Chapter I

Constructive and Dysfunctional Personal Web Usage in the Workplace: Mapping Employee Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand how people work in the Web-enabled workplace, we examined the phenomenon of personal Web usage (PWU). We analyzed 316 responses from those with Web access at work to the question, “Do you think it’s ok for a person to use the Web for non-work purposes during working hours in the workplace.” The responses were coded into 19 themes and four categories. Using correspondence analysis, concept maps were generated which revealed that personal Web usage in the workplace is a complex issue with not only a potentially dysfunctional
dimension, but also a potentially constructive one. Organizational position was an important variable with top, middle, lower-level managers, as well as professionals, and administrators positioning in different spaces on the conceptual map. Further analysis using Q-methodology reinforced the dual nature of PWU and the importance of position. Drawing on our results, an extension of the social contract theory and a model of personal Web usage in the workplace were suggested.

INTRODUCTION

“The Internet has brought distractions into cubicles...Employee study cites rampant Internet abuse.” (Network World, 2000)

Such headlines have become familiar popular press items. According to the American Management Association, more than 50% of all workplace-related Web activities are personal in nature (Greengard, 2000). Examples of personal Web usage (PWU) activities include reading news, making travel arrangements, online purchases, and searching for jobs. Personal Web usage has consistently been seen as a negative force with productivity losses, congested computer resources, security costs, and legal liability risks prominent concerns (Conlin, 2000). As the business environment becomes increasingly Web-enabled, organizations show a growing interest in understanding and managing PWU (McWilliams & Stepanek, 1998; Stewart, 2000; Simmers, 2002).

Personal Web usage has been defined as any voluntary act of employees using their company’s Web access during office hours to surf non-work-related websites for non-work purposes (Lim et al., 2002). There seems to be three views on the issue of PWU. It is often assessed as completely negative, with no place in the workplace as it can cost organizations billions of dollars in terms of lost productivity, increased security costs and network overload, as well as the risk of civil and criminal liability. Another view is that personal usage at work is a variation of dysfunctional work behaviors such as stealing, wasting time, and making personal long distance phone calls. These behaviors need to be managed and controlled, primarily through monitoring, policies, and disciplinary actions (Block, 2001; Sunoo, 1996). In these two views, PWU is often called cyber slacking or Web abuse. However, a third view is that such “cyber activity, which might foster subconscious problem solving or provide a neces-
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