In this issue, Wendi Everton, Paul Mastrangelo, and Jeff Jolton will be sharing some insights from their research on the less-productive uses of computers at work. It’s a surprisingly underresearched area that has great potential for employers given the omnipresence of personal computers.

**Surfin’ USA:**
*Using Your Work Computer for Personal Reasons*

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Chances are pretty good that you are reading this column after another rejuvenating and stimulating SIOP conference, this time in sunny Orlando. Chances are also pretty good that you are “Disney-ed out” (although that threshold is pretty high for some of us). So now you are energized to put some of those great ideas from the conference in motion. You get back to your office, take off your coat, make a few phone calls, turn to your computer, and…play a little solitaire to clear your mental palette? What would your employer think of that? So what if you have played a few computer games or done some online banking at work? Does that make you a bad employee, or even an unproductive one? Should employers stop you from using your work computer for non-work-related purposes?

These are some questions we’ve been asking in our research, and this research is the reason we have been asked to guest-write On the Horizon. We believe that the impact of information technology, particularly the personal computer and Internet, has changed the way that work gets done, perhaps to a greater extent than the effects of the industrial revolution. At the same time, very little research has examined the process of how people use their work computers.

A personal computer, especially if it is hooked up to the Internet, provides an unparalleled opportunity to be productive. To test your own dependence
on your computer, imagine for a moment trying to work using only a type-
writer and paper. How about doing your dissertation without a computer?
With a computer and Internet access, you could conceivably conduct an
entire research project without leaving your chair—search PsychInfo or a
comparable database for articles, retrieve those articles electronically, down-
load an archival dataset from a government Web site, run the results, and
write the paper. But the desktop computer also provides a constant tempta-
tion to stray from work. Literally at your fingertips, you can make personal
vacation plans, shop, sell items, bank, trade stocks, and e-mail friends. Given
these distractions, it’s amazing that we do any work at all.

Examining Internet use in the workplace is a burgeoning research topic in
organizational psychology, but there is not the explosion of studies on the topic
that one might expect. Given that personal computers have existed for about
30 years, and public use of the Internet for about 20, there is comparatively lit-
tle research about the effects of these technologies on how work gets done. In
fact, most of the I-O research having anything to do with these technologies has
been much more “I-side” than “O-side” (i.e., comparing the validity of Web-
based selection tests versus their paper-and-pencil counterparts), with the
exception of the use of technology to train employees and facilitate groups.

Meanwhile, organizations have created policies about how employees
should use the computers they have paid for and house, and rightly so. After
all, there are risks for organizations in providing computers and Internet access
to their employees. Employees can knowingly or unknowingly introduce
viruses, which can damage the systems. Employees can also use these sys-
tems in ways that place the organization at legal risk. For example, Chevron
recently settled a sexual harassment lawsuit for $2.2 million because a group
of female employees was offended by a series of e-mails such as “25 reasons
why beer is better than women” (Alder, Stone, King, & Rhodes, 1998).

Our research indicates that there are two forms of personal (nonwork-relat-
ed) computer use. We continue to struggle with labeling the two forms, but we
have called one form Counter-Productive Computer Use because these behav-
iors include viewing pornography, gambling online, harassing coworkers—
general activities that involve knowingly placing the organization at risk. The
far more prevalent form we have called Nonproductive Computer Use, which
includes e-mailing, sending instant messages, downloading images and music,
and shopping online. These activities are not directly productive, but neither
do they knowingly place the organization at risk.

It may be the case that allowing some nonproductive use is something
that organizations should foster. Using a work computer for doing banking
or shopping might actually relieve some of the work–family pressures that we
all feel. For example, more and more daycare centers have cameras whose
live footage is accessible via the Internet so that nervous parents can keep an
eye on their children while they work. Transferring personal funds online means that an employee need not run out during the day to visit the bank.

Other forms of nonproductive computer use might serve to give the user a rest. Most organizations certainly understand the value of work breaks—even Frederick Taylor knew the impact of a well-needed break on productivity. A round of online backgammon or solitaire might serve the same purpose.

Nonproductive use of a work computer might be desirable for other reasons as well. What may start out as a quick e-mail to a friend can blossom into a prolonged back-and-forth discussion that leads to creative solutions to a work problem. The three of us have probably done the majority of our thinking and information exchange about this research through e-mail containing both personal content and professional thoughts. We have also “introduced” each other to colleagues using e-mail. The difference between our personal and professional e-mail has blurred. In this sense, e-mail that starts as personal may energize the creative professional thoughts of an employee, and at the same time broaden his or her professional networks.

For those organizations that choose to prohibit all personal use of work computers, there is very little knowledge about the effectiveness and consequences of such a policy. Jeff Stanton’s recent line of research suggests that an employer’s use of monitoring devices poses a threat to employee privacy, making the organization less attractive to employees (Stanton & Lin, 2001). Likewise, the expense of buying and staffing monitoring equipment directly affects profitability, and the number of inappropriate Internet sites to be blocked must constantly be updated.

Even with monitoring policies in place, the research that we have conducted shows that when employees are aware of computer monitoring at their job, they are no less likely to engage in personal computer use than are employees who are unaware of monitoring. This is the case even when employees know of coworkers who have been warned or disciplined; they are not deterred from using the work computer for personal reasons. For organizations that enforce such policies using suspensions or terminations, the effect on organizational performance is uncertain, in part because little is known about the type of employees who engage in these activities.

In our approach to this research, we believe that the extent to which an employee uses a work computer for personal reasons will be a function of the person-environment interaction. For example, aspects of personality such as sensation seeking or conscientiousness may play a part in an employee’s personal use of his or her work computer. Demographic characteristics may play a part as well. Some examples of the environmental factors that may affect personal use of a work computer are the amount of access the employee has to the technology, the level of stress present on the job, and the climate and culture in the organization including policies regarding acceptable computer use.
Although organizations absolutely should delineate acceptable and unacceptable use of the technologies (at the very least to protect them from litigation), little empirical evidence exists to guide managers on prescriptions for Internet accessibility, policy enforcement, or potentially productive forms of personal use. Even if that guidance existed, addressing employees’ personal use of work computers should entail more than writing policies and looking for violations. There are techniques organizations can use to encourage productive use of the Internet at work that are less draconian than the “Big Brother” monitoring approach. One “best practice” that we have identified involves setting up a kiosk with Internet access in common areas while limiting Internet access on office computers. Employees who want to read “The Onion,” shop for Valentine’s Day, or surf the Web can indeed accomplish such personal tasks without feeling threatened or threatening network security (i.e., viruses). This approach provides a separation of work space and personal space without keeping employees from the advantages of the 21st-century workplace.

We are currently in the process of refining and testing aspects of a theoretical model to explain employees’ personal use of work computers. We welcome your thoughts and research contributions to this burgeoning area within industrial-organizational psychology—an area that we feel is long overdue.

References
