



THE EFFECT OF IM USAGE ON WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

**By
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Increasingly, Instant Messaging (IM) clients including AOL, Yahoo! and MSN are becoming a primary means of workplace communication. However, there has been relatively little research conducted to determine the effect of this communication on employee productivity. We will attempt to synthesize what information does exist in order to provide corporate executives with a foundation on which to build future electronic communications policies and regulations.

Introduction to IM in the Workplace

According to recent studies, IM is present in over 90% of organizations and 52% of these companies now use IM for business applications.¹ Originally deployed by individual users (69% of organizations acknowledge that IM was introduced without the involvement of the IT department) as a means of personal communication, IM has quickly become a tool for intra-office interaction.² In fact, Ellen Isaacs recently conducted a study in which she found that 62% of the time employees spent using IM was dedicated to work related purposes, while personal communications were limited to 13%.³ An overwhelming majority (79%) believe Instant Messaging has had a positive impact on the workplace experience, with 40% acknowledging an improvement in collaborative teamwork.⁴ Interestingly, IM clients are used more frequently by male employees, as well as those with an extensive education and a high household income.⁵

The Argument for IM Clients in the Workplace

There are many arguments for the use of IM as a communications tool in the business environment, including improved brainstorming capabilities and the ability to multitask. However, none is more overriding than the impact on geographically separated offices. Throughout our research we reviewed countless positive accounts of IM bridging locations and continents, thereby encouraging the new global business structure. Kevin Vanderberg, Director of Software Development at Navitaire, states, "We work with people in Ireland, the Phillipines and around the US everyday. I don't know how we would get anything done without instant messaging."⁶ One designer based in Detroit acknowledges the immediacy created through IM: "My clients don't mind that I'm across the country when they can reach me in an instant online."⁷ Another professional notes, "I use IM every day at work and depend on it. Most of my coworkers

¹ Osterman Research, *A Short & Simple Guide to Managing Instant Messaging in the Workplace*; available from <http://www.imbrellasoftware.com/Osterman.pdf>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2007.

² Osterman Research, *A Short & Simple Guide to Managing Instant Messaging in the Workplace*; available from <http://www.imbrellasoftware.com/Osterman.pdf>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2007.

³ Ellen Isaacs, Alan Walendowski, Steve Whittaker, Diane Schian and Candace Kamm, *The Character, Functions and Styles of Instant Messaging in the Workplace*; available from <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~jpd/classes/ics105s03/readings/isaacs-character-function-cscw02.pdf>; Internet; accessed 31 January 2007.

⁴ Eulynn Shiu and Amanda Lenhart, *How Americans Use Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Instanmessage_Report.pdf; Internet; accessed 26 January 2007.

⁵ Eulynn Shiu and Amanda Lenhart, *How Americans Use Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Instanmessage_Report.pdf; Internet; accessed 26 January 2007.

⁶ Jeff Hoffman, "Instant Messaging in the Workplace"; available from http://www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/2004/200402_16-17.pdf; Internet; accessed 7 February 2007.

⁷ Regina Robo, *Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.salary.com/advice/layouthtmls/adv1_display_nocat_Ser79_Par168.html; Internet; accessed 31 January 2007.

are in other countries, so it's easier and cheaper to ping them throughout the day rather than picking up the phone.⁸

Many also acknowledge the tool as less intrusive and a time saver when compared to the telephone due to the ability to clearly see if the co-worker is available prior to sending a message. At the same time, it is much more efficient in terms of communication than email applications due to the real-time feature. In fact, this argument has been proven by a congregation of researchers from the University of the Pacific (California), National Chung Cheng University (Taiwan) and Miami University (Florida) when they discovered that IM communications were better for brainstorming due to its collaborative nature and speed, thereby giving employees a greater ability to generate ideas when compared to an email system.⁹

Studies also note the ability to multitask as a major benefit of IM in the workplace. Isaacs reports that "users like that they could respond to quick IM questions from coworkers while engaged in another task, such as talking on the telephone, or processing documents or email." In fact, in a recent study, researchers determined that at least one participant was multitasking during 85.7% of workplace IM conversations.¹⁰ One editor based in Boston noted, "IM takes less time away from productivity than someone coming into your office."¹¹ It is clear that IM can be an efficient, thought-provoking communications tool not only within the office but as a bridge between geographically dispersed locations. However, some argue that the costs may outweigh the benefits of this technology.

