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Social networking, a game the whole office can play

By Shannon Proudfoot, Canwest News Service

The youngest employees lead the pack, but plenty of their baby boomer and senior colleagues are trolling social networking sites while at work.

Exactly half of the "traditionalist" generation (born in 1945 or earlier) admit to visiting social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, travel reviews and YouTube on the job, a new survey reveals.

Sixty-one per cent of boomers, commonly viewed as those born in the two decades following the Second World War, are doing the same, along with 73 per cent of Gen-Xers (defined here as those born between 1968 and 1980) and 81 per cent of Gen-Ys (born between 1981 and 2000).

"There often tends to be a bias against the younger colleagues, that they're the ones who are wasting time at work online, but really the recognition is that 66 per cent of employed Canadians are visiting social networking sites at work," says Giselle Kovary, managing partner of n-gen People Performance, which commissioned the survey.

Many workplaces block access to social networking sites, but those aren't the only online destinations for employees seeking a break from the workday, says Adwoa K. Buahene, co-founder of n-gen, which focuses on multi-generational workplaces.

"As one Gen-Y said to us, 'Why can't I be 15 minutes on my Facebook when I see that my baby boomer colleague is spending 15 minutes on CNN or SportsNet?'" she says.

The survey was conducted for n-gen in March and included about 800 Canadians aged 18 and over. The results are considered accurate within 3.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

For Pamela Ross, vice-president of communications and chief marketing officer for the Toronto-based Sunnybrook Foundation, the professional and personal are closely intertwined online.

The 42-year-old says she uses her personal Facebook account to promote events supporting Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and maintains a personal and professional Twitter account, though her four children think the microblogging site is "the lamest thing they've ever come across."

At her last job, Ross says employees communicated during the day via MSN Messenger, though some of her older colleagues never liked it.

"It is evolutionary and I think it's also a matter of a comfort level," she says.

When it comes to tools that curtail or monitor Internet access at work, there's little difference of opinion among employees of different generations, and almost all of it is negative, says David Zweig, a management professor at the University of Toronto at Scarborough.

"Organizations definitely have the right to limit access to these types of sites if it isn't job-related, but they need to make it very clear to their employees so people don't feel like their rights are being violated," he says.

Surreptitious at-work surfing has spawned a cottage industry of software and tricks designed to help people cover their digital tracks.

A week ago, 22-year-old British web developer Elliott Kember released Spreadtweet, an application that disguises a Twitter feed as an Excel spreadsheet. He says it's been downloaded almost 5,000 times already.

"There's this old-world mentality for bosses that they think socializing is not working, but I think those lines are starting to blur," he says.

The Firefox browser's Panic application allows users to "close all tabs, while opening another one that will make it look like you are doing what you should be doing" with a single click. MSN's Messenger Plus! Live gives users a keyboard shortcut to lock their instant messaging window and hide it under an innocent-looking icon.

During the March Madness college basketball tournament, CBS Sports streamed games live online, and cubicle-bound fans raved about the "boss button" that instantly muted the sound and switched the screen from an NCAA game to an Excel spreadsheet.

ReadAtWork.com, meanwhile, mimics a Windows desktop and disguises classic literary works by the likes of Tolstoy, Emily Dickinson and F. Scott Fitzgerald as stodgy Power Point presentations.

But a recent study from the University of Melbourne could make bosses feel better about their employees' online wanderings. Researchers found that workers who engage in "workplace Internet leisure browsing" were nine per cent more productive than those who didn't.

"It's the new walk around the block to get some fresh air," says Ross.

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