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Young Workers Push Employers for Wider Web Access

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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CHICAGO (AP) -- Ryan Tracy thought he'd entered the Dark Ages when he graduated college and arrived in the working world.

His employer blocked access to [Facebook](#), Gmail and other popular Internet sites. He had no wireless access for his laptop and often ran to a nearby cafe on work time so he could use its Wi-Fi connection to send large files.

Sure, the barriers did what his employer intended: They stopped him and his colleagues from using work time to goof around online. But Tracy says the rules also got in the way of legitimate work he needed to do as a scientific analyst for a health care services company.

"It was a constant battle between the people that saw technology as an advantage, and those that saw it as a hindrance," says the 27-year-old Chicagoan, who now works for a different company.

He was sure there had to be a better way. It's a common complaint from young people who join the work force with the expectation that their bosses will embrace technology as much as they do. Then some discover that sites they're supposed to be researching for work are blocked. Or they can't take a little down time to read a news story online or check their personal e-mail or social networking accounts. In some cases, they end up using their own Internet-enabled smart phones to get to blocked sites, either for work or fun.

So some are wondering: Could companies take a different approach, without compromising security or workplace efficiency, that allows at least some of the online access that younger employees particularly crave?

"It's no different than spending too much time around the water cooler or making too many personal phone calls. Do you take those away? No," says Gary Rudman, president of GTR Consulting, a market research firm that tracks the habits of young people. "These two worlds will continue to collide until there's a mutual understanding that performance, not Internet usage, is what really matters."

This is, after all, a generation of young people known for what University of Toronto sociologist Barry Wellman calls "media multiplexity." College students he has studied tell him how they sleep with their smart phones and, in some cases, consider their gadgets to be like a part of their bodies. They're also less likely to fit the traditional 9-to-5 work mode and are willing to put in time after hours in exchange for flexibility, including online time.

So, Wellman and others argue, why not embrace that working style when possible, rather than fight it?

There is, of course, another side of the story -- from employers who worry about everything from wasted time on the Internet to confidentiality breaches and liability for what their employees do online. Such concerns have to be taken especially seriously in such highly regulated fields as finance and health care, says Nancy Flynn, a corporate consultant who heads the Ohio-based ePolicy Institute.

From a survey Flynn did this year with the American Management Association, she believes nearly half of U.S. employers have a policy banning visits to personal social networking or video sharing sites during work hours. Many also ban personal text messaging during working days.

Flynn notes that the rising popularity of BlackBerrys, iPhones and other devices with Web access and messaging have made it much trickier to enforce what's being done on work time, particularly on an employee's personal phone. Or often the staff uses unapproved software applications to bypass the blocks.

As a result, more employers are experimenting with opening access.

That's what Joe Dwyer decided to do when he started Chicago-based Brill Street & Co., a jobs site for young professionals. He lets his employees use social networking and has found that, while they might spend time chatting up their friends, sometimes they're asking those same friends for advice for a work problem or looking for useful contacts.

"So what seems unproductive can be very productive," Dwyer says.

Kraft Foods Inc. recently opened access to everything from YouTube to Facebook and Hotmail, with the caveat that personal use be reasonable and never interfere with job activities.

Broadening access does, of course, mean some employees will cross lines they aren't supposed to.

Sapphire Technologies LP, an information-technology staffing firm based in Massachusetts, started allowing employees to use most Internet sites two years ago, because recruiters for the company were going on Facebook to find talent.

Martin Perry, the company's chief information officer, says managers occasionally have to give employees a "slap on the wrist" for watching sports on streaming video or downloading movies on iTunes. And he says older managers sometimes raise eyebrows at their younger counterparts' online judgment.

"If you saw some of the pictures that they've uploaded, even to our internal directory, you'd question the maturity," Perry says.

It's the price a company has to pay, he says, for attracting top young talent that's willing to work at any hour. "Banning the Internet during work hours would be myopic on our part," Perry says.

But that also means many companies are still figuring out their online policies and how to deal with the blurring lines between work and personal time -- including social networking, even with the boss.

"I think over time, an open embrace of these tools can become like an awkward hug," says Mary Madden, a senior research specialist at the Pew Internet & American Life Project. "It can get very messy."

One option is for companies to allow access to certain sites but limit what employees can do there. For instance, Palo Alto Networks, a computer security company, recently helped a pharmaceutical company and a furniture maker open up social networking for some employees, but limited such options as file-sharing, largely so that sensitive information isn't transferred, even accidentally.

"Wide-open Internet access is the risky approach," says Chris King, Palo Alto Networks' director of product marketing. However, "fully closed is increasingly untenable for cultural reasons and business reasons."

Flynn, at the ePolicy Institute, says it's important that employers have a clear online policy and then explain it. She believes not enough employers have conducted formal training on such matters as online liability and confidentiality.

Meantime, her advice to any employee is this: "Don't start blogging. Don't start tweeting. Don't even start e-mailing until you read the company policy."

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