

# The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of the Internet Is Your Organization at Risk?

By Estelle Morrison

Technology has changed not only the way we work, but also how we interact. Gone are the days when employees gathered around the water cooler to discuss last night's hockey game. In a world where fewer than four per cent of teams ever meet physically, the Internet has replaced face-to-face interactions of all kinds.

Managers may think that this is a good thing since employees are no longer wasting time in idle conversation. Instead, they're at their desks, glued to their monitors and typing frantically. They're hard at work, right? Or are they?

### The Internet Age

Canadians spend more time online than any other country, with 80 per cent of adults using the Internet for personal reasons, up seven per cent in two years. They spend more time in front of the PC than in front of the TV, watching an average of 147 videos per month — the highest in the world.

And then there's social media: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other sites. Facebook has changed the way many of us communicate with friends and family, and LinkedIn has done the same for professional relationships. Facebook had 500 million users as of July 2010 — one in 14 people in the world! Interestingly, more than 60 per cent of Facebook users are over 35 — people in their peak working years.

Along with the ability to post messages, photographs and personal information, Facebook offers a multitude of online collaborative games. And who are these social gamers? Not just teenagers. They're

typically over 40, female and working full-time — many playing during working hours.

### What's Happening at Work

A recent survey by 24/7 Wall Street found that workers with PCs spend 20 to 22 hours a week online, with about a quarter of that time going to personal matters, i.e., shopping, banking, planning vacations, watching videos, playing online games, downloading music and even dating. Instead of chitchat over cubicle walls, employees are blogging, texting, instant messaging and emailing.

Even though these pursuits can undermine productivity, there are even more serious concerns: those employees who spend time accessing gambling and pornography sites. There's now a new phrase being bandied about: Internet addiction. While the Internet is not itself addicting, its applications — games, shopping, gambling, pornography — can be.



And these are not the only risks. Despite the best efforts of IT departments, cybercriminals and hackers are finding new routes into company databases. According to a Sophos study, in 2009, there was a 70 per cent rise in the number of organizations experiencing spam and malware attacks via social networking sites.

### Pros vs Cons

For all these reasons, many organizations have decided to block employee access to social networking and other sites.

Yet we need to ask: Are personal online activities on company time really so bad? Is checking out blogs or online sports news any different from dawdling around the water cooler discussing last night's hockey game? Is taking a 10-minute break to check your Facebook page or personal email any different from taking a 10-minute coffee break?

A Melbourne University study indicates that regular breaks relieve stress and refocus the mind, thus enhancing problem-solving skills, ability to concentrate and overall productivity.

In addition, play is an important part of brain development and equally important in adulthood because it stimulates creative thinking. The online world allows for many forms of adult play that can contribute to ongoing cognitive fitness.

People need to interact socially — it's an important part of the work experience. In today's world, online is how this happens. A 2008 Popcap report found that 57 per cent of workers chose e-breaks over tea breaks. That's because 10 minutes to do

some online banking saves 30 minutes driving to the bank, and going online to research a major purchase saves hours of driving from store to store. Organizations may benefit if employees are less likely to take long lunches or coffee breaks to run personal errands since they can now accomplish these tasks with just a few minutes online.

The online world also offers opportunities for employees to network, research and collaborate across borders and industries. And social networks allow organizations to promote themselves and their products and provide new ways to attract new business and recruit highly skilled employees.

### What's to Be Done?

So what should an organization do? When it comes to the Internet and its hundreds of online pursuits, you have just three choices: ban it, limit it or allow it. Before coming to a decision, you should consider the pros and cons of personal use in the context of your particular environment and culture.

Is a complete ban likely to be successful or even desirable? Forty-seven per cent of employees surveyed by Popcap in 2008 felt that taking a five-minute cigarette break during work hours was viewed as more acceptable by their boss than spending the same amount of time surfing online. So it's not surprising that 71 per cent admit to sneaking online while their boss isn't looking.

The goal should be to minimize distractions and disruptions to productivity while enhancing engagement and work-life balance.

If the choice is to allow limited access, organizations need to educate employees to what's acceptable and what's not. Managers should know that it's not their responsibility to "diagnose" Internet addiction. As in the case of any personal problem that is negatively affecting performance or the workplace, the employee should be referred to an appropriate resource such as an employee assistance program.

### Achieving a Balance

In today's organizations, most employees need access to the Internet to do their jobs. While online attractions and pursuits pose certain threats — accessing sexual content, harassment, "cyberstupidity," addiction or overuse, security breaches — they also offer benefits such as providing needed breaks, social connections, play, increased knowledge and time-saving by running errands or seeking information online. It's up to the organization to weigh the pros and cons carefully and set clear security and usage policies with these facts in mind.

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## Employees with Internet access do the following more often at work than at home:

**45%** send personal emails

**33%** read the daily news

**31%** gather local information

**31%** investigate travel arrangements

**24%** visit sites related to hobbies

**24%** participate in contests

*Jupiter Communications*