

Internet Use Policy



By *Lasa Information Systems Team*

We've had lots of calls from organisations looking for help in developing policy for Internet use by staff. We don't have a standard policy, but here are a few pointers to some of the main issues.

A lot will depend on the existing culture of an organisation and there will be big differences between policies of organisations which place a high degree of autonomy and trust in their staff and those which have a very regulatory atmosphere. The use of e-mail and the Web, chat rooms and instant messaging are closely related, but there are some differences so let's look at them in turn.

Email

A good starting point is the existing policy on telephone usage.

Many organisations accept that staff should be able to make local calls - things like calls to partners, making appointments, arranging childcare etc. assuming these are short and local – e.g. long conversations with friends in Australia are out.

The use of email to send personal messages can be treated in the same way. The cost to the company if they have broadband or a fixed fee dial up account will be zero. So it seems reasonable to allow staff to use the system to send personal emails.

Some companies are concerned that views expressed in emails may be seen as company policy and attach rather tedious and ridiculous disclaimers to all emails. Note that these disclaimers are rarely grounded in law, and in some cases may be counter productive - see [Stupid Email Disclaimers](#) for discussion of this, and an amusing library of disclaimers.

Most companies will allow the use of email for personal messages but come down very heavily on staff using company email systems to send or receive certain types of material – pornography or racist material for example. Rolls Royce sacked five staff and suspended 14 for sending pornography by email.

The New York Times sacked 23 people in December 1999 for what it deemed to be offensive emails. [There have been other examples since.](#)

These organisations were all routinely monitoring their staff's use of email.

This highlights an associated privacy issue. The knowledge that emails are monitored will act as a constraint on staff's use of email, but there should be clarity on what company practice is in this regard: what monitoring is done, for what purpose, what information may be disclosed. The Human Rights Act is beginning its focus attention on these

privacy issues, and the Data Protection Act 1998 also places various responsibilities on employers who wish to monitor staff use of the Internet.

Use of web based email services such as Yahoo, Hotmail or Gmail may be preferable if staff wish to send personal emails. This also means that an organisation's security is maintained with less chance of a virus infection.

Web use

The main issue with the use of the Web probably isn't the cost of the call but the potential waste of staff time.

There are also potential legal issues, for example if staff download copyrighted music or software through file sharing networks your organisation may be liable. Another issue is that downloading large files on a broadband connection shared across your organisation slows the net down for everyone else.

Using the Web to look up a train time or check out a phone number may be seen as just fine, providing it doesn't take long, but longer activities like buying a book or finding a cheap flight should be done in a lunch break or after work if your organisation's policy allows this.

Illegal downloading of copyrighted files could potentially expose the organisation to prosecution. In addition to this, file sharing networks can be a good way of picking up viruses!

Some companies bar the use of the Web for personal use completely, others will trust staff to act responsibly but deal harshly with staff viewing distasteful sites. There are some difficult issues here. Who decides what is acceptable? What about legitimate research? Again, the knowledge that everything they do may be monitored by their organisation can be a significant constraint on staff's use of the Web. Most people are now aware that everything they do on the Web is logged in several places on their PC as well as on the network server. The high profile Gary Glitter case in November 1999 highlighted this issue very clearly.

Any policy on staff's use of the Web should make clear what monitoring is being done, and if it is felt necessary to proscribe some use of the Web then boundaries need to be clearly spelled out.

Chat Rooms

A chat room is a Web site, or an area of a Web site, or part of an online service like AOL (America On Line), or MSN (Microsoft Network), that allows communities of people with similar interests, but who are usually in different locations to chat online in real time. Chat rooms don't usually require particular software other than a Web

browser such as Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox to be installed on the user's machine.

Users may need to register to use a chat room and log in with a user name and possibly also a password. Once users log in a list of other users in the room will usually be visible. In order to chat, users type messages into a text box and the message becomes visible to other users in the room almost instantly. Other users can respond to messages.

Whilst chat rooms can be a legitimate way of communicating with colleagues, they can also be abused.

The main issue in organisations is again likely to be the potential waste of time if staff are using the them for non-work related chat during work time.

Instant Messaging

Instant messaging allows people to see whether a chosen friend or work colleague is on the Internet and send them real time messages. It can be a legitimate, useful and cheap communication tool - especially when trying to stay in contact with colleagues in different locations.

Instant messaging can also enable several people in different locations to chat to each other simultaneously. In order for instant messaging to work, each user must have a messaging client installed on their machine, be connected to the Internet, and be signed up to a service such as AOL, Hotmail/MSN Messenger, Yahoo etc. Each of these online service providers has their own messaging software. Software is also available that allows you to connect to several networks (e.g. [Trillian](#)), thereby allowing you to connect with users on all of these IM networks without having to install each network's IM software separately.

As with telephone calls, email, Web and chat room usage, one of the main issues with instant messaging is likely to be the potential waste of staff time.