Cyberloafing: Vice or Virtue?

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ABSTRACT

In this article we use the concepts of virtue and vice to explain the extent to which cyberloafing can have positive or negative consequences. We argue that under some circumstances, cyberloafing can be viewed as a vice—leading to counterproductive behaviors. However, as a virtue, cyberloafing can provide constructive recreational opportunities to employees, allowing them to better learn the technology. Thus, managers should develop Internet usage policies that integrate both the positive and negative consequences of cyberloafing.

Cyberloafing refers to any voluntary act of employees using their company's Internet access during office hours to surf nonwork-related web sites for nonwork purposes, and assess nonwork-related e-mail (Lim, 2002). Recent research has considered cyberloafing as a counterproductive behavior (Lim, 2002; Beugré, 2003). Despite the focus on its negative impact, one may wonder whether cyberloafing can be considered as a constructive behavior likely to boost employee productivity. Cyberloafing may be constructive when it helps employees and the organization. However, it can be destructive when it prevents employees from being productive. Hence, all Internet usage may not be perceived as abusive and costly to the organization. The character of the contemporary work environment with its flexible, open and autonomous nature has blurred the line between work and life. Thus, what constitutes Internet abuse in the workplace is less clear (Anandarajan, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to explore the extent to which cyberloafing is construed as a constructive or destructive behavior. In so doing, we challenge the conventional wisdom that cyberloafing is a form of workplace deviance (Beugré, 2003; Lim, 2002, Lim, Teo, & Loo, 2001). Rather, we contend that cyberloafing can be destructive or constructive, depending on the circumstances and the user's intentions. This approach has both theoretical and practical implications. From the theoretical standpoint, researchers may analyze the conditions under which cyberloafing is detrimental to the individual and/or the organization and the conditions under which it can have positive consequences. From the practical standpoint, managers may use cyberloafing as a way of helping employees to better manipulate the technology they use at work.

We use the concepts of vice and virtue to refer to the positive and negative consequences of cyberloafing. *Webster's New Unabridged Dictionary* defines vice as an immoral, evil habit or practice, a defect or a shortcoming, and virtue as moral excellence, goodness; righteousness. As a vice, cyberloafing is counterproductive, preventing the organization from reaching its goals. As a virtue, cyberloafing is a means of increasing employee productivity. The question then remains; under what conditions can cyberloafing be a virtue or a vice?

To judge cyberloafing as constructive or destructive, one needs some standard of comparison. We argue that three criteria may help determine the constructiveness or destructiveness of cyberloafing. These criteria include:

1) A departure from a norm. The employee is expected to use his or her computer for work-related activities. Doing otherwise would be considered destructive.
2) Cyberloafing reduces the cyberloafer's work performance.
3) Cyberloafing has harmful effects on the organization in terms of reduced performance, high costs, or tarnished reputation.

Following these criteria, we argue that cyberloafing is destructive when it violates a company's Internet usage policies or reduces employee and organizational performance. Cyberloafing is destructive and constitutes a form of employee deviance (Lim, 2002) in so far as it represents a voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). We use the constructs of *destructive cyberloafing* and *constructive cyberloafing* to explain the extent to which cyberloafing may have positive or negative consequences in an organization.

DESTRUCTIVE CYBERLOAFING

Cyberloafing is destructive when it has negative consequences for the organization, such as loss of productivity or higher costs for the company. When the intention of the employee is to shirk or retaliate against the company by reducing his or her input, then cyberloafing is a counterproductive behavior. A counterproductive behavior is any intentional behavior that is deemed by the organization to run counter to its legitimate interests (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Research on cyberloafing has considered the practice as a counterproductive behavior (Lim et al., 2002). Scholars considering cyberloafing as a dysfunctional behavior, focus on productivity loss, issues of harassment, and the overall misuse of the Internet, and contend that using the Internet can generate undesirable outcomes, such as loss of intellectual property, sexual harassment lawsuits, productivity losses due to excessive web-surfing, security threats, and network bandwith overload (Simmers, 2002). Table 1 presents a summary of studies construing cyberloafing as a destructive behavior. Although this list is far from being comprehensive, it helps capture the negative nature of the phenomenon. Expressions such as cyberslacking (Block, 2001) and Internet abuse (Armstrong, Philips, & Saling, 2000) are used to assess the negative impact of cyberloafing.

