

Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development

Volume 2
Issue 3 *Spring 2007*

Article 2

April 2007

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Recommended Citation

Threeton, Mark D. (2007) "Ethical Use of Technology in the Workplace," *Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development*. Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/ojwed/vol2/iss3/2>

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Ethical Use of Technology in the Workplace

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ethical issue of incumbent workers surfing the internet for personal reasons while on the clock at work. Internet surfing for personal reasons while at work is clearly a violation of public trust and is often times viewed as stealing time and money from an employer. This common workplace problem is costing employers billions in wasted salary dollars per year (Malachowski, 2005). The conclusion identifies solutions for workforce education professionals such as implementing strong ethical use of technology statements and seminars to combat this workplace problem.

Introduction

The extreme technological advancements in the U.S. over the past few decades have led to an increasingly complex workplace which can realistically be compared to the boom of the Industrial Revolution. These advancements in technology have led to increased workplace productivity and economic development. However, with these technological advancements are some workplace performance problems that this country has never seen before. One such problem presents itself in the form of an ethical issue related to the employees' use of technology. More specifically, the ethical issues surrounding surfing the Internet for personal reasons at work while on company time.

Abuse of workplace technology has been an important topic of discussion over the past several years. In fact, a recent article identified that workers have admitted using technology on the job for unethical purposes (MacSweeney, 2001). Another article suggests that surfing the Internet in the workplace is no different than using the telephone or reading a newspaper for personal reasons (Associated Press, 2006). It seems quite possible that the issues surrounding the use of technology in the workplace may require some clarification for the incumbent worker. At this point an important question presents itself. When does surfing the Internet for personal reasons at work become a questionable practice? Some employees may suggest that it is a completely harmless behavior that has no bearing on their job performance and or productivity. While another individual may imply that it is an unethical practice that should be avoided at all costs.

Unethical Use of Technology

A recent technology and ethics survey examined the topic of ethical use of technology in the workplace. The article identified that a large portion of workers surveyed have admitted using technology on the job for unethical purposes (MacSweeney, 2001). The most common unethical uses of technology identified by MacSweeney (2001) were personal web surfing or shopping, using company email for personal reasons and playing computer games at work. An article such as this identifies a clear problem in the workplace which should be taken seriously by workforce education professionals.

A recent article written by the Associated Press (2006) identified a workplace situation where an employee of the Department of Education had been accused of ignoring supervisors who told him to stop browsing the internet at work. This workplace issue developed into a lawsuit and was eventually ruled on by a New York administrative judge. The final ruling on the court case explained that surfing the Internet in the workplace is no different than using the telephone or reading a newspaper for personal reasons, as long as it does not interfere with the overall work performance of the incumbent worker (Associated Press, 2006). So, when does surfing the Internet for personal reasons at work become a questionable practice? Apparently, according to this judge, it becomes a problem when it interferes with the overall work performance of the individual.

The Cost Associated With This Workforce Problem

A recent study conducted by America Online and Salary.com surveyed individuals regarding wasted time at work. According to the results of this thought

provoking study, the average American worker admits to wasting roughly two hours in each eight hour workday which in the end equates to approximately 759 billion in wasted U.S. salary dollars per year (Malachowski, 2005). In fact, the America Online and Salary.com survey results identified that:

44.7% of the more than 10,000 people polled cited web surfing as their #1 distraction at work. Socializing with co-workers came in second at 23.4%. Conducting personal business, “spacing out,” running errands, and making personal phone calls were the other popular time-wasting activities in the workplace. . . . 33.2 % of respondents cited lack of work as the biggest reason for wasting time. (Malachowski, 2005, p. 2)

While some argue that this waste time is considered creative down time which equates to new business and industry ideas, it seems to be a bit of a stretch to adopt this philosophy given the magnitude of the aforementioned study. This waste of time not only hurts the employer and company it is also extremely destructive to the U.S. economy and has the potential to damage the concept of a strong work ethic for the youth of this country.

