

Cyberloafing and Constructive Recreation

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INTRODUCTION

“Cyberloafing” in workplace and educational contexts refers to the uses of computer-related applications and devices in ways or at times that are not directly sanctioned by employers, managers, or teachers. It has often been considered as a kind of “time theft” on the part of employees and students (as described in Block, 2001), possibly decreasing workplace and educational productivity by consuming attention, energies, and resources designated for organizational operations. In contrast, many employees and students have construed cyberloafing as a stress reliever and as a support for personal wellbeing, often with the rationale that they are able to engage effectively in alternating or multitasking between and among their various work and off-work endeavors (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2013). “Constructive recreation,” in contrast with cyberloafing, comprises online recreation and gamification initiatives that are designed by employees along with managers; these initiatives are designed to be in synch with productive efforts and support the wellbeing of all organizational participants (Oravec, 2002; 2004a). This article compares and contrasts cyberloafing processes with constructive recreation approaches, the latter involving conscientious consideration of how online leisure activities can enhance workplace and educational activity and improve organizational productivity. The article analyzes some current research trends and public discourse related to cyberloafing; it also describes some constructive recreation approaches that have been explored over the past decades.

Many recent computing technology and gamification advances have helped to blur the conceptual and pragmatic boundaries between

“work” and “play,” distinctions that have great cultural variation (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Oravec, 2015). This article indeed focuses on cyberloafing issues within the US and UK, but international dimensions can also become especially salient in a world of globalized corporate interactions and relations. Cyberloafing practices that are acceptable in one nation may be seen in harsher lights in other places, given cultural and ethical differences that affect how work is structured and evaluated (Cheng, Li, Zhai, & Smyth, 2014; Sheikh, Atashgah, & Adibzadegan, 2015). International and regional variations in organizational approaches to cyberloafing can illuminate other significant aspects of workplace culture (Canaan Messarra, Karkouljian, & McCarthy, 2011), variations that can become salient as many organizations deal with international outsourcers or with units that are rooted in various nations.

BACKGROUND

The term “cyberloafing” emerged in academic and popular discourse in the 1990s as a way of characterizing the growing phenomenon of non-sanctioned online recreation and other activities (Oravec, 2002). Cyberloafing has been defined by Lim (2002) as the “act of employees using their companies’ internet access for personal purposes during work hours” (p. 675). Researchers have generated associated concepts such as Anandaraman, Simmers, and D’Ovidio’s (2011) framing of “personal web usage” or PWR, which is a more specific characterization of cyberloafing activity. As outlined in the “Key Words and Definitions” section below, “cyberbludging” is often used in some nations to refer to individuals’ use of comput-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2255-3.ch374

ers in the workplace for recreation while shirking responsibility for work outcomes (Hernandez-Castro, 2016; Liaskos & Sandy, 2004). An alternate term, “cyberslacking,” is often used to label computer usage by students or younger members of the workforce (although it sometimes also emerges in broader discussions of the issue). Other characterizations of these phenomena include “non-work-related computing, cyber deviance, personal use at work, Internet abuse, workplace Internet leisure browsing, and junk computing” (Vitak, Crouse, & LaRose, 2011, p. 1751). Cyberloafing has also been examined as an aspect of the larger construct of “counterproductive workplace behavior” (as formulated in O’Neill, Hambley, and Bercovich, 2014), which also refers to a broader assortment of online workplace dysfunctions such as hacking, manipulation of metrics, and theft of resources (Oravec, 2017). Burnay, Billieux, Blairy, & Larøi (2015) linked some forms of cyberloafing with “obsessive passion” (p. 28). Askew (2012) explores the relationship between cyberloafing and task performance, and Jia, Jia, and Karau (2013) examines the influences of personality and workplace situational factors on cyberloafing. Some researchers portray cyberloafing as a kind of “deviance” (Weatherbee, 2010), despite the wide proliferation of cyberloafing behaviors and their normalization in some settings.

Propositions that employees or students should be forced to focus only on their assigned tasks and not be able to take reasonable discretionary breaks run counter to a great deal of managerial, psychological, and educational research (Lim, 2002; Oravec, 1996). For many decades, social scientists have given support to the assumption that human beings generally require some sort of periodic relief and refreshment as they pursue their workplace and educational endeavors (Metcalf, 1952; Souter, 1940). However, the open access that many employees and students have to computer devices and networking has often set up “contested spaces” in a number of workplaces and schools (Oravec, 2004a); these contestations refer to disputes and confrontations over the right to be

able to define what kinds of diversions and times for recreational activity are deemed as acceptable in the workplace or educational institution.

Cyberloafing issues have changed dramatically in character over the decades. When organizational computer resources were very expensive and tightly controlled (in the 1950s through the early 1970s), informal and unregulated access by employees and students was not considered an issue of widespread importance. Only a relatively few individuals were able to explore the uses of computing technology for recreation in the workplace, although their surreptitious initiatives ultimately resulted in some of the early popular video games (Wolf, 2001). Since the 1970s and the advent of the desktop personal computer (PC), however, opportunities for the non-sanctioned use of computers and networking resources expanded dramatically. Employees could access video games on their desks at work as well as engage in computer network interaction in early electronic bulletin boards or listservs (Oravec, 1996). They could also compose their resumes and cover letters during work breaks and produce them on their employers’ printers for a professional-looking product. The “boss key” or “boss button” became a feature on many applications, giving employees an easy way to appear to be working hard on an organizationally-sanctioned application while engaging in unsanctioned efforts (van Gelder, 1982); by pressing a certain key, usually a function key, the PC’s screen would change to a spreadsheet or other business-oriented image. In that era, managers and administrators at nearly all levels of organizational functioning were faced with the prospect that some of their employees could be utilizing computer technology on company time, possibly consuming expensive organizational resources as well. Cyberloafing provided a wake-up call to managers about the power of computer technology to change everyday organizational functioning, often in complex and dysfunctional ways.

Many of the pioneering research and policy initiatives involving cyberloafing were formulated

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