Cyberloafing
SIOP Member's Research Shows Not All Web Activity at Work Is Detrimental

Web browsing and sending personal e-mails while at work might be viewed by most managers as a misuse of time and company resources, but recent research from one SIOP member and his professor shows that certain Internet activities aren't as detrimental to employee performance as one might think.

The terms *cyberslacking* and *cyberloafing* have been used to describe voluntary acts of employees using their companies' Internet access for nonwork-related purposes during working hours. With the ubiquity of the Internet in employees' offices today, the temptation to cyberloaf seems to be great for many employees. A survey by Websense.com in 2006 found that the average American employee spent about 24% of his/her working hours on cyberloafing activities.

The cost and productivity loss associated with cyberloafing may be an obvious concern for companies, but SIOP Student Affiliate **Don J.Q. Chen**, a PhD student in organizational behavior, and Associate Professor Vivien Lim at the National University of Singapore say some scholars have noted that cyberloafing can actually serve as a palliative coping strategy against negative workplace experiences. Presented at the SIOP annual conference in April, Chen and Lim explained their findings, which are some of the first to gauge the positive and negative effects of two different cyberloafing activities—browsing and nonwork-related e-mailing. Their research shows that although nonwork-related e-mailing can, in fact, be detrimental to employee affect, Internet browsing may actually be a positive activity.

"Although some studies have pointed out that cyberloafing is counterproductive, managers should not be too hasty in dismissing all cyberloafing activities as unproductive," Chen said. "This study has shown that not all cyberloafing activities are detrimental. In this study, we can conclude that browsing is beneficial."

To reach these conclusions, Chen and Lim surveyed randomly drawn respondents from the alumni list of a local business school. A package containing a cover letter, the survey, and a stamped reply envelope was sent to the respondents. Out of 600 surveys administered, 191 useable responses were obtained. Average age of respondents was approximately 28 and average working experience was 4.54 years. Almost 100% of the respondents reported that they cyberloaf in some ways.

The survey measured various types of information about the respondents' Internet activities. The first factor, "*browsing activities*," comprised six items, asking respondents if they "visit news Web sites" and "visit sports Web sites." The second factor "*e-mailing activities*," comprised three items. Sample items included "check nonwork-related email" and "send nonwork-related email."

The survey also consisted of a *work facilitation* subscale comprising six items. Sample items included "Engaging in nonwork-related online activities at work helps me deal with practical issues at work." A *work depletion* subscale comprised seven items. Sample items included

"Engaging in nonwork-related online activities at work makes it difficult for me to fulfill my work obligations." *Work engagement* was also assessed with nine. Sample items included "I spend a lot of time thinking about my work" and "I focus a great deal of attention on my work."

Chen and his coauthor predicted that browsing activities lead to positive affect and work facilitation whereas e-mailing leads to negative affect and work depletion. These variables were assessed with twenty items from the PANAS scale developed by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen in 1988. Respondents were asked to indicate to the extent to which they experience "distress," "excitement," among other affect *after* they have engaged in cyberloafing activities.

"High positive affect (PA) is a state of high energy and pleasurable engagement while high negative affect (NA) is a state of distress and unpleasurable engagement," Chen said.

Work engagement is an important factor for effective role performance and has a direct impact on work attitudes, Chen added. "Prior research has found that work engagement is positively related with organizational commitment and other work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, organization citizenship behavior, and reduced intention to quit."

In the study, Chen and Lim hypothesized that employees experience positive affect from browsing, and this positive affect will positively impact work by providing employees with emotional resources to cope with work or *work facilitation*. On the other hand, negative affect from e-mailing will impede work process by depleting employees' emotional resources, *work depletion*.

"In this study, we found that browsing the Web leads to PA while personal e-mailing leads to NA," he said.

The relationship between employees' affect arising from cyberloafing and work depletion/facilitation was informed by insights drawn from affective event theory (AET), which suggests that individuals' affect has a direct impact on their attitudes and behaviors, Chen explained.

"Briefly, affective events theory states that workplace events will trigger affective reactions, and these affective reactions will affect employees' work attitudes and behaviors," Chen added.

Chen explained that browsing the Web gives employees a temporal escape from work stress. This temporal escape allows employees to recharge, and in the recharging process they experienced positive affect. Positive affect in turn provides the resources necessary for work fulfillment. E-mailing, on the other hand, is cognitively taxing, he explained. Employees need to exert psychological resources to craft the message, and this exertion depletes psychological resources that otherwise can be used for work purposes. This leads to negative affect that impedes work processes.

Chen and Lim's research contributes to current literature as well as breaks stereotypes about cyberloafing. Prior research in cyberloafing had focused on three main aspects, Chen said. First, it focused on the antecedents of cyberloafing, such as personality determinants, perceived

seriousness, and organizational norms. Second, it focused on the consequences and outcomes of cyberloafing. Third, previous research focused on the impact of companies' Internet policies on cyberloafing behavior.

"Most of these studies had concluded that cyberloafing is a form of workplace production deviance that leads to productivity and monetary loss," Chen explained. "However, recent studies have found that cyberloafing can be beneficial in that it provides employees a temporal escape from work stress."

Although recent studies had found that cyberloafing can be beneficial, these studies did not adequately explain the underlying mechanism of how cyberloafing can positively impact work, Chen said. They also assumed that different cyberloafing activities predict work outcomes similarly. Chen said the research didn't go far enough.

"We felt that this approach had offered a rather simplistic explanation to relatively complex phenomenon," he said.

Instead, in their study, Chen and Lim chose to distinguish between cyberloafing activities that involve browsing the Internet and activities that involve sending personal e-mails.

"The reason for this distinction is because prior studies had found that browsing the Web is a relatively pleasant experience and e-mailing is cognitively taxing and highly disruptive for work," he explained. "We believe that this distinction is important in allowing us to further understand how personal Web usage can impact work outcomes."

There were significant gender differences in cyberloafing behavior. Men were more likely to respond that they cyberloaf and were more likely to experience work facilitation. Women, on the other hand, were less likely to cyberloaf and were more likely to think that cyberloafing impedes their work processes.

Prior research found that men were more confident in Internet usage and were more likely to use the Internet for entertainment and leisure purposes, Chen explained. Women, on the other hand, were less confident about using the Internet and were more likely to possess negative attitudes towards Internet use.

"Given the opportunity to cyberloaf, men will cyberloaf more than women since they were more likely to engage in online entertainment," Chen added. "Since women are less confident with Internet usage, they will rationalize that cyberloafing is unproductive and interferes with work. Although men and women respond differently to cyberloafing, it does not mean that men should cyberloaf less and women should cyberloaf more. Rather, our findings are instructive in that they provide an interesting glimpse of how cyberloafing and the Internet had affected men and women differently."

So, what should employers consider when developing an Internet policy?

"In formulating Internet policies, managers must recognize that blanket policies that prohibit all forms of personal Web usage are not effective, and excessive monitoring is likely to lead to employees' retaliation and stifle legitimate Internet use," Chen said. "Instead, managers and companies should work toward implementing acceptable Internet use policy. Acceptable Internet use policy does not mean a total ban of nonwork-related usage of the Internet; it should aim to work out a reasonable balance between some personal Web usage and work. More resources should be devoted to curbing detrimental cyberloafing such as e-mailing while some Web browsing should be allowed as a coping strategy against work stress."