Is Technology Killing Office Productivity?

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By Teresa Meek

If you want to be more productive at work, technology can be your friend — or your enemy.

Consider this scenario: You're wrapping up a project that would have taken days longer without new software that allows everyone to contribute, even Joe, who's sharing via his cell phone, and — Oh! Look at that hilarious cat video he sent!

Such is the double-edged sword of today's technology, which has led to huge ramp-ups in productivity, but also rampant distractions, as a recent CareerBuilder study found. Some 24 percent of workers surveyed admitted they spend at least an hour a day on personal calls, emails and texting, and 21 percent admitted to an hour on non-work-related sites or searching the Internet for photos.

From the survey, which polled over 2,000 hiring managers and HR people, as well as 3,000 employees, CareerBuilder compiled a list of the top 10 productivity killers at work. Cell phone use and texting topped the list, with personal Internet use and social media not far behind. Email came in at No. 8 on the list, which also includes old-fashioned problems like gossip, noisy co-workers and, yes, meetings.

Some of the colorful examples of workplace no-no's uncovered by the study include an employee caring for a pet bird she smuggled into the office, an employee who printed out an entire book from a website, and a married employee who denied looking at a dating site even

as it remained on his screen.

"Technology has changed the dynamic of the workplace — mostly for the better, but it can also dampen productivity," says Ryan Hunt, a senior career advisor at CareerBuilder.

The survey results come as no surprise to personal productivity expert Peggy Duncan, who writes the technology blog SuiteMinute.

Whether intervention is needed depends on whether the diversions are affecting work quality and timeliness.

"Is the work getting done in a timely fashion, is it top-notch, are you providing top-notch customer service? Or is someone wasting time planning a wedding and a family reunion?"

But before you intervene, look at possible reasons for the time-wasting behavior, Hunt advises.

"There is an argument that employees browse because they aren't engaged and invested in the work or they don't have enough work to do," Hunt says. "A lot of workers might just be bored. If you push to make them more engaged, you might get more out of them."

To improve involvement, CareerBuilder recommends quarterly, instead of annual, reviews. Employers should seek feedback from employees and invite them to offer suggestions for changes.

Part of the reason employees shamelessly browse and text is that technology has shifted the scales of work-life balance, says Laura Stack, a productivity expert and author of _What To Do When There's Too Much To Do._

"People are spending an inordinate amount of time doing personal things at work. But remember, people are also spending time at home doing work things," Stack says. "You may be watching your kid play T-ball and on your phone checking work email. Lines have really blurred."

Blocking sites at work is not the answer, she believes. "I have hourly workers, and I know they're logging onto Facebook and texting their kids. I don't have a problem with it if it's not extreme."

"We don't want employees checking out X-rated movies on the Internet. But if you look for sites to shut down because one person did it, that in itself is a waste of time," Stack says. "We call it managing by exception. It takes tons of time to implement and it ends up inadvertently punishing people for things they're not responsible for."

Instead, teams with technology-related distractions should meet to come up with solutions, which are often implemented at an individual level.

Here are some tips to help you keep technology in its rightful place:

- Selectively turn off notifications on your computer or phone. You need to know about work-related emails, but learning who's friended you on Facebook can wait. And even for the work emails, if the *ding!* or the pop-up message distracts you, turn it off.
- If you're working on something important, finish it or at least get to a good stopping point before responding to messages.
- Schedule times for technology-related work breaks when you can answer personal emails, text or search for a great Thai restaurant.
- Don't automatically hit "Reply All" to office emails, which Duncan says creates a workplace culture of email overload. Spending time upfront to select appropriate recipients saves everyone time in the end.
- Have a conversation with your team on how to help each other stay focused. Someone who needs to concentrate on a spreadsheet for 20 minutes could wear a red baseball cap, Stack suggests, signaling coworkers not to bother them with chats, texts or emails during that time.

In our age of interactive technology where boundaries between the professional and the personal are often murky, stamping out personal use of electronics isn't the answer. Instead, become aware of your habits and reserve personal use for planned breaks.

As Duncan says, "you're not a machine. But you do have to get your work done."

Teresa Meek is a Seattle-based freelance journalist, writer, and editor whose journalism has appeared in Newsday, the Miami Herald, the St. Petersburg Times, the Baltimore Sun, and other newspapers and magazines.

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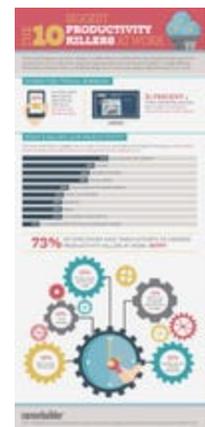
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