

Talking in Keystrokes

The divided issue on instant messengers at the workplace

There was a time when communicating over distance was a madly romanticised affair. But today, the regular postman is now a worldwide network of computers called the Internet. The *instant messenger (IM)*, like MSN messenger and Yahoo messenger, is a relatively new and irrefutably powerful communication tool that not too long ago changed the very way people interacted with one another. Now, they are permeating the working world in overwhelming fashion.

Technological innovations in communication like emails and IMs unquestionably make work more efficient, allowing multiple conversations in real time and adding an element of archiving so referencing is easy. To the pleasure of bosses, they make the company phone bills a lot prettier to look at too.

However, like double-edged swords, these communicative revolutions did not come without drawbacks.

Hide-and-seek

It's a hard fact - people love to talk a whole lot. Back when phones were the predominant mode of communication in the workplace, the smart employees were those who knew to limit their personal calls. You could attract unfavourable suspicion if you were discussing what *Tommy said to Lily that made her cry so badly the night before*, even if you were trying to whisper all the drama straight-faced through the phone.

To chronic conversationalists however, IMs were gifts from heaven. There was now an avenue to gossip with friends and still look like you're hard at work. The truth is that as much as people would love to claim the title of multi-tasking extraordinaire, indulging in personal chit-chat while at work causes a proven degradation in productivity.

Real-time communicative technologies like IMs attract personal usage on company time. Bosses see this as a risk that could defray the added productivity these programs were supposed to offer in the first place. As a result, many employers now make it commonplace practice to enforce some form of regulatory policy regarding their usage, whether explicitly or implicitly expressed. As an employee, it's good for you to understand some of the common guidelines so that you know you're not crossing the line, or in worse cases, landing yourself in hot water.

One-size-fits-all advice

Every company will have their own policy. That, and the degree by which they are enforced, may differ from company to company. Whatever a company's stance is, the following are great points of advice that should be applied to any place of work.

Advice #1: Work first, chat later

A conversation with a friend or family member is often times more interesting and engaging than work. It's easy to get carried away, but keep in mind that while you're on your company's payroll, your obligation is to your work. As employers are accepting the importance of work-life balance, and are facilitating family-time and activities, employees shouldn't sway to the other side of the equilibrium. At the office, give your work unparalleled priority. So that after work, you can put your whole mind to play.

Advice #2: You're not a computer processor.

When you multi-task, you are engaging in constant context-shifting, which is, essentially, having to keep on changing your frame of mind. This is often disruptive to a good train of thought. It's like trying to run two races at the same time, shuttling back and forth between tracks. You end up wasting time and energy during each process of shifting.

Stretching and bombarding your mind with multiple conversations and intrusive alerts that can be done without only ends up jeopardising your quality of work. When you truly get down to business when it's called for and reserve the small talk for lunch breaks and in-betweens, you'll find it easier to wow your boss with great on-the-dot work.

Advice #3: You're not invisible

Did you know that the court of law regards electronic evidence as admissible as paper? Just like emails can be centrally archived and reviewed, IM chat activities and logs can be tracked and monitored. So be careful not to indulge in conversations that are defamatory, libellous, offensive, obscene or inappropriate. Think twice about presuming it's safe to bad mouth that director who gave you three months worth of work to finish in a week, even if you think you covered your tracks. Remember that logs would be stored in the other computer too.

The internet harkened an age of unprecedented global interaction and new levels of social freedom. But that individual openness puts people in a position vulnerable to information theft. It's therefore unwise to divulge sensitive information or discuss confidential matters via IMs. They are more suited for non-critical trivialities, e.g. setting up an appointment or a meeting.

Advice #4: Your company's not invincible

Unlike emails, which have had extensive use in businesses, mainstream IM providers, do not have adequate safeguards against viruses, spyware and other security technicalities and liabilities in place yet. It's crucial to practise caution.

Be particular about the conversations you engage in, especially when it comes to file transfers, which are notorious for harbouring byte-sized terrorists. That's another reason to refrain from extraneous non-work related chatter. You don't want to end up derailing your company's entire computer network and structure because your friend sent you a picture of his dog on wheels.

Not now, I'm working

IMs are definitely gaining ground at work. Without a doubt, it is through great innovations that modern office is shaped and advanced. However, a lot of discourse has been generated surrounding the counter-productive effects of seamless communication.

Whether or not you have the choice of engaging in personal banter, the greater picture where you are concerned is ultimately how you manage your work and all your potential distractions. It's really just a matter of discipline.