Cyberloafing ‘has its benefits’

Studies reveal employees who take time out online may be more productive

SINGAPORE – When Mr Trevor Tan, 30, is in the office, he is not always hard at work. In fact, Mr Tan, an editor at a publishing firm, spends some time each day surfing the Internet for news, travel information, and on social networks such as Facebook. He is quite open about this, saying he is online for personal use “throughout the day.”

“I think it’s fine to use the Internet at work for personal stuff, as long as you are disciplined and discreet, enough to not let it disrupt your work,” said Mr Tan.

This sentiment is echoed by many workers who see nothing wrong with using the Internet for their own purposes at work. So widespread is the cyberloafing phenomenon that it spurred Associate Professor Vivien Lim of NUS Business School to research its cause and impact.

According to Prof Lim, cyberloafing “is the act of employees using their companies’ Internet access for personal purposes during work hours,” and a key point in her research is the notion that it can actually help relieve employee stress.

Employees who are bored or stressed with their work are likely to use cyberloafing as an ‘office toy’ to escape from mundane work,” she said. In such cases, a few minutes of online escapism lets employees “zone out” and then re-focus their attention on work demands.

“Such cyberloafing is likely to be beneficial as it allows employees to take an innocuous break from what otherwise would be a stressful environment,” Prof Lim said.

PRODUCTIVITY BOOST

In one of her studies, Prof Lim and PhD student Don Chen recruited a group of undergraduates and gave them a simple — and deliberately dull — 20-minute task: To read a body of text and highlight every occurrence of the letter “e.”

After that, they were divided into three teams. One was asked to do another simple job for 10 minutes, a second was told they could take a break and do whatever they wanted — except surf the Web — and the third was allowed to go online. They were then assigned another similar job for a further 10 minutes.

The results showed the surfers were consistently — and by a significant margin — the most productive and effective at the tasks. Moreover, they felt lower levels of mental exhaustion, boredom and higher levels of engagement than the other groups.

In another study with PhD student Zhu Jinhong, Prof Lim found that individuals who experienced negative emotions in the morning and cyberloafed during the day reported feeling better and experienced more positive emotions at the end of the day. This suggests that cyberloafing does offer some a salubrious effect on the individuals.

JUSTIFYING CYBERLOAFING

A respondent in a recent survey by global tech firm Cisco said: “I am currently underpaid for the number of hours I need to work. Hence, the company should not mind that I use the Internet for non-work purpose during office hours as I hardly have personal time at home.”

Ultimately, though, the predominant underlying condition that has led the proliferation of cyberloafing has got to be that “everyone is doing it, so it must be okay.”

As technology keeps employees contactable 24/7, many people understandably feel that boundaries between work and non-work have merged.

Since after-office hours are spent working, spending some official work time catching up on personal things is a reasonable and common justification for many employees. While cyberloafing is definitely a trend, it is debatable whether it is a threat.

Based on Prof Lim’s findings thus far, cyberloafing — as an inevitable aspect of modern working life rather than being a drain on productivity — may actually produce more benefits than initially thought.

So that hit of social networking, online gaming is unlikely to hurt, as long as you are getting your job done. In fact, in the right doses, it might even help.

For the full story, visit tdy.sg/cyberloaFAug17

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