

# Create an Internet Usage Policy that Works for You

by Mike Foster

No matter how large or small your company, if you have employees and supply them with an at-work Internet connection, chances are you also have Internet misuse issues. In fact, recent surveys show that at-work Internet users spend an average of 21 hours per month online, more than double the amount of time spent online by at-home Internet users. While some employees may be using this online time to conduct actual business, many more are using their at-work Internet connection for personal use.

For you as a business owner or manager, this misuse costs your company thousands of dollars each year. Consider this example: if an employee who earns \$35,000 annually is spending 20% of his or her time being unproductive on the Internet, that equals \$7,000 lost out of your payroll. Now multiply that amount by the number of employees at that salary level who misuse the Internet. Next, add to that figure 20% of your organization's share of Social Security payments, unemployment taxes, and worker's compensation insurance, and the true amount lost can be staggering.

Even more startling are the legal liabilities and the amount of technological resources lost due to the misuse. Examples of this include violating copyright and software licensing laws by illegally downloading online material, or visiting inappropriate web sites and allowing your company's domain name to be captured, possibly resulting in negative publicity. Additionally, excessive non-business use of the Internet results in slower network connections. As a result, companies may spend thousands of dollars more than they need in order to handle the increased bandwidth load.

In order to combat these problems, many companies have initiated an Internet Usage Policy, which establishes what is permissible when using the company resources to access the Internet. In fact, a recent study published by The Aberdeen Group found that 52 of the Fortune 100 companies actually have an Internet usage policy in place.

But before you begin to draw up your own Internet Usage Policy, distribute it company-wide, and enforce it, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who in the company needs Internet access? Do all employees need it, including your receptionists and data entry personnel, or do just the sales and marketing departments require it? Remember, just because you offer Internet access doesn't mean all employees are entitled to it.
- What online services do the users need? Perhaps your sales team simply needs email capabilities to stay in contact with customers, while your marketing or research and development teams need access to the web in order to stay abreast of current industry trends.
- What kind of access do the users need? Do they each need their own individual connection, or can the department share one Internet enabled computer?



Once you define your company's Internet protocol, then you're ready to create the most effective Internet Usage Policy for your organization.

## Steps for Implementing an Effective Internet Usage Policy

(Please note none of the information provided below is to be misconstrued as legal advice. This information is meant to be of general nature. You should consult your attorney if you have specific legal questions.)

### 1. Establish a written Internet Usage Policy.

Simply stating your company's Internet philosophies during an informal meeting is not enough. You need to put it in writing and detail everything from the kinds of uses that are acceptable to the consequences of violating the policy. Be sure to explain that the Internet is a business tool and should only be used as such. Express the costs associated with providing Internet access and state why the policy must be as stringent as it is—i.e.: to reduce legal liabilities and protect the company's image. Other points to consider for your policy include:

- Prohibiting employees from using the Internet or email to promote their personal cause or agenda;
- Prohibiting obscene, harassing, dishonest, profane, or offensive communication of any kind;

- Instructing the employees to avoid downloading any data or attachments until they have been scanned for viruses by the system administrator;
- Defining the password creation/change procedures;
- Stating if and when Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Channels and/or instant messaging may be used;
- Explaining that all data received, created, and/or sent over the network are the property of the company and is public information without privacy of any kind;
- Addressing the issue of employees using personal devices, like their own modems and portable devices (wireless phones and/or wireless Internet browsers) while at work;
- Reserving the right to access all data and monitor activity for any reason or even no reason at all;
- Explaining who is authorized to access e-mail messages, Internet history, and other monitored data;
- Explaining the disposition of e-mail messages when the employee is on temporary but extended leave;
- Reserving the right to turn over any and all data to law enforcement without prior consent of the sender or receiver;
- Stating the retention/purge schedule for files, including retention procedures for possible use as legal evidence.

informal meetings or question and answer sessions with your employees to address their policy and Internet concerns.

No one can deny that the Internet is an amazing technological tool that can help your business achieve new levels of success. But as with any technology, the temptation for misuse is always present. By implementing and enforcing an Internet Usage Policy, your company can not only reclaim lost employee productivity, but you can also gain the peace of mind that comes with decreased liabilities and increased profits.

#### **About the Author:**

*Mike Foster's history as the CEO of a computer company for 12 years, and as an international technology consultant and speaker, makes him an expert at both technology and management skills. Mike Foster is a frequent presenter of keynote speeches, seminars, and workshops. His message about how to use technology to increase profits and productivity is welcomed by small business owners and Fortune 10 executives alike. For more information about Foster's programs, call 800-657-7107 or visit [www.fosterinstitute.com](http://www.fosterinstitute.com) or [www.internetmisuse.com](http://www.internetmisuse.com).*

## **2. Post your policy AND give each employee a copy to sign.**

At the time of hire, each new employee should be given a copy of your Internet Usage Policy, and he or she should sign it and return an acknowledgement stating that the Internet Usage Policy has been explained. In addition, post a copy of the policy on your company bulletin board or on your Intranet. This reduces the chance of an employee stating that he or she never learned about your Internet Usage Policy. Finally, make sure your employees know whom to contact when reporting policy violations.

## **3. Enforce your policy and remind your employees on a regular basis.**

Mentioning your Internet Usage Policy once and never bringing the subject up again is a sure path to Internet misuse. Your employees must know that the policy is always in full effect and not simply window-dressing. Publicizing your policy through Internet misuse seminars is a great enforcing agent. Also, hold