Cyberloafing in an Asian context.

HOW DO I LOAF HERE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

The Internet has been pivotal in helping businesses reduce costs, shorten product cycle times, and market products and services more effectively. However, recent anecdotal evidence suggests the Internet is a double-edged sword because companies should deploy Internet access to employees with caution due to the potential for abuse. For example, an online survey reported that 84% of employees sent nonwork-related email, while another 90% surfed the Internet for recreational purposes during work hours [7]. Another study found that 50% of 244 companies surveyed were only somewhat concerned about this issue [8]. Employees’ misuse of the Internet is a worrisome trend for a number of reasons.

First, considerable costs may be incurred. For instance, a study by SurfWatch found that when employees accessed the Internet on company time for nonwork reasons, as much as $1 billion in costs are incurred. Much of the cost arises from losses in employee productivity. Indeed, research has shown that productivity losses of 30% to 40% may result from inappropriate Internet usage. This occurs when employees violate software licenses by copying company-owned software and emailing it to friends or by downloading unlicensed software, making the employer responsible for the violation. Finally, net-
works may be exposed to the possibilities of viruses and hackers.

To facilitate our discussion, we use the term “cyberloafing” to refer to any voluntary act of employees using their companies’ Internet access during office hours to surf nonwork-related Web sites for nonwork purposes, and access (including receiving and sending) nonwork-related email [4]. The availability of the Internet has revolutionized loafing. Specifically, cyberloafing is the IT way of idling on the job, where employees can literally enjoy the best of both worlds by maintaining the guise of being at work while, in effect, traveling through cyberspace for nonwork interests. Therefore, while access to the Internet may not necessarily result in more people loafing, the temptation to do so is certainly higher since the Internet makes cyberloaing easier and more convenient.

The Study
Given the potentially detrimental organizational effects of cyberloafing, it is imperative managers pay closer attention to this phenomenon. However, research on cyberloafing has largely been conducted only in the West. Since the Internet transcends global borders, it would be interesting to examine if cyberloafing is similarly “borderless.” Therefore, the objective of our study is to examine how often, and why working adults with access to the Internet at work cyberloaf in an Asian context, specifically Singapore. The Singapore government has been working toward the country being fully wired [5]. Thus, with widespread Internet access both at home and at work, Singaporeans are generally Internet-savvy, and Singapore is an ideal location for our study.

Data was obtained through a combination of an Internet-posted survey and focus group interviews. Respondents comprised 188 working adults with access to the Internet while at work. Men comprised 47% of respondents. The average age of respondents was 30. The majority of respondents were Chinese (96%), while the remaining 4% comprised Malays, Indians, and other ethnic minorities. About 85% of respondents had at least a high school diploma or a bachelor’s degree. Respondents
reported that on average, they use the Internet while at work for about 2.4 hours each day, and have been using the Internet for about 2.6 years.

Generally, results suggest working adults use the Internet for nonwork interest during office hours.

Respondents who cyberloafed typically visited general news Web sites (Item 2), or downloaded nonwork-related information (Item 3). Other popular destinations include entertainment-related (Item 4), investment-related (Item 5), and sports-related (Item 6) Web sites.

Interestingly, while almost 28% of respondents admitted to cyberloafing via online shopping a few times monthly (Item 7); about 54% of respondents reported they never shopped online. Actual visits to shopping malls appear to be favored over Internet shopping, plausibly because of online shopping’s inherent risks (security and privacy). Furthermore, people may be unwilling to purchase products without actually physically examining them [2]. For these reasons, online shopping may not be a popular form of cyberloafing.

The majority of respondents surveyed (86%) also reported they never visited adult-oriented Web sites when they cyberloafed (Item 8). This low incidence of visits may be due to restricted access by proxy servers. Additionally, employees’ reluctance to visit such sites may arise from the possibility that organizations may track Web sites visited, which may lead to disciplinary actions being taken.

Nevertheless, 9% of respondents reported that they browsed adult sites a few times a month; another 3% stated they did so a few times a week; 2% reported doing so a few times a day.

Regarding emailing activities: Figure 2 shows the frequencies with which respondents cyberloafed by checking nonwork-related email. A majority of respondents (54%) received nonwork-related email (Item 1) up to five times a day—

Figure 1 summarizes how often respondents cyberloafed by browsing Web sites.

Almost 23% of respondents reported they use the Internet to browse nonwork-related Web sites a few times a day at work (Item 1). Another 26% reported they browsed nonwork-related Web sites a few times a week. Results are thus fairly consistent with those obtained in Vault.com’s U.S.-based study, where 32% of those surveyed reported they surfed the Internet for nonwork-related purposes at work a few times a day, 21% did so a few times a week [7].
a figure considerably higher than the 32% in Vault.com’s study [7]. Approximately 52% of respondents checked nonwork-related email (Item 2), while another 51% sent (Item 3) nonwork-related email one to five times daily. This is comparable to the 47% U.S. respondents who reported engaging in similar acts [7].

In summary, our results suggest cyberloafing is generally as prevalent in Singapore as in the U.S. Furthermore, our findings are comparable to studies conducted locally [5], in that people are likely to engage in browsing and messaging activities when using the Internet. This suggests the boundaries between home and work activities have become increasingly indistinguishable because people may simply take whatever time is available to them to engage in certain activities.