The Argument against IM Clients in the Workplace

"Instant Messaging can be a productivity-enhancing tool for expeditious business communications with coworkers, clients, customers, vendors, and the like. On the other hand, productivity may be adversely affected by employee abuse or overindulgence in personal instant messaging communications."¹² This statement, taken from a human resource executive, while disheartening, presents the major challenge with implementing IM clients into the office. In fact, 32% of those individuals who use IM in the office acknowledge that IM can encourage workplace gossip, and 29% note that IM has been a distraction at some point in the past.¹³ While we have already discussed that personal communications account for only 13% of IM conversations in the office, it is recognized that IM tools can raise non-work related conversations between co-workers. Although initially frowned upon, some managers look at this communication as team building "because it enables peers to bond and form stronger working relationships." However, not all concur.¹⁴ This begs the question: how can managers develop policies to limit the distractions associated with IM tools while promoting the benefits to business operations?

⁸ Keith Robinson, *Instant Messaging: Risky to Productivity*; available from <http://www.to-done.com/2005/11/instant-messaging-risky-to-productivity/>; Internet; accessed 7 February 2007.

⁹ New Scientist Blog; *Is IM Better for Brainstorming?*; available from <http://www.newscientist.com/blog/technology/2007/01/is-im-better-for-brainstorming.html>; Internet; accessed 23 January 2007.

¹⁰ Ellen Isaacs, Alan Walendowski, Steve Whittaker, Diane Schian and Candace Kamm, *The Character, Functions and Styles of Instant Messaging in the Workplace*; available from <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~jpd/classes/ics105s03/readings/isaacs-character-function-cscw02.pdf>; Internet; accessed 31 January 2007.

¹¹ Regina Robo, *Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.salary.com/advice/layouthtmls/adv1_display_nocat_Ser79_Par168.html; Internet; accessed 31 January 2007.

¹² Nehra, *Instant Messaging In The Office: What To Know and Do About It*; available from <http://bostonworks.boston.com/nehra/112805.shtml>; Internet; accessed 29 January 2007.

¹³ Eulynn Shiu and Amanda Lenhart, *How Americans Use Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Instanmessage_Report.pdf; Internet; accessed 26 January 2007.

¹⁴ Regina Robo, *Instant Messaging*; available from http://www.salary.com/advice/layouthtmls/adv1_display_nocat_Ser79_Par168.html; Internet; accessed 31 January 2007.

Conclusion: Developing the Appropriate Workplace Policy

In order to obtain the benefits of IM in the workplace, executives must make decisions on how to implement the tool and which client to use, based on the best match with their workplace environment. Currently, the new generation of Instant Messaging technologies gives executives the ability to customize features to their own staffs. The first step executives should take is to invest in one of the many new diagnostic tools which reveal use (and abuse) of all IM clients within the organization.¹⁵ This will identify the need for the tool within the organization as well as detect if employees are currently using it responsibly. Once the problems have been uncovered the manager has two alternatives:

1. If employees are using the technology responsibly and cost is an issue, the executives may want to leave the free clients (AOL, Yahoo!, MSN) in place and focus on establishing regulations to encourage productivity. As Nehra notes, "Employers should amend their instant messaging and electronic communication policies to meet the needs of the specific industry, business entity, or corporate client. An employer should identify and define, to the extent possible, acceptable and prohibited electronic communications in its policy."¹⁶
2. If employees are abusing the technology and cost is irrelevant, managers can purchase products like Sametime, created exclusively for the business environment, which runs internally and can help to alleviate some of the problems with personal communication by including such options as IM monitoring, ability to restrict privileges to each individual employee, and IM archives.¹⁷

Depending on the specific work environment, executives can determine the alternative that makes the most sense for the cheapest cost.

Lastly, some managers take another approach entirely. Robert Shoenfelt, CIO Celina Insurance Group, states, "People have a job to do and they either do it or they don't. My attitude is that I work with professionals and they'll get the job done."¹⁸ Jenn Schraut, human resources and compensation associate at Salary.com, concurs: "It's like the telephone: the technology itself is neutral. So the onus is on the employee to use the tool wisely and effectively keep their chit chat under control."¹⁹

The key to managing IM use in the workplace is to understand how employees use the tool in regards to their job responsibilities and then offer the optimal option based on 1) the degree of employee use and abuse and 2) the cost of implementing the technology, all the while remembering that ultimately it is the employees' responsibility to get their work done in a timely fashion.

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¹⁷ Robert A. Blackstone and Anne E. Denecke, *Blogging and Text /Instant Messaging in the Workplace*; available from http://www.dwt.com/practc/empservices/publications/11-06_WorkplaceBlogging.pdf; Internet; accessed 6 February 2007.

¹⁸ David Haskin, *Chatting Your Way To Greater Productivity*; available from <http://www.internetnews.com/bus-news/article.php/3067281>; Internet; accessed 28 January 2007.

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