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A site study: social media at work

There's a good chance you're reading this at work.

And the way you are reading this might get you in trouble with the boss if you found it through your Twitter account, retweeted it and commented on it through Facebook.

The majority of employees use mobile devices to check social media websites on a daily basis at businesses that don't limit access, according to a recent Chicago-based SilkRoad Technology report.

The Social Media and Workplace 2012 Report surveyed more than 1,100 employees in the U.S. to better understand how people use social media to communicate and collaborate in the office.

About 60 percent of respondents said they check personal social media sites more than once a day on a mobile device.

The use of social media while on the job takes employees away from what they are hired to do, said April Williams, president of Algonquin-based CyberLife Tutors. The distraction is comparable to using the telephone, a fax machine or online shopping sites at work.

According to a 2011 survey by social email software provider harmon.ie, a typical employee waste $10,375 in productivity each year using social media sites, online chatting or checking email, among other things. Digital distractions can waste more than $10 million each year at companies with more than 1,000 employees.

"If the employee is doing personal tasks on company time, they are not producing," Williams said. "This has a direct impact on revenues and profits."

According to the SilkRoad Technology report, 70 percent of workers used Twitter and 65 percent used Facebook. Nineteen percent used corporate intranets, data showed.

Connecting with co-workers (49 percent) was the top reason to use social media while at work. That was followed by using it to connect with others personally (47 percent) and customers (44 percent).

From an employer standpoint, 43 percent of respondents said they worked where social media access was completely open. Those companies that monitored access or completely blocked social media websites were 24 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

Even at workplaces with restrictions on social media use, employees still can check sites with increasingly popular smartphones, tablets and other devices.

Sue Dobbe, founder of Crystal Lake-based Dobbe Marketing & PR, uses social media in her professional and personal life.

Employees at the small marketing firm are expected to use the websites for personal reasons only while on breaks, and use them during work time to connect with clients.

"I handle it with two sets of eyes," Dobbe said. "I look at it from a personal side to catch up with friends and family members, but I also do business with a lot of folks. You have to control it and have a sense of when it is appropriate."

As more businesses use social media sites for work-related reasons, some employees are in charge of using social media to post messages and engage customers.

"There are ways to get messages out there through social media that are more compatible with their overall message," Dobbe said. "People are receptive when they are on social media websites because it is a great vehicle if you use it wisely."

Conversely, allowing employees to use social media for work sometimes entices them to post on their own profiles when they aren't supposed to, Williams said.

"Social media sites are fun and engaging, much more than a typical work environment," she said. "It is easy to get drawn in during a moment of boredom then realize 15 minutes have gone by."

Northern Illinois University has a broad social media policy that doesn't restrict employees' social media use, but rather addresses how to use it appropriately.

"It's a matter of having self-control and drawing the line as to when it is or is not appropriate to use," NIU social media specialist Holly Nicholson said. "Anyone who has a tendency to not focus on their work will find a way to do that regardless of social media."

A worker quickly closing a web browser screen when supervisors approach is a clue that employees are using social media sites on company time. The same applies for mobile devices.

"They know they are not supposed to be on these sites and try to hide it," Williams said.

An employer setting expectations for their staff remains the most important way to curb social media use in the workplace.

"While it is impossible to keep everyone off social networking site at work, setting expectations makes it easier for the company to take disciplinary actions if necessary," Williams said. "Employers hire employees to get a job done, not to entertain themselves."