



Personal Internet use at work: Understanding cyberslacking

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ABSTRACT

Cyberslacking, typically defined as the use of Internet and mobile technology during work hours for personal purposes, is a growing concern for organizations due to the potential in lost revenue; however, the majority of academic research in this area has focused on a limited number of cyberslacking behaviors and/or employed small, non-representative samples. In order to address these limitations, the present study employs a nationally representative sample of American workers and tests the relationship between nine cyberslacking behaviors and a variety of demographic and work-specific predictors. Three measures of cyberslacking are employed to provide a richer analysis of the phenomenon: individual behaviors, frequency of cyberslacking, and variety of cyberslacking. Results indicate that being younger, male, and a racial minority positively predict cyberslacking variety and frequency, as do routinized Internet use at work and higher perceived Internet utility. Results are discussed as to how the present study expands on previous research, and directions for future research are indicated.

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1. Introduction

Cyberslacking (also referred to as cyberloafing, non-work-related computing, cyber deviance, personal use at work, Internet abuse, workplace Internet leisure browsing, and junk computing) is the use of Internet and mobile technology during work hours for personal purposes (Bock & Ho, 2009; Johnson & Indvik, 2004; Lim, 2002; Mastrangelo, Everton, & Jolton, 2006). Within professions that use computers, these behaviors appear to be prevalent: in a recent study, employees reported spending at least 1 h on non-work-related activities during a regular work day, and the largest proportion of non-work-related time was spent on the Internet (Salary.com., 2009). Online shopping, blogging, gaming, and instant messaging are popular non-work-related activities performed during work hours (Madden, 2009), and online gambling (Mills, Hu, Beldona, & Clay, 2001), pornography (Cooper, Safir, & Rosenmann, 2006), personal investing, and online auctions (Pee, Woon, & Kankanhalli, 2008) also raise concerns. In one of the few national studies conducted on cyberslacking behaviors, 80% of information workers reported using a computer for personal email or messaging while on the job (Garrett & Danziger, 2008a; Garrett & Danziger, 2008b). Meanwhile, estimates of US productivity losses due to cyberslacking range as high as \$178 billion annually (Websense, 2006). In addition to financial losses from reduced worker productivity, cyberslacking threatens network security,

strains organizational bandwidth, and makes employers vulnerable to lawsuits on a variety of issues ranging from securities fraud to sexual harassment (Oswalt, Elliott-Howard, & Austin, 2003).

Most of our knowledge about cyberslacking is limited by non-representative samples. Studies boasting national samples have either focused on a narrow range of cyberslacking behaviors (e.g., online sexual activity in Cooper et al., 2006), or have employed limited explanatory variables (Garrett & Danziger, 2008a; Garrett & Danziger, 2008b). Furthermore, Garrett and Danziger (2008a), Garrett and Danziger (2008b) provided a limited operational definition of cyberslacking (using a computer “for personal email and text messaging” and “to look up information of personal interest, such as news, sports scores, or stock reports”), which did not take into consideration increasingly popular activities such as using social network sites (SNSs), viewing online videos, and sending text messages.

The present study seeks to expand on previous studies on cyberslacking by examining how a nationally representative sample of Americans engage in personal use of technology while at work. Employing hierarchical and logistic regression analyses, we analyzed a 2008 dataset from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (for descriptive statistics from this dataset, see Madden & Jones, 2008) that includes nine activities included within most definitions of cyberslacking, as well as a wide range of demographic, disaffection-based, and work requirement variables.

2. Cyberslacking research to date

The characteristics of cyberslackers are not well established. Studies that have tried to identify which employees may be more

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likely to engage in cyberslacking than others have been inconclusive. In their national survey of computer-using workers, **Garrett and Danziger (2008b)** found that occupational status, perceived autonomy within the workplace, income, education, and gender were significant predictors of cyberslacking. They concluded that personal Internet use at work is not an activity relegated to low-status employees, but rather one that is more frequently performed by men who are well-educated and work in a high-status field such as management, finance, or business. In contrast, **Ugrin, Pearson, and Odom (2007)** found that young executives were the most likely group to engage in cyberslacking, while **Stanton (2002)** found that differences in demographics, Internet use, or occupational attitudes did not result in a greater likelihood to cyberslack.

The conflicting findings may arise from the restricted samples used in cyberslacking research. Samples are often comprised of students (**Blanchard & Henle, 2008; Chang & Cheung, 2001**), or a small number of employees from specific organizations (**Chen, Chen, & Yang, 2008; De Lara, Tacoronte, & Ding, 2006; Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001**), or case studies of individuals (**Day & Gehringer, 2002**) or organizations (**Simmers, 2002**). In the one national US study (**Garrett & Danziger, 2008a; Garrett & Danziger, 2008b**), only full-time employees who used a computer for at least 5 h of their workweek were surveyed. A great deal of cyberslacking research has been performed in Asian countries (**Chen et al., 2008; Lim & Teo, 2005; Lim, Teo, & Loo, 2002; Pee et al., 2008**), where workplace practices and cultural norms about deviant behavior may differ substantially from those found in the United States.

