

By **Toni C. Talbot, SPHR**

E-mail and Internet Use



Electronic mail and the Internet are great tools. They enhance and expedite communication. They improve access to information and overall make your staff more productive. Electronic mail and the Internet can also be a time thief and, if misused, can possibly place your organization in jeopardy. Remember Bill Gates and how all those innocent e-mails were used against him.

You need e-mail and the Internet to get the work done. Make sure you put in controls that allow you the ability to address the inappropriate use of e-mail and the Internet and to put in safeguards to prevent unintended consequences from the day-to-day communications. This, of course, means a policy. Implementing a thorough policy and administering it appropriately will set the guidelines and provide the teeth you need to address situations of abuse.

Privacy

The first issue is privacy. Employees often are under the illusion that the computer information they receive and send is private. Unless you clearly tell them it is not private...you may find this to be fact rather than illusion. Your policy should notify employees that the computer and any other electronic information storage devices (PDA, cell phones, CDs, disks) are the property of the company and that any information contained in these devices is the property of the company. The policy should state that employees should have no expectations of privacy and that management retains the right to monitor and/or search any and all company owned property, including these storage devices. The company also retains the right to conduct a search of company

property at any time, with or without notification. Sounds harsh...maybe, but it's necessary.

Appropriate usage

The next issue that must be addressed is the appropriate use of e-mail and the Internet. This aspect of the policy deals with employees who spend way too much time e-mailing friends or surfing the Net for Christmas gifts as well as employees who are using company time and equipment to visit inappropriate sites, such as pornography or gambling.

It will be close to impossible to completely shut down personal use. What you need to address is excessive personal and inappropriate use. Your policy should clearly state that excessive personal use of e-mail and the Internet will not be tolerated. In addition, the use of the Internet or e-mail for any pornographic, racially offensive, or subject matter deemed inappropriate by management, also will not be tolerated and may lead to disciplinary action, including termination.

Finally, the policy should remind employees that e-mail is considered business communications and should be treated as such. E-mail has created its own language. It may be okay for casual communication, but it will not work in the business environment. It is up to you to establish guidelines on appropriate business communication through e-mail. Remind employees that all written communication could be discoverable and therefore should be written as one would a handwritten memo. Employees should also delete messages on regular intervals. This will help reduce the chances of being used in discovery. Be wary though. If your company is subpoenaed for information, you can't choose this time to do the deleting. And, as we all know, the delete key does not necessarily make the memo disappear.

Administering your policy

Now that you have the policy in place, you need to be sure to administer it accordingly. This may mean reacting to a situation after you hear a rumor or have suspicion of abuse, with a search of the employee's computers, desks, and electronic

Toni C. Talbot, SPHR, is the General Partner of the Human Resource consulting firm, HRMS, LLC. She specializes in working with companies and organizations to aid them in dealing with a variety of employee and management related issues. She may be reached at (517) 655-3959 or e-mail her at tctalbot@voyager.net.



storage devices. Some may choose to establish and implement monitoring systems. If you do monitor the employees' e-mail and Internet use, clearly and repeatedly notify the employees that their work is being monitored. Whatever the method, be sure to act consistently. Do not let one employee slide because, hey, he brings in a lot of business, but address another employee's violation. Like any pol-

icy, consistency in administration is as important, if not more, than the actual policy.

Managers and Human Resource professionals should take extra care when communicating employee-related information via e-mail. Although at times it is unavoidable, keep in mind what you are writing and who eventually could be the reader. Avoid the conversational tone common in e-mail communication, since it may be easily misconstrued. Stick to the communication of fact and avoid opinion or potential employee actions. Do not communicate with emotion. Implement methods to keep the information confidential, such as encryption and password protection.

The Internet and e-mail are here to stay. We know how they help our business. We must also be fully aware of the many ways they can hurt us and then implement safeguards to protect the company's assets. **MF**

The Internet and e-mail are here to stay. We know how they help our business. We must also be fully aware of the many ways they can hurt us and then implement safeguards to protect the company's assets.