

Allowing Personal Use of IT Systems May Even Benefit the Enterprise

Bill Gassman

Enterprises have to formulate sensible policies to balance employee privacy with the need to reduce their own legal exposure. However, this issue should not prevent enterprises from allowing some personal use of their IT systems.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

Recently, former employees of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), who had been dismissed for misusing a CIA chat room, publicly stated that their punishment was too severe for the offense. The dismissed employees and others who received lighter punishment participated in a by-invitation-only chat room on a Lotus Notes system internal to the CIA from 1987 to 1997 and afterward on an Internet-based system. The group regularly exchanged off-color jokes and other messages offensive to some people.

Analysis

This case illuminates a tough dilemma: to what extent an enterprise should allow employees to put its systems to personal use with a degree of privacy while shielding itself from possible mischief. People can have private conversations within an enterprise with the expectation of privacy, and they naturally seek online environments, such as chat rooms, with similar privacy. However, when the enterprise formulates a privacy policy governing peer-to-peer communications, it must consider that potentially damaging content can be archived in sites, such as chat rooms, which a legal search could later discover. Furthermore, private chat rooms have problems similar to "private" lunch tables — i.e., closed groups of workers who can discriminate against others — which are wrong and possibly illegal. As for the content of peer-to-peer communications between employees, the enterprise policy should follow its policy for person-to-person conversations. If the enterprise does not allow off-color jokes in the boardroom, it should not allow them in a chat room.

Every enterprise must set the right level of permissiveness, and an enterprise such as the CIA may have good reasons to be particularly restrictive. Nevertheless, enterprises should not view their IT systems as assets fully used for corporate purposes and automatically crack down on employees using them instead for personal business — much as a company would crack down on someone taking home reams of copier paper. Most enterprises have spare computer cycles, disk storage space and network bandwidth to support a degree of personal use without incurring any expense. Enterprises would benefit more by viewing their IT systems as enabling workers to be productive, which entails giving the worker some latitude. Enterprises that create an atmosphere of trust and allow reasonable personal use will operate more smoothly and efficiently.

Allowing a degree of private experimentation with peer-to-peer collaborative tools can also educate employees. Few employees are efficient with virtual collaboration tools because enterprises themselves have not extensively begun teaching these skills. Any skills learned in private chat rooms or forums will enable employees to collaborate better when they tackle their work.

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