

Don't Try this in the office!

By: G.C.Silva

As a computer consultant in the field, I see just about everything. Sure, I get calls on the regular stuff, such as the email that got lost, or the network printer that no one seems to be able to print to any longer. Everyone, from home users to business owners, wants to know who's who and what's what in the technology realm these days.

More recently, however, I have begun receiving numerous calls on what was once a nuisance but has now become a serious issue: office productivity. No, owners of small to medium-sized companies are not asking me how to make their employees work harder but they are however asking me how to keep their networks safe and work flow on track.

Let's face it: if you work for a small to medium-sized business you have probably checked your personal email while you're at work. Maybe you paid a bill online, checked sports scores, or even read a newspaper. Maybe you updated your Facebook page, "Tweeted" to a pal, or took a few minutes to add to your MySpace blog.

The question is, are these tasks acceptable while one is at the office? The answer, for the most part, is "no," but please allow me explain these modern-day distractions and the potential impacts they can have on businesses of all sizes.

In recent months, the Internet has had a few significant growth spurts, the first being "social networks." For those not "in the know," social networking is just what it sounds like but by using a computer over the Internet. It means connecting with old friends, making new friends, posting pictures, videos, blogging, playing games, and chatting. Examples of social networking sites would be Facebook, Twitter and MySpace.

While social networking can be great fun, it should **not** be done in the office during work time, hence the term "social."

Another recent expansion of the internet that has gained popularity is streaming media. At first it was streaming music, a radio station playing music over the

Internet for employees to listen to while they worked. Known now as Internet Radio, such streaming music has begun to cause bandwidth issues on an ever-increasing basis.

I have been to offices where it took 10 minutes to send a simple email with no attachments because four of the office's employees were listening to music via the Internet. When I was asked what could be done to "speed things up," I gave the owner a choice: either pay more money for a faster Internet connection or eliminate some of the wasted bandwidth. I believe that office now has a small FM radio and once again, email is flowing fine.

More recently streaming media has taken a turn that is driving the Internet to a new level – streaming video. Streaming video allows people to watch live or prerecorded TV shows, or even full movies on your computer over an Internet connection. A classic example of a streaming video site is YouTube. Hulu is another popular site at the moment, and boasts thousands of television episodes and hundreds of movies that can be streamed right over your network and onto your screen. This is great for the home user but, like social networking, it really has no place in the workplace. Streaming media and social networking negatively impact employee productivity and can cost a company lot in bandwidth usage.

There is another piece of clever computer technology that can be problematic in the workplace even though they seem innocuous: Widgets. These are small programs that sit seemingly idly on one's desktop, but in reality run constantly in the background, taking much-needed speed and power away from one's system. Popular widgets include those for weather, sports scores, and even stock tickers.

Finally, a medium that has had the longest lasting impact on the workplace is Instant Messaging. Referred to as IM-ing, Instant Messaging is essentially the ability to be able to chat with your friends, relatives, even strangers all around the world using your computer.

The question I ask employers and business owners most often is, "Would you let your employees talk on the phone all day with friends and family?" Given that the answer is likely "no" then why should they be allowed to chat with them over the network resources you pay for?

All that said, I haven't even brought up the other types of web sites people shouldn't be going to while at the work place. On-line gambling, gaming, and adult sites are three big no-no's in the corporate world. They can invite viruses and Trojans alike to your computers causing network crashes, and cost business owners more than a pretty penny to fix.

So what can be done about all of this? First off, ALL businesses should have a Computer and Internet Usage Policy. Every employee should read it, understand it, and sign it. Companies setting clear guidelines on what employees can do on company owned computer equipment is very important.

Getting employees to sign such a policy is a great start, but enforcing it can be tough. However, there are excellent software packages out there that can restrict what people can do and where they can go online with their computers. Some even offer a web-based statistics page that allows business owners and IT managers can view where people have been or even tried to go.

Unfortunately, many companies do not have a full time IT staff monitoring everyone's computer usage. Either someone that works for the company multitasks by managing the network and performing other job related duties, or they call in an outside firm when something is not working properly.

While this may seem like the ideal cost saving measure, many business owners do not fully realize what their employees are doing on the computer and on their network, and, as previously discussed, while some activities are relatively harmless, others can cause serious issues with an office computer network.

Having someone from outside the company that "plays no favorites" conduct an audit from time to time on business network systems is a good idea. It allows someone to see the network as a whole who can point out potential weaknesses in security that must be looked at. It will also give business owners a "paid for" answer on who's doing what on the network, and that is certainly one of the most important aspects of who's who and what's what in business.

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