

More and more businesses rely heavily on electronic technology such as telephone, fax, and e-mail. All of these new technologies have brought in a new era to the present world. The use of computers and Internet for electronic commerce and information exchange has increased quite dramatically,

Martina Schollmeyer (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, USA), and Helen Kelly (University of Western Ontario, Canada) showed that approximately 90% of the companies have an e-mail system at work. An employee sends and receives an average of 50 e-mail messages per week. Each employee spends about 200 minutes each week on e-mail. Among those 200 an average of 30 minutes are spent on personal e-mail. It means that every week an employee will have to spend 3 hours just reading e-mails at work.

Concern regarding workplace privacy has become a huge issue along with the successfulness and cheerfulness profits that electronic mails have brought to the company. Conflicts between the employer and employee's perspectives toward the use of electronic mail system have started an invisible war in the workplace. These conflicting assertions have the potential to, create an atmosphere of mutual mistrust in the workplace and lowering company morale and production.

Advantages of Electronic Mail System

The lists below are few major advantages that encourage people to use electronic mail over other similar communication tools.

- It can send pictures, sounds, spreadsheet, and long document.
- It costs users nothing - probably just the cost of a local phone call.
- It is fast. It can be arrived anywhere in the world within a few minutes.
- It makes clear and concise communication, avoids the risk of verbal misunderstanding.

Electronic mail is actually a wonderful tool that helps individuals and companies work faster and smarter. All of these advantages have helped employers to choose electronic mail system as their major communication tool for internal and external use.

Arguments Between the Two Groups

Employer's Perspective

Most of the organizations with internal email systems also provide the exchange of emails between their internal network and other external networks on the Internet. A company with the probability of exchanging emails also provides Internet access to their employees. This new trend has provided opportunities for employees to add new value to their employers' business.

However, some employers are concerned that their employees may use these conveniences for non-business purposes. Most of these companies have established a

surveillance system to monitor their employees' daily electronic communication activities. Few major concerns that most of the employers have are listed here:

- They are afraid that employees might send confidential information or corporate trade secrets through the email system.
- Some employees might use the technology that the employer provided to start or operate their own business.
- Employers sometimes might find that they could be held liable for email or Internet related activities of their employees. In most cases, employee's e-mails or Usenet postings carry the employer's name or trademark as part of the employee's e-mail address. Defamatory, political, or religious statements sent outside the company by employees may be attributed to the employer.
- Employers also have the obligation to provide a work environment free of discrimination and harassment. Inappropriate material circulated internally can create a problem.
- Employers have the concern on the potential liability for sexually explicit messages sent to other employees.

Employers want to be sure that their employees are doing a good job and work properly using the electronic mail system provided by the company. Most of the companies have set up some level of surveillance system to monitoring their employees' e-mail activities.

Employee's Perspective

Employers believe they have the right, as an employer and as an e-mail system provider, to monitor the communications of their employees in the workplace.

However, for employees, this electronic monitoring is an unacceptable intrusion of privacy.

In employees' perspective that e-mail is more like a telephone since the rapidly growth of e-mail usage in the workplace, its natural interactive style, and the probability of instantaneous communication. Because most of the companies allow employees use telephones for private calls. As a result, employees feel that they can be as informal and natural in drafting e-mail messages as they are talking over their phone.

Employees are expecting that their e-mail accounts are private in the fact of accessing their accounts is restricted by the use of personal passwords. As such, employees believe that they should have an absolute right to privacy for their e-mail communication.

Also, most of the companies' electronic mail system has the connection to the Internet. The ability to communicate with the outside world makes the employees believe that the e-mail system is not restricted to business related use. Employees tend to use the system to send e-mail to friends and colleagues.

Furthermore, the misunderstanding or the lack of clarification of the company's policy, and the lack of knowledge on electronic communication and computer networks, employees have forgotten some important facts when using the e-mail system. When electronic mail system is used at a company, the employer owns it and is allowed to review its contents. Messages sent within the company and as well as those that are sent from your terminal to another company or from another company to you can be subjected to monitoring by your employer.

Most of the electronic systems retain messages in memory even after they have been deleted. Although it appears they are erased from the employee's terminal, they are often backed up by someone or an automatic system in the IS department along with other important data from the computer system to prevent data loss or power failure. When there is a need to retrieve the contents for legitimate reasons, such as to find

lost messages, to comply with investigations of wrongful acts or to recover from system failure, management can look into these backups.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the conflict regarding to the electronic mail privacy in the workplace between employers and employees goes on, employers have to spend a large amount of time to keep an eye on what did the employees send out in e-mail messages, while employees have to keep in mind that every time they are in front of a computer sending out e-mail messages, there might be an invisible eye watching at their back. All of these causes have lower the company's productivity and generate a deadlock between the employer and employee's relationship.

Electronic mail has played a major role in every company and organization. Employees are not only dealing with internal documents, but also with external client communications, such as contract proposals, orders, customer support, etc., via the e-mail system. Almost all of the commercial sites that you visit today you can e-mail the company for customer support, on-line order, etc., directly from the company's home page. Electronic mail has become a backbone of electronic commerce.

In conclusion, the best solution is to establish a clear explicit policy to ensure the employer and employee's rights to access the e-mail system. The policy should clearly state what messages an employee can put in the e-mail. When and under what circumstance that employer has the right to access to their employees' accounts. Some of the following major elements should include in the policy:

- The policy should address whether the company's e-mail system can be used for personal messages and/or business related only.
- The policy should address whether if the company information will be allowed in any e-mail that is send outside the company (if personal e-mail is allowed).

- The policy should address the company will monitor the contents of e-mail to what extent. This includes the explanation of the company owns the e-mail system and the owner has the legal right to access the system.
- The policy should address whether the employees are allowed to use encryption on their e-mail. This includes the explanation on the security level that the company has provided to its employees.
- The policy should address a prohibition against the post of e-mail that contains sexually explicit images or language to avoid sexual harassment.
- The Policy should address any specific opinion based on others' race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, religious beliefs or political beliefs contain in e-mail will not be allowed to avoid discrimination.
- The policy should explicitly address the procedures for disciplining employees who violate or abuse the company's e-mail policy.

References:

<http://www.elinfont.com>

<http://www.cnn.com>