To date, studies examining cyberslacking have focused on more traditional Internet-based activities, rarely identifying more recent Web 2.0 activities such as watching online videos, blogging, or using social network sites (SNSs). For example, **Lim (2002)** identified two major categories of cyberslacking, which he termed browsing (visiting sports, news, investment, entertainment, non-work, or adult websites; online shopping; and downloading non-work information) and emailing (checking, sending, and receiving non-work emails). Drawing on this research, **Garrett and Danziger (2008a), Garrett and Danziger (2008b)** employed a two-item measure of cyberslacking in their study, asking participants about the frequency with which they sent personal emails and browsed the Web while at work. Since **Garrett and Danziger's** data collection (i.e., 2006), sites such as YouTube and Facebook have become increasingly popular; adult use of SNSs has grown tremendously, from just 8% of online adults in 2005 to 37% of online adults in 2008 and 47% in 2009 (**Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010**), while 62% of online adults watch videos on sites like YouTube (**Madden, 2009**). These activities may be contributing to cyberslacking behaviors significantly and need to be examined in conjunction with behaviors that have previously been analyzed.

While cyberslacking is typically portrayed as a negative behavior leading to losses in productivity and revenue (**Greenfield & Davis, 2002; Mastrangelo et al., 2006**), engaging in brief periods of time on tasks not related to work may have positive effects, including relief from boredom, fatigue, or stress, greater job satisfaction or creativity, increases in well-being, recreation and recovery, and overall happier employees (**Eastin, Glynn, & Griffiths, 2007; Oravec, 2002; Reinecke, 2009; Stanton, 2002**). Employees believe that behaviors typically associated with cyberslacking, such as sending personal emails and browsing news websites, help them “deal with problems at work” and makes them “a better worker” (**Zafar, 2008**). Personal Internet use as work has also been associated with productivity benefits: **Garrett and Danziger (2008a)** found a positive relationship between the expected productivity benefits of the Internet and cyberslacking activity.

A variety of explanations have been offered for cyberslacking. For example, **Chen et al. (2008)** found that employees with a high

external locus of control (i.e., they believe their fate is in other people's hands) and those with low self-esteem reported diminished self-control of Internet use (e.g., they experienced symptoms of withdrawal when they were unable to indulge in cyberslacking), which in turn affected their level of Internet abuse at work. When employees in Singapore felt they were being treated unjustly, such as when they did not think company-provided rewards matched employee contributions, they were more likely to engage in cyberslacking than when their job responsibilities are clearly defined (**Lim, 2002; Lim et al., 2002**).

Recent research has questioned whether employees' disaffection with their jobs leads to cyberslacking, suggesting instead that engagement in such activities mirrors web activities in other environments. **Garrett and Danziger (2008a)** found that neither one's job-related stress level nor their job satisfaction was related to the amount of time spent using the Internet for non-work-related activities. Among the factors that did influence the level of cyberslacking, the expected outcomes of such activities had the strongest effect; in other words, people who perceived their Internet use as beneficial to their overall job performance were more likely to engage in cyberslacking than others. Those who used the Internet at work as part of a habitual routine were also more likely to engage in personal use at work. Conversely, employees who were more committed to their job and who would face stronger penalties for engaging in deviant behaviors were less likely to cyberslack. This finding contradicted earlier work (e.g., **Lim, 2002**), which suggested that employees engaged in cyberslacking to “get back” at unfair employers. Instead, these findings supported **Lim et al.'s (2002)** findings that one's personal habits are the best single predictor of cyberslacking.

Efforts to explain cyberslacking have made varying distinctions among different types of cyberslacking. **Lim and colleagues (e.g., Lim, 2002; Lim & Teo, 2005)** separated browsing activities from email-related activities. **Robinson and Bennett (1995)** proposed that deviant behaviors varied by seriousness, as well as whether they were interpersonal or organizational in nature. Drawing from this typology, **Blanchard and Henle (2008)** divided cyberslacking into minor (e.g., reading personal emails) and serious (e.g., downloading pornography) categories. They found that perceptions of what other employees were doing explained minor cases of cyberslacking (e.g., online shopping), but not serious cases (e.g., online gambling). **Lim and Teo (2005)** found a similar result, with 88% of respondents in their study saying that cyberslacking was acceptable when they perceived other employees to be engaging in similar behavior. However, the more serious employees perceived a cyberslacking activity to be, the less likely they were to engage in it while at work.

Overall, the extant cyberslacking research fails to distinguish among online activities that may have distinct motivations. Researchers either combine all behaviors identified as cyberslacking together into a single dependent variable (as in **Garrett & Danziger, 2008a, 2008b**) or divide them into a small number of categories that may neglect important distinctions among them. For example, online shopping and personal email may both be characterized as minor cases (e.g., **Blanchard & Henle, 2008**). However, these activities have been shown to have distinct patterns of motivation (**LaRose, Kim, & Peng, 2010**) and there is growing appreciation of the need to distinguish among specific online activities in examining the determinants of Internet use.

Zhang, Oh, and Teo (2006) found that the perceived importance of the ethical prohibitions on cyberslacking were negatively related to the acceptability of the behavior, which was, in turn, positively related to one's intention to engage in misuse. In addition, individuals' personal normative beliefs (i.e., their belief that cyberslacking is morally wrong) reduced intentions to engage in cyberslacking. **Mahatanakoon (2006)** found that attitudes and intentions to engage in cyberslacking predicted cyberslacking behavior, although subjective norms were not a significant predic-

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