

# BOULDER COUNTY BUSINESS REPORT

## **Social e-mails, instant messages don't hinder work productivity unless they're interruptive**

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They invade our e-mail on a daily basis - those well-circulated jokes and cartoons that arrive in our inbox from our friends and colleagues at work.

Some of them are funny, some may be annoying, but when they show up in our office e-mail, can dealing with them become detrimental to our on-the-job productivity?

According to K.J. McCorry, president of Officiency Inc., a Boulder-based consultancy firm that specializes in workplace productivity, this type of social interaction through e-mail and instant messaging usually isn't disruptive - unless it becomes interruptive.

"Whenever social interaction is not mutual it becomes an interruption," McCorry said. "If I engage you, and you're engaging me back, and there's a connection, then it's mutual. But if I call you and you're busy, and I keep going on and on and don't pick up your cues, that's when it becomes an interruption."

According to consultations with her executive clients, McCorry said e-mail and instant messaging chit-chat isn't commonly perceived to be a threat to company productivity.

"All of us could work 24/7 because we're in the computer age," she said. "Work has moved much further into our personal time, and people are at home dealing with their work e-mail on Saturday and Sunday. Companies know that they're getting more work time from their employees so that's why they're allowing this type of social interaction more, and frankly, I think they should."

Because the line between work and social time has become blurred, McCorry said this type of social interaction is even being encouraged by many companies.

"I think it's necessary in the workplace because you want to build relationships, and you can't build them by always talking about business," she said. "There's a place for social interaction at work because today's culture is much more in tune with work productivity."

McCorry added that the practice of forwarding jokes, cartoons and gossip among office employees was far more prevalent six or seven years ago than it is today. She attributed this change to the fact that in today's workplace everyone's e-mail is constantly deluged with data - the novelty has worn off, and users are more apt to get rid of any unnecessary online distractions.

This doesn't mean that problems don't exist.

When a problem does arise, McCorry said the best way to deal with it is by communicating with the employee involved and letting them know what does and does not constitute an interruption.

If you want to engage in a nonwork-related pleasantry, asking your colleague if it's a good time to interrupt is usually a good idea. Being more aware of nonverbal language can also help clue you in when your colleague doesn't wish to be disturbed.

At Eenergy International Corp., a renewable power producer with headquarters in Boulder, Margie Paine, human resources director, said Internet socializing has never been a problem in the office.

"This is the first place I've worked where there hasn't been an abuse of e-mail," she said. "I worked for another larger company where that practice was more widespread, but here I don't see it at all. We're all extremely busy so there's not very much chit-chat or personal conversation during the day. Occasionally we'll go out after work for a drink, but that's all."

With 75 staff members worldwide and 35 in the Boulder office, Eenergy relies on e-mail as its most efficient communications tool - particularly since many of the employees telecommunicate. In spite of this reliance on e-mail, Paine said she has never seen it used for anything other than work purposes.

"I've never seen any abuse or cartoons or jokes from any employee ever," she said.

This atmosphere of e-mail decorum is typical of today's office environment, according to McCorry. She said the real distraction for many employees comes from e-mail quantity.

"Usually I hear from people who are constantly on e-mail and not effectively managing it," she said. "They're reading their e-mails but not dealing with them, which means they're constantly rereading and filtering massive amounts of data. It's not an issue of personal or social e-mails but rather fact that they're not filtering or managing them effectively.

"Companies are starting to do e-mail guidance - restrictions on what you can or can't say - but what hasn't been addressed is how to manage e-mails appropriately. Most employees get 100 to 150 e-mails per day, per user. If you're not managing them appropriately you could spend the