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An interesting recent conversation with the principal of a small accounting firm has driven me to address the personal use of the Internet by employees at work. The question he had regarded how to address his staff's personal use of the Internet. Should it be banned or regulated? How could he develop a policy to address it? So here is a general overview of the situation, with a few recommendations for those who might want to try to implement a written policy for their practice.

Ever since the professional workplace became infested with mice in the late 1980s and early 1990s, (computer mice, of course), businesses have been developing policies to deal with proper and improper use of the systems by their employees. The Internet, now about 12 years old, compounded the perceived problem: While it certainly was a revolution in communication and work processes, it also provided nearly untethered recreational opportunities for employees to pursue in lieu of work. While similar in some aspects to personal use of other company resources, the potential loss is that of time and productivity, as opposed to the financial costs resulting from personal phone calls, faxes, paper or photocopies.

So for larger businesses, the era of policy building began, with many employers banning their staffs from any personal use of the Internet. This was, in retrospect, a wholly unenforceable ideal. As a result, over time, most companies have developed more moderate policies that allow for moderate use of the Internet for personal issues. But most small professional firms still have yet to develop a written guideline for use of the Internet.

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according to Roland Rust, director of the Center for e-Service at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business. "Businesses should accept some personal use of the Internet by employees at work as not only inevitable, but as positive to the organization," he said, noting that since the proliferation of the Internet and e-mail, workers also are more likely to check work e-mail from home and, depending upon the nature of their profession, to do work from home. The telecommuting option has also been borne of technology and has been a boon to many firms.

Policy Recommendation: Aside from banning personal usage, it is hard to offer a finite amount of time that might be appropriate. However, employees should be reminded that, while occasional personal use of the Internet is acceptable, it should be limited and only involve workplace-appropriate activities that are neither disruptive nor offensive to others.

Safe Surfing

Keep in mind that the above notations on the effects on productivity assume a moderate use of the Internet by employees who are already working on their PCs. There are, of course, some people whose compulsive behaviors drive them to spend an inordinate amount of time in chat rooms, gambling sites, gaming, lewd sites or other areas. This behavior is obviously unacceptable, resulting in lost productivity and, in the case of downloading music or pornography, may have legal repercussions on the firm. Internet Explorer and other browsers can easily be set to disallow pages based on content, and more powerful filtering tools are also available, but may hinder employees with a need to conduct broad legitimate research.

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need to be addressed. Viruses and worms cause much more financial damage each year, inflicting damage on software and operating systems, and compromising sensitive data. That's why it's imperative for any business, especially professional accounting firms, to have modern (and frequently updated) utility programs that scan all e-mail and prevent inadvertent downloading of unsafe materials. These can be purchased online or from any computer retailer, but it is imperative that they be kept up to date. A little common sense also goes a long way: Don't open attachments from people you don't know, especially zipped files or *.EXE files. E-mail filtering and spam blocking tools must be employed by the company. Also, for most workers, it is beneficial to not provide them with Admin rights to their workstation and to restrict them from being able to download programs. Even innocuous little things like the Weather Bug can have malicious intent.

Policy Recommendation: In addition to codifying the "don't open these kinds of files" rule in the firm's resources policy, occasional reminders also serve to keep workers vigilant. Deny program download rights to all but Admin users.

Misuse of E-Mail

Virtually everyone receives some form of personal e-mail at work, but e-mail that contains inappropriate content carries the potential for legal liability (as well as not being proper at work), and there is the risk of sensitive data being transferred in an insecure manner.

Policy Recommendation: "Inappropriate content" is in the eye of the business owner or manager, so define this as you see fit, but also reinforce the knowledge that any information transmitted by regular e-mail is inherently at risk of being observed by outside people,

so absolutely no confidential or identifying client or business information

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develop between the principals/partners and the general staff, so hiring and firing decisions are not easy to make. There must be consequences, however, to violations of the workplace Internet policy, but they must be made by the superior with respect to the severity of the offense. Almost all U.S. states (43) recognize "at-will" employment relationships, so dismissing an employee for serious or continued abuse of Internet usage is generally acceptable, but once again, this is not a legal advice column.

It's Okay

While there certainly can be negative potential effects from the misuse of the Internet and e-mail, there is similar potential for the misuse of telephones and other office equipment. But businesses can also benefit from allowing their staff responsible personal use of the Internet. Employees usually cite higher morale, but it can also provide a wind-down from stress. As well, frequent Internet users are more likely to be caught up on current events, including those that could affect the firm or its clients. Additionally, the ability to manage their banking online, in conjunction with the direct deposit you surely provide them, helps them spend less work time in line at their financial institution. In short, an Internet use policy that permits responsible limited personal use can benefit both worker and employer, providing a knowledgeable, competent staff that enjoys their work environment. □

Mr. O'Bannon is the technology editor for The CPA Technology Advisor.

Technology

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