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BY ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER / PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE



Illustration by Daniel Marsula

Is cyberspace the world's new playground? Internet technology has brought incredible efficiency in communications and research. But has it opened up a new way to loaf on the job?

Ever since there's been work, there have been ways of avoiding it.

One stroke of the hammer instead of two. Smoke breaks. Water-cooler talk.

When the Internet came along and transformed the U.S. economy — and, with it, the workplace — it also changed the way people escape the mandates of work, making it possible to distribute a PowerPoint presentation at lightning speed but also possible to first check email, send an instant message, peruse sports scores and do next month's Christmas shopping.

The digital revolution, with the rise of the Internet and associated technologies, created a promise of greater productivity. And, between 1995 and 2000, labor productivity in the nonfarm business sector did advance — at nearly twice the rate of the previous 20 years, an acceleration that continued into the first decade of the millennium, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics; businesses invested in information technology products, as firms latched onto new technologies revolutionizing production and distribution.

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Then productivity growth dipped back to levels seen before the dot-com boom. As for the long-term impact of gadgets cut for efficiency — the jury is still out.

Just a click away ...

Today researchers look to the diverse, even conflicting, applications of Web-based services in probing how IT affects work. Smartphones and tablet computers provide immense access to knowledge; they are powerful tools of research and work. They also mean users are always a click away from personal email and the day's headlines. A click away from cat videos and an Instagrammed picture of lunch.

"It's unquestioned that technology has come to play an integral role in our lives," said David T. Wagner, assistant professor of organizational behavior and human resources at Singapore Management University and author of "Lost sleep and cyberloafing: Evidence from the laboratory and a daylight saving time quasi-experiment."

"There are advantages to that," he continued, but the ubiquity of technology also has its downsides: The same devices that empower good work also multiply the opportunities to slack off, and in more insidious, less obvious ways. Where once taking a break meant physically removing oneself from instruments of labor — hammer and nails, a sewing machine — now a diversion can be as simple as the click of a mouse, with little outward sign that an employee is not engrossed in work.

The workforce has taken note. Thirty to 40 percent of Internet use at work is nonwork related, according to an International Data Corp. survey. Roughly 60 percent of online shopping is completed during working hours.

On a recent weekday, white-collar workers spilled out of offices in PPG Place, Downtown. Most said personal web usage is considered off-limits in the workplace, adding that the specifics of the rules are somewhat unclear. Still, "cyberloafing," as the activity is known colloquially, goes on right under the noses of supervisors, they added, clarifying that it was not at a level that would seriously hamper work.

Lance Pfeifer, an IT project manager at PPG Industries, said his employer blocks specific sites as well as certain categories of content, including news and sports. Instagram, Facebook and The New York Times homepage are among the specific Web destinations that employees cannot access. It's still possible to resort to a smartphone, he said.

"There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of abuse — maybe a few bad apples," he said, chalking up cyberloafing to boredom and to a culture in which "everyone wants to stay in touch."

Although it filters access to the Web, PPG Industries appears not to actively monitor employees' Internet usage, an IT analyst for the company said. But a spokesman for the company said "all aspects of the company's network infrastructure" are monitored "to ensure business continuity and security."

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More than a dozen others interviewed — employed at a range of companies in the area — asked not to be named because they were not authorized to speak about their employers' internal policies.

A woman who works in marketing for H.J. Heinz Co. said an open office arrangement all but eliminates cyberloafing. "Everyone can see everyone else's screen," she said. "Unless your job is social media and you're supposed to be on Facebook, it's very, very rare."

Personal web usage is tracked at Towers Watson, according to two employees. "If it does happen, it's addressed one-on-one with the person in question," one employee, a benefits administrator, said, adding that the policy is written into contracts with the company. Employees are also not allowed to listen to music in the office, they said.

A spokesman for Towers Watson acknowledged in a statement that personal web usage does happen, adding that the company believes it has "appropriate policies" in place to ensure work gets done. The company would not elaborate on the nature of those policies.

Several other companies, including PNC Bank and BNY Mellon, declined to comment.

Highmark affords employees a "high level of access to the Internet without many restrictions," Phil Neubauer, a spokesman, said in an emailed statement. "We have not seen this as an issue in our offices." Still, he said, certain sites are blocked, including personal email accounts, gambling sites and sites with adult content.

One Highmark employee, in training for customer service, said virtually all Google queries are blocked. As a result, most people resort to their phones, he said. Another employee, who works on the user experience team, said personal web usage happens, but she bristled at the characterization of the activity as "loafing."

Benefits of breaks

"It's not necessarily a bad thing," she said. "We all need a break. Maybe you're even viewing something inspirational."

That sentiment has some evidentiary basis, said James A. Craft, professor of business administration at the Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh. Boredom is human nature, he said, and often employees are completing research related to their work when they find an interesting subpoint that leads them somewhere else.

Certain studies have suggested that checking Facebook or making an online purchase can be a rejuvenating break, which leaves employees refreshed and ready to refocus on the task at hand, Mr. Craft said: "There's an instantaneous recovery."

"The important thing is that the work gets done," he added. To that end, employers should clarify rules and set expectations, he said; meanwhile, employees should schedule breaks around

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assignments and projects. If those breaks consist of perusing the Web instead of taking a stroll, there's no inherent harm.

Some, however, contend that cyberloafing is "deviant" behavior, akin to stealing from one's employer, said Mr. Wagner, who studies what sort of circumstances abet loafing behavior.

A 2014 paper from the Association for Information Systems notes that personal Web usage can be a way for employees to express negative attitudes toward their employer, either as a way of coping with unpleasant encounters or of retaliating against supervisors they perceive to be treating them unfairly.

Mr. Wagner has examined the more commonplace factors that contribute to loafing on the job. He said sleep deprivation — anything less than about seven hours a night — can increase the tendency to seek online diversions during working hours. Rest replenishes the "self-regulatory reservoir," which enables considered decision-making. Mr. Wagner and fellow researchers used daylight saving time, when people sleep on average 40 minutes less than usual, as a test case. Based on data from Google, they found that searches for entertainment websites increased 6 percent on the day following the time change.

Changing the way work is done could replace more draconian approaches, such as blocking certain websites and penalizing loafing. Employees who are physically comfortable in the office are more focused, Mr. Wagner said. Finding ways to tie seemingly rote labor to the products of that labor — such as connecting fundraisers to the recipients of the funds — encourages conscientious job performance, he said.

The most important factor could be social, according to Dennis Galletta, also a professor of business administration at Katz.

"If it's going on around you, you're going to do it, too," Mr. Galletta said. "If the consensus is that it's accepted by peers and supervisors, that's extremely powerful."