**Propensity to Cyberloaf**

Generally, these findings suggest respondents believe they are justified in using their companies’ Internet access for nonwork purposes in certain situations. The majority of respondents agreed it is acceptable for them to use the Internet for nonwork-related reasons if they put in extra effort to find enough information to get the job done, or if they have to conduct overtime work without compensation. It is plausible individuals rationalize that since they put in extra effort to perform their jobs, they are entitled to spend some time visiting nonwork-related Web sites as a form of informal compensation.

Forty-three percent of respondents agreed that it is acceptable to use the Internet for nonwork interest if asked to do excessive amounts of work. Additionally, about 37% agreed that they need not experience guilt over cyberloafing in each of the following situations: if they are exposed to conflicting demands other people make of them; and if they have to put in extra work because they do not receive enough help and equipment. Conversely, in work situations where job responsibilities are clearly defined, and where there are no extra job obligations, approximately 52% of respondents disagreed they should not feel guilty for abusing their companies’ Internet access.

Previous studies found employees generally become disgruntled when they view the effort expended for their jobs exceeds the reward(s) received from their employers, and are motivated to restore this perceived inequity [1]. While it is plausible that employees would previously resort to other forms of loafing to address this perceived imbalance, with the advent of technology, employees now have an easier way to redress their perceived grievances—the Internet. Given that cyberloafing is not easily detected and provides instant gratification with just a few clicks of the mouse, it is not surprising employees are willing to cyberloaf when they perceive companies overwork and underpay them. Indeed, comments obtained from focus group interviews support this line of reasoning:

- “It is all right for me to use the Internet for nonwork reasons at work. After all, I work overtime without receiving extra pay from my employer.”
- “I don’t see anything wrong with using the company’s Internet access for nonwork purposes as long as I do not do it too often and complete my work as required by my boss.”

These comments suggest that when employees are able to rationalize their right to use their companies’ Internet access for nonwork purposes, they would not be averse to cyberloafing.

**Regulation of Workplace Internet Usage**

The majority of respondents (86%) reported they did not know anyone, professionally or personally, who had been disciplined due to nonwork-related Internet usage at the workplace. Findings suggest organizations do, in fact, discipline employees who cyberloaf, since approximately 14% of respondents reported they were aware of colleagues warned about cyberloafing.

Additionally, respondents appeared to be divided when queried about regulating Internet usage at the workplace. For example, while almost 57% of respondents believed it was possible to do so, 43% indicated otherwise. One plausible explanation could be that respondents may perceive a lack of trust when companies monitor their Internet activity, and hence, view Internet regulation with resentment.
About 47% of respondents reported their organizations have policies regarding Internet usage, while 40% reported otherwise. Compared to findings of studies conducted in the U.S., where 87% of companies surveyed indicated they had formal Internet usage policies [3], this figure is relatively low. Furthermore, 12% of respondents indicated they were unaware of the existence of any policies governing Internet usage at the workplace. This highlights the plausibility that such policies, though in existence, may not be adequately and effectively communicated to employees. This not only defeats the purpose of having policies, but also makes it difficult for the organizations to enforce the policies when necessary. Thus, our findings highlight the need of not only having clearly written guidelines governing Internet usage at work, but also ensuring these guidelines are communicated to all employees.

Finally, results suggest that among respondents whose organizations had policies to regulate Internet usage, 60% indicated they found this policy acceptable, 22% reported they were not sure, and 18% did not find this policy acceptable.

**Implications and Conclusions**

Our results suggest cyberloafing is generally as prevalent in Singapore as in the U.S. However, companies in Singapore are lagging behind their U.S. counterparts where regulation of Internet usage is concerned. Since our findings suggest individuals are not averse to cyberloafing when they perceive their companies are overworking them and providing inadequate compensation, it is imperative organizations start addressing the issue of potential Internet abuse in the workplace.

Companies providing Internet access for their employees must first accept some employees will cyberloaf some of the time every day. From there, organizations should then decide the extent to which cyberloafing will be tolerated. For example, while some companies may decide cyberloafing is acceptable insofar as employees finish their work efficiently and effectively, other companies may decide to limit Internet access altogether, or allow access but monitor employees’ Internet usage.

Regardless of the approach chosen, there remains a clear need for explicit guidelines to be established. Employees would then find it more difficult to rely on their own interpretation of ambiguous or nonexistent norms regarding Internet usage and thus be more hesitant in trying to justify cyberloafing. Possible areas these policies should cover include what constitutes cyberloafing; what means, if any, will be used to monitor employees’ movements in cyber-space; and what disciplinary actions would be enforced should employees be caught cyberloafing.

Our results also highlight the need to ensure such policies are communicated to all employees. Basically, no policy is beneficial to any company unless employees know it exists and adhere to the guidelines outlined within. Additionally, organizations should enforce the policy when Internet abuse is detected to ensure the policy is taken seriously by employees, thus serving its purpose of curbing cyberloafing.

The Internet is fast becoming an indispensable work tool. However, organizations, in their eagerness to embrace the Internet as a business tool, must be aware that employees are presented with a tempting new way to loaf on the job. Thus, employers should try to develop a work culture whereby employees utilize the Internet effectively and responsibly.

**References**

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