Examples of computer abuse include general e-mail abuses (spamming, harassments, chain letters, propagations of viruses/worms, and defamatory statements); unauthorized usage and access (sharing of passwords and access into networks without permission); copyright infringement/

TABLE 1. Summary of Studies Construing Cyberloafing as a Destructive Behavior

Labeling of cyberloafing	Authors	Nature of cyberloafing	Explicit/Implicit harmful effects
Internet abuse/misuse	Anandarajan (2002); Armstrong, Philips, & Saling (2000)	Use of the Internet for non-work related activities.	Productivity reduction. Costs to company. Waste of valuable work time.
Cyberloafing/Cyberslacking	Beugré (2003); Block (2001); Lim (2002); Lim et al. (2001); Lim et al. (2002)	Use of the Internet for non-work related activities.	Productivity reduction. Costs to company. Waste of valuable work time.

plagiarism (illegal copies of websites of downloaded materials and software pirating); newsgroups posting (posting of personal messages); transmission of confidential data (using the Internet to display or transmit trade secrets); pornography (accessing and/or downloading sexually explicit materials); hacking (denial of service attacks or accessing organizational databases); nonwork-related download/upload of materials; leisure use of the Internet (on-line shopping, gambling, chatting, game playing, etc.), use of external ISPs (using an external ISP to connect to the Internet to avoid detection); and moonlighting (using office resources such as networks to organize and conduct personal business) (Siau, Nah, & Teng, 2002: 75).

Despite its negative consequences, cyberloafing may not always have detrimental effects on organizations. Few studies have recognized the opportunity of providing recreational use of the Internet at work. When the intent of the employee is to escape routine practices and discharge anxiety, then cyberloafing becomes a form of constructive behavior.

CONSTRUCTIVE CYBERLOAFING
Although cyberloafing is viewed as a counterproductive behavior, under some circumstances, it may be perceived as a positive practice. Lim et al. (2002) conducted an empirical study in Singapore designed to assess employee Internet usage. They found that the majority of respondents agreed that it was acceptable for them to use the Internet for nonwork-related activities. Today, many young people first learned about computing through video games and took online breaks during their college studies (Oravec, 2002a). Computer games may not always have detrimental effects on employee productivity. They can be used to decrease anxiety and encourage experimentation (Ovarec, 2002a). In a survey study, Stanton found that frequent Internet users reported higher levels of job satisfaction than less frequent users (Stanton, 2002).

Online recreation is constructive when it is in synch with pending work responsibilities, allowing individuals to use time not consumed by workplace demands in ways that equip them to face future tasks with greater energy and expanded perspectives (Ovarec, 2002a). Constructive recreation may allow employees to momentarily escape their regular tasks providing them a safety valve for those who face unyielding situations or put in long hours, thus putting the porousness of today's Internet-supported workplaces to good use (Ovarec, 2002b). A certain amount of playful use of computer applications in the right situation can lead to learning that may be of value to organizations (Belanger & van Slyke, 2002). When individuals engage in playful web browsing, they may learn through an improved understanding of the organization, of existing knowledge, or increased amount of accuracy of knowledge (Belanger & van Slyke, 2002).

CONCLUSION
In this article, we have argued that cyberloafing can be considered as a virtue or a vice, depending on the user's intent. To reduce the negative effects of cyberloafing, managers should develop and implement clear

policies related to the use of the Internet at work. For instance, managers may determine the appropriate amount of time that is allowed for personal use of the Internet and provide space where employees may use the Internet for personal reasons during breaks or lunchtime. Because employees are too busy attempting to meet their work obligations, organizations should realize that certain personal business might need to be conducted during work hours (Siau, Nah, & Teng, 2002). Thus, managers may well gain by allowing a 'constructive' cyberloafing at work. Such a recreational use of the Internet at work may help spur creativity, reduce anxiety, and enhance well-being. Because managers cannot prevent employees from cyberloafing at work, they should design ways to allow them to do it in a more constructive manner.

We believe that overtly restricting online recreation may prevent employees from exploring the Internet's full potential for productive intellectual and social endeavors (e.g., Oravec, 2002a). Allowing for reasonable and humane amounts of online recreation can indeed have considerable advantages, both for the individuals involved and the organization as a whole. It can serve to open blocked creative channels and possibly relieve stress as well (Ovarec, 2002b). Organizations that provide benefits such as high-speed desktop Internet access and do not forbid occasional nonbusiness use may promote higher job satisfaction by doing so (Stanton, 2002).

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TABLE 2. Summary of Studies Construing Cyberloafing as a Constructive Behavior

Labeling of cyberloafing	Authors	Nature of cyberloafing	Explicit/Implicit benefits
Frequent use of Internet	Stranton (2002)	Using the Internet several times a day.	Increases job satisfaction.
Playful use of computer	Belanger & Slyke (2002)	Use of computer for fun. Playing computer games.	Increases learning and use of computer applications.
Internet recreation	Ovarec (2002a,b)	Use the Internet for fun, playing games, on-line shoping, etc.	Awakes creativity, increases well-being; restores personal energy, reduces anxiety, encourages experimentation.

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