EMPLOYEE INTERNET MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE
Background, Concerns and Best Practices
by Terri Rieber

John Bachich, owner and president of Woodstone Homes, was amazed to discover his new project manager had spent most of his first week on the job surfing pornographic sites on the Internet. But instead of facing a lengthy internal investigation and a complicated legal scenario, Bachich was able to take quick action and terminate the offending employee, thanks to new Employee Internet Management (EIM) software he had put in place at his company.

According to the Saratoga Institute, a consulting firm in Santa Clara, Calif., Bachich's employee woes are not uncommon. More than 50 percent of all Internet activity that takes place within companies is not business-related. Online industry analysts predict that Internet misuse will cost companies an estimated $1 billion in lost productivity this year.

Companies both large and small are fighting back with EIM software, tools that allow business owners to monitor and manage employee Internet habits during the workday. Companies that have put the software in place report that it:

- Encourages responsible Internet use on the job

- Increases employee productivity by discouraging non-business-related Internet use

- Minimizes "hostile workplace" issues that can arise when an employee engages in Internet activities (like visiting pornographic or racist web sites or e-mailing distasteful jokes) that other employees may find offensive or abusive

- Discourages theft or release of competitive information by employees through e-mail, chat room conversations or electronic news group postings

- Provides employers with a "trail of evidence" should they need to take disciplinary action against an employee who misuses the Internet

How It Works

EIM software tracks all widely used forms of Internet communication, including Web browsing, file transfers, news groups, chat, e-mail and instant messaging. Employers are provided with a detailed log of employees' Internet activities, including the content of transmitted messages. An Internet administrator reviewing the log can easily spot employee activity that might constitute misuse of the Internet.

The most sophisticated and flexible software in this emerging class even allows employers to manage the Internet use of "remote" employees, like telecommuters, roaming users and traveling sales people.

EIM software tools come at a good time. As companies face slower economic conditions, they are shifting their technology priorities from external threats posed by computer hackers to internal threats to their bottom lines posed by employee lost productivity and increased legal issues.

Is It Too Intrusive?

Some employers may be uncomfortable with the idea of Internet management software. Sure, they reason, my employees are e-mailing their friends on my dime, but won't I violate their privacy if I monitor their activities?

Guidelines on Internet use are no different than guidelines on acceptable dress and workplace behavior that most new employees read about in the employee handbook. A good EIM tool will accommodate companies that have very strict Internet use policies, as well as those that are less limiting – and everything in between. Some companies, for example, have the software in place to record Internet activity without actually viewing detailed content.

Managing the Trust

Whatever level of Internet management an employer chooses to use, it is essential that the company put in place an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) that spells out acceptable and unacceptable Internet use for employees. Without clear direction or a rock-solid understanding of what is permissible, how can someone perform to expected standards? Clearly communicate that the purpose of your company's Internet-related systems is to facilitate the exchange of information within the company and with vendors and customers.

Internet management software works best when employees know it is being used. It is also important to communicate your company's policy on Internet use and how employees will be disciplined if they violate that policy. If Internet management software is put in place in a sneaky, surreptitious manner, a "we're-out-to-getcha" work environment is likely to result. Employee mistrust then grows and you simply replace one management issue with another. Instead, focus your employees on what is right about what they do. Clearly communicate the company's need to flourish by ensuring the protection of proprietary information, maintaining and improving productivity, conserving Internet access bandwidth for company needs and, most importantly, providing a workplace that is safe and pleasant for everyone.

Getting Started

If your business is interested in considering Internet management software, here are some points that will help ensure a successful implementation.

- **Involve the CEO and the IT and Human Resources departments**. Each will need to play a critical role in the software's implementation, including support from the top-down.

- **Find a software company that matches your needs**. Make sure the software scales well to accommodate your growth and that you can purchase the requisite software licenses in incremental units.

- **Consider what you really want the software to do**. Are you interested in controlling web surfing habits, or is information sent via e-mail, chat, blogs and news postings also critical? Do you have remote employees that you want to manage? Do you want to limit use only during certain times of the day? How much leeway do you want your employees to have?

- **Implement an Internet Acceptable Use Policy**. Clear guidelines are the first step to ensuring employee Internet productivity. Look for a software company that can provide you with a sample AUP to be tailored to your specific needs.

- **Communicate your expectations**. It's crucial to have an AUP and equally important to communicate it and make sure people understand it. Plan on training your employees about how you expect the Internet to be used in the workplace and how to protect confidential information. Give demonstrations and be as specific as possible, so everyone understands the parameters.

The Internet provides the potential to make companies more productive and efficient. Business owners must continue to develop guidelines regarding appropriate use of company resources and time and must have a means to ensure compliance. EIM software is one tool business owners can implement to maximize employee potential while limiting corporate exposure.

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