Theory of Moral Development

At this point it may not be possible to move on without a firm understanding the stages of moral reasoning found in Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development. Kohlberg (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) suggested that there are three levels of moral development which include: Preconventional, Conventional and Postconventional or Principled and each of the three levels represent a different correlation between self and societal regulations and expectations. Kohlberg’s three levels of moral development (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) are identified as follows:

At level one (preconventional), individuals have not yet come to understand societal rules and expectations; their perspective is concrete and individually focused. Level two (conventional) is called “member-of-society” perspective. At this level, individuals identify with the rules and expectations of others, especially those of authorities. Level three (postconventional or principled) is labeled the “prior-to-society” perspective. At this level, individuals separate themselves from the rules and expectations of others and base their decisions on self-chosen principles. (p. 174)

Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development directly aligns with the topic of ethical use of technology in the workplace. Incumbent workers can very easily be placed in one or more of the three levels when deciding whether or not to surf the Internet at work for personal reasons. It is critical that workforce education professionals understand this developmental process when determining their specific role regarding this problem. What is the role of workforce education professionals regarding this issue? In order to answer this question one must first define the term workforce education. According to Gray and Herr (1998):

Workforce education is that form of pedagogy that is provided at the prebaccalaureate level by educational institutions, by private business and industry, or by government-sponsored, community-based organizations where the objective is to increase individual opportunity in the labor market or to solve human performance problems in the workplace. (p. 4)

By this definition it is clear that this is an issue that is directly related to workforce education professionals because abuse of technology in the workplace has the ability to

cause a human performance problem while at the same time obstructs labor market advantage for the individual.

The Role of Workforce Education Professionals

In order for workforce education professionals to address this problem, they must first look at themselves to determine if they have a problem with abusing technology while at work. This is extremely important because workforce education professionals should never get in the practice of asking another individual to do something that they are not willing to do themselves. Grey and Herr (1998) identify that there are four ethical obligations for workforce education professionals which include promoting learning, ensuring health and safety, protecting the public and private trust, and promoting the transfer of learning. Before addressing a human performance problem such as abuse of technology, all workforce education professional must make sure that they are meeting all of the ethical obligations to their clients, students, employers, parents and the public. Grey and Herr (1998) indicate that some types of public trust are universal:

For example being a professional implies the need for sacrificing personal gain when it conflicts with professional duty, such as learning. It is a matter of public trust that individuals will not use their position for personal gain, be it outright stealing, or more covert methods such as kickbacks, conducting private for-profit business on employers' time, coercing subordinates for personal gain, and so forth. (p.23)

An important role of workforce education professionals is to inform incumbent workers, as well as students, about this universal public trust. Internet surfing for personal reasons

while at work is clearly a violation of public trust which is considered an act for personal gain and is often times viewed as stealing time and money from an employer.

Over the years education professionals have adapted their curriculum to serve as an intervention for students based on a societal concern. A separate but somewhat related ethical study by McCabe and Pavela (2004) identified the need for higher education faculty to promote ethical behaviors to students via their academic integrity systems to foster qualities that discourage habits of cheating and deception. The rationale behind this intervention appears to be the fact that corporate scandals of recent years have highlighted the importance of honesty and integrity in America's evolving Information Age economy (McCabe & Pavela, 2004). This intervention serves as a training ground to help students develop honesty and integrity, and ethical behavior which in the end has the ability to directly transfer to their workplace performance upon graduation. While the process of educating post-secondary students about ethical behavior is imperative, it is critical that this form of intervention be used with adolescents as well. The Computer Learning Foundation (1990) suggests that:

Ensuring that our children develop positive values and a sense of ethical and responsible use of technology is our responsibility as adults. . . . Class discussions are important in most strategies for teaching children computer ethics, as students have the opportunity to discover and better understand all sides of ethical issues and develop their own values. (p. 1)

Conclusions and Recommendations

While new technology has led to increased workplace productivity and economic development, some workplace performance problems surrounding the ethical use of technology have presented themselves. The problem of incumbent workers surfing the internet for personal reasons is costing employers billions in wasted salary dollars per year (Malachowski, 2005). In order to combat this abuse of technology in the workplace, workforce education professionals, especially Career and Technical Educators, need to make sure that there is an ethical use of technology statement in their Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program which emulates that found in business and industry. The CTE programs should have a clear set of consequences in place for violations to the ethical use of technology statement. Regularly scheduled intervention seminars for CTE students must outline business and industry standards for ethical use of technology and should include classroom discussions which allow students to completely understand the issue in order to establish a value system that upholds public trust. Human Resource Development Professionals must make sure that there is an ethical use of technology statement in the workplace and should also hold seminars for employees that will address workplace standards surrounding this topic. Finally, in order for the U.S. workforce and economy to reach its fullest potential it is imperative that all workforce education professionals take this problem seriously while putting their best foot forward to combat this problem.

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