

On Cyberslacking: Workplace Status and Personal Internet Use at Work

R. KELLY GARRETT, Ph.D.¹ and JAMES N. DANZIGER, Ph.D.²

ABSTRACT

Is personal Internet use at work primarily the domain of lower-status employees, or do individuals higher up the organizational hierarchy engage in this activity at equal or even greater levels? We posit that higher workplace status is associated with significant incentives and greater opportunities for personal Internet use. We test this hypothesis using data collected via a recent national telephone survey ($n = 1,024$). Regression analyses demonstrate that, contrary to conventional wisdom, higher-status employees, as measured by occupation status, job autonomy, income, education, and gender, engage in significantly more frequent personal Internet use at work.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE, personal Internet use at work is presented as a problematic behavior that is especially prevalent among lower-status employees. Often referred to as “cyberslacking” in the popular press, it is conceived of as a work-avoidance strategy that serves primarily as a means of expressing workplace grievances, and to a lesser extent, as a source of personal gratification.^{6,12,14,19–21} A central focus is its negative effects on productivity. Recommendations for controlling cyberslacking are generally framed in terms of restrictive management responses, such as establishing clear use and abuse policies and policing, or even prohibiting, personal Internet usage.^{4,18,27,29,32}

A less common narrative about cyberslacking concerns its potential benefits. Some researchers have suggested that nonwork computing could positively influence productivity and workplace learning.^{5,22,25,28} These claims are based on the assertion that many contemporary workers, especially infor-

mation workers, need to engage in creative and flexible thinking in order to do their work effectively and that periodic off-task activities can promote such an approach. Implicit in these claims is the belief that cyberslacking is not solely the domain of lower-status employees and that it might be especially prevalent among more highly valued, higher-status workers.

The objective of this article is to assess what characterization of cyberslackers is most accurate. Is nonwork-related use of the Internet most evident among lower-paid, lower-prestige jobs, or is it associated with those employees higher in prestige and with more valued job skills? To answer this question, we provide an empirical exploration of personal Internet use based on a recent nationwide survey of computer-using workers in the United States. Understanding the individual characteristics that shape nonwork-related Internet use at work is an important aspect of the broader study of the impacts of contemporary information and communications technologies (ICTs). Moreover, sound data

¹School of Communication, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

²Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations, School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine, California.

might help organizations and their managers better assess the significance of cyberslacking and might afford them greater insights regarding how to deal with it.

Personal Internet use among high-status workers

Relatively little research on personal Internet use at work has dealt with the question of status directly, but the broader literature on status and work practices provides some insights regarding our central research question. High-status occupations have historically been associated with fewer work hours than lower-status occupation. For example, the American Heritage Dictionary succinctly defines *bankers' hours* as "a short working day."² This stereotype, and others like it, underscores the view that high-status occupations lend themselves to more leisure activity. In fact, time diary data suggest that was an accurate perception as recently as the 1960s, when higher-status individuals (e.g., more highly educated individuals, those in managerial occupations) had more leisure time than those with less status.^{15,16} However, this relationship had reversed by the 1990s. During the intervening years, leisure time for lower-status individuals had increased more rapidly than it did among high-status workers, and data suggest that low-status workers now report more leisure time overall.

A decrease in leisure time relative to other status groups does not necessarily mean that higher-status workers have given up the leisure privileges historically associated with their position. Instead, it may be that these individuals compensate for the relative decline in nonwork leisure time by pursuing more personal activities in the workplace. Internet access from the workplace offers many attractive opportunities for nonwork activity, and high-status workers arguably have more chances to take advantage of these opportunities than do individuals working in lower-status jobs.^{10,11,31}

There is limited empirical research examining the relationships between status and cyberslacking. One survey conducted among professional engineers ($n = 400$) found that frequent personal Internet users reported having more autonomy, more responsibility, and a higher salary than those who used the technology less frequently, but the differences were not statistically significant.²⁸ Although this is a relatively weak finding, it does call into question the claim that the incidence of nonwork Internet use is higher among lower-status employees.

We operationalize workplace status by four different measures: occupational classification, workplace autonomy, income level, and education.

Given the historical relationship between status and leisure, and the greater opportunity for nonwork computing by high-status employees, we expect that higher workplace status will be positively related to personal Internet use at work.

H1: Managers and professionals engage in personal Internet use more frequently than workers in other, lower-status occupational groups.

H2: The frequency of personal Internet use during work increases as job autonomy levels rise.

H3: The frequency of personal Internet use during work increases as income levels rise.

H4: The frequency of personal Internet use during work increases as education levels rise.

Finally, although gender is clearly not the same as job status, we suggest that males might engage in cyberslacking more than females for reasons associated with status. First, it has been shown that, *ceteris paribus*, men do receive some work status benefits that women do not. There is ample evidence that occupational distributions are sex-segregated, and employment rewards, notably pay, still consistently advantage men.^{8,9,26} In a world where women receive less recognition and fewer rewards for their work, they may feel pressured to exhibit greater work commitment than men. Among other things, this might lead to greater reluctance to engage in personal computer use during work.

Second, there is also evidence of a gender-related "leisure gap": men tend to spend more time on hobbies and other personal-interest activities than women do.^{7,17} For example, according to time diary data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 2006, men spend about three-quarters of an hour more each day on leisure activities, such as socializing, watching television and participating in sporting activities, than women (5.7 hours vs. 4.9 hours).³ Although leisure-time differences have historically been conceived of in terms of activity in the home, particularly for working mothers, it seems reasonable to posit that the leisure gap is present in the workplace as well.

Scholars have also noted, however, that women face more pressure to balance their work responsibilities with responsibilities related to their family.^{17,23} Thus one could argue that working women feel more pressure to handle nonwork-related tasks whenever they can, even in the workplace. As new ICTs have entered the work world, many women have attempted to use the technologies to achieve a more effective balance, for example, choosing to

work from home in order to increase their work/life flexibility.³¹ Given the disproportionate time women put into managing domestic affairs compared to men, we might expect them to be *more* likely than men to use new ICTs to pursue domestic activities during work. This line of reasoning leads to the expectation that men engage more frequently in cyberslacking that is related to leisure interests and that women engage in those activities that are more instrumental and communications-based. These observations lead us to pose the following hypotheses.

H5: Male employees engage in more personal Internet use than female employees.

H6: Male employees engage in more leisure-oriented personal Internet uses than female employees.

H7: Female employees engage in more communication-oriented personal Internet uses than male employees.

Data, measures and methods

Our analyses are based on a national random-digit-dial telephone survey conducted in the summer of 2006. Given that work-related computer use is the core focus of the overall study, qualified respondents were required to be currently employed by an organization, to have worked for at least 30 hours in the previous work week, and to have used a computer for at least 5 of those hours. The survey response rate was 40.1%, yielding a sample of 1,024 such computer-using workers living in the United States (The full sample includes 1,200 computer-using workers, but those who were self-employed or who worked through a staffing agency were excluded from this analysis. The response rate is calculated according to the American Association for Public Opinion Research [AAPOR] guidelines [Response Rate 1]).

While only 5 hours of work-related computer use per week was the minimum, most survey respondents used computers much more extensively in their work, reporting an average of 23.3 hours of computer use at work per week ($SD = 15.8$). Respondents were between 18 and 73 years old, with a mean age of 43.9 years ($SD = 11.5$). A slight majority of the respondents were female (53%). A broad range of occupations in the private and public sector was represented among the respondents, with the largest groups being in professional, managerial, administrative, and sales positions. Almost four-fifths of the respondents were Caucasian

(79.2%), while 8.2% were African American and 5.1% were Hispanic.

Personal Internet use at work. Our dependent variable is based on responses to two questions about the employee's level of computer use for nonwork purposes during work. Based on a 5-point scale anchored by 1, *never*, and 5, *several times a day*, respondents indicated how often they use a computer during work "for personal e-mail and text messaging" ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.4$) and "to look up information of personal interest, such as news, sports scores, or stock reports" ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.4$). We combined the two types of nonwork-related personal use to form a summative index of personal ICT use during work, with scores ranging from 2 to 10 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$). (We dropped cases with missing values when computing summative scales throughout. For this variable, there were 1,020 listwise-valid cases.) While almost one in five (18%) reported that they never use the Internet for personal reasons while at work, a large majority (81.8%) acknowledged that they engage in such activities at least once each workday. There is substantial variation in use frequency ($M = 5.5$, $SD = 2.5$).

Occupational classification. Respondents were asked to provide their occupation. These responses were recorded verbatim and then coded into the U.S. Census Bureau's Standard Occupational Categories. For this analysis, we created an occupational-status dummy variable. Respondents were coded as having higher-status occupations if they worked in management, business, and financial occupations (27.5%) or in professional occupations (39.6%). Other occupations, including sales (7.8%), office and administrative support (13.4%), and service and production occupations (9.6%) form the reference category.

Autonomy. Autonomy was measured as a summative scale based on responses to 5 Likert-scale items: 1, *I have a lot of say over what happens in my job*; 2, *I am allowed to decide how to go about getting my job done*; 3, *I can decide what hours I work*; 4, *I can decide how many hours I work*; and 5, *I can decide where I work*. The scales were anchored by *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree*, with higher scores corresponding to greater agreement. Values ranged from 5 to 25, with a mean score near the middle of the scale ($M = 15.7$, $SD = 4.7$).

Household income. Respondents indicated whether their total household income was less than \$25,000 (2.6%), between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (18.9%), be-

TABLE 1. REGRESSING STATUS FACTORS ON FREQUENCY OF PERSONAL INTEREST USE AT WORK

	β	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. error</i>
Management, business, financial, and professional occupations ^a	0.14***	0.75	(0.20)
Autonomy	0.12***	0.06	(0.02)
Household income	0.11**	0.24	(0.07)
Education	0.19***	0.39	(0.07)
Gender (male)	0.07***	0.34	(0.16)
Controls			
Computer skills	0.14***	0.46	(0.11)
Age	-0.08*	0.02	(0.01)
Constant	—	1.98***	(0.63)
<i>N</i>	—	913	—
<i>R</i> ²	—	0.13	—

^aReference category includes sales, service, production, and office/administrative support occupations.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

tween \$50,000 and \$75,000 (24.3%), between \$75,000 and \$100,000 (20.0%), or more than \$100,000 (27.7%).

Education. Education was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from high school or less to holding a graduate degree. Overall, respondents reported high levels of educational attainment: three-fifths had completed a college degree (35.7% undergraduate and an additional 24.3% held a graduate degree as well).

RESULTS

In order to test our hypotheses, we regressed the five explanatory variables on the frequency of personal Internet use (see Table 1). We also controlled for the individual's age and computer skills, both of which have been correlated with Internet use in other contexts. The model explains a modest amount of the variance in personal Internet use ($R^2 = 0.13$), and the coefficients on the variables of

theoretical interest are all highly significant. As predicted, the four measures of status—occupational classification, autonomy, household income, and education—are each associated with more frequent personal Internet use during work.

Turning to the hypotheses concerning gender, we find that male employees do engage in significantly more frequent personal Internet use than female employees. To address the question of whether employees differ by gender in terms of the forms of personal Internet use in which they engage, we constructed an additional pair of regression models (see Table 2). The key distinguishing feature of these models is that the dependent variable from the first model, personal Internet use, is split into its two components, personal leisure-related activities (i.e., looking up information of personal interest) and personal communications (i.e., e-mails and instant messaging). Men are significantly more likely than women to surf the Web for leisure-related information during work. However, gender has no influence on the incidence of nonwork-related Internet

TABLE 2. REGRESSING GENDER ON FREQUENCY OF PERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND OF PERSONAL INFORMATION SEEKING AT WORK

	<i>Personal communication</i>			<i>Personal information seeking</i>		
	β	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. error</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>Std. error</i>
Gender (male)	0.02	0.05	(0.10)	0.10**	0.30	(0.09)
Constant	—	1.32***	(0.31)	—	0.66*	(0.30)
<i>N</i>	—	914	—	—	913	—
<i>R</i> ²	—	0.08	—	—	0.13	—

Note: Models also control for all variables identified on Table 1.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

communications during work. Thus, hypotheses 1 to 6 are all supported; only hypothesis 7 is unsupported.

DISCUSSION

This article examines the relationship between workplace status and personal Internet use during work. This activity, sometimes termed cyberslacking, is a source of growing concern for businesses around the world, and the yearly productivity costs from the practice are estimated to be in the billions.³²

The results confirm that *personal Internet use during work is now reported by the majority of contemporary computer-using workers*. Moreover, such behavior is not primarily the domain of lower-status employees. To the contrary, our data indicate that *cyberslacking is significantly more frequent among those with higher workplace status*. In particular, those who are highly paid, managers and professionals, better educated, and employees with greater workplace autonomy spend substantially more time online for personal purposes during work than those below them in the workplace hierarchy. We also conclude that men, who have historically enjoyed status benefits by virtue of their gender, are more likely to use the Internet for nonwork purposes than women. Furthermore, we find that men and women differ in their level of use of the Internet during work for personal leisure interests, although there are no gender differences in personal use for communications. We also note that men and women might use e-mail differently even though their aggregate usage levels are the same. For example, perhaps men focus more on leisure-oriented communication and women focus more on instrumental communication. This would be a valuable line of inquiry for future research.

In sum, it is arguably the organization's most valued employees who are most likely to use computers at work for personal purposes. This perspective is further supported by the fact that more cyberslacking is very significantly associated with a higher level of computer skills (Table 1). These findings raise important questions concerning the management of information and communications technologies in the workplace. Much of the scholarship to date emphasizes control-oriented Internet usage policies that are highly visible and systematically enforced; but our results lead us to be somewhat wary of this approach. Restricting personal Internet use may be an effective deterrent to cyberslacking, but, as others have noted, it can backfire by reduc-

ing job satisfaction and actually depressing productivity.^{13,30}

Cyberslacking is clearly a pejorative, if playful, concept, and it seems obvious that very few employers would encourage unrestrained personal uses of ICTs during work. Yet it also seems that this behavior is most prevalent among employees who are particularly valuable to the organization. Managers and organizational policymakers might conclude that a wise course is to find ways to use the flexibility afforded by Internet-connected computers to help employees enhance their performance. For example, if parents are able to quickly and easily check on their kids or to manage a household need efficiently from their workplace computer, they might be less distracted and require less time away from work tasks.²⁴ And just as very short naps have been demonstrated to revive mental activity, perhaps short virtual breaks for a quick hand of solitaire, a note to a friend, an exploration of the online deal of the day, or a check on a sports score might refresh and invigorate many individuals' work and productivity. Perhaps. Our analysis suggests that further psychological experiments, productivity studies, and empirical analyses of end-user behavior would be desirable in better understanding what cyberslacking is really about and how it should be controlled or accommodated in the workplace.

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Address reprint requests to:
 Dr. R. Kelly Garrett
 School of Communication
 Ohio State University
 3016 Derby Hall
 154 North Oval Mall
 Columbus, OH 43210-1339

E-mail: garrett.258@osu.edu