the factors that impact these perceptions. Within the broad field of technoethics research, this study would address issues related to technoethics and work, professional and organizational technoethics, computer and Internet technoethics, and digital property ethics.

In this study we address these issues from the perspective of individual employee’s perceptions regarding the level of acceptability for certain NWRC activities given their ethical orientation. We address the following questions. The first two questions are included to replicate an earlier study of these issues (Strader et al., 2010). The final two questions are the primary focus of this study.

1. What ethical orientation do individual employees employ when determining the extent to which they perceive non-work related computing activities as ethical?
2. If individuals are utilitarians, which factors are associated with their assessment of activity related benefits and negative consequences?
3. What additional contextual factors impact employee perceptions?
4. Beyond the contextual variables, do demographic factors have an impact on ethical perceptions?

The answers to these questions will provide organizations with a better understanding of how their employees perceive these activities and why. These are particularly important questions to answer because existing countermeasures such as appropriate use policies or filter/monitoring systems that are intended to reduce misuse do not appear to work (Lee et al., 2007).

The paper is organized as follows. The theoretical background for this study is presented in the next section including discussion of existing research in this area. Study hypotheses are identified along with the theoretical basis for their inclusion in this study. The next section presents the research methodology and findings. The final section outlines the overall conclusions along with managerial and research implications.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The digital world enabled by computers and other information technologies has produced numerous benefits for individuals, organizations, and society, but it has also created new and unique ethical issues that are not fully understood. From a very broad perspective, ethics issues arising in the digital world have been addressed by a number of previous studies. Examples of issues addressed include the cultural lag between rapid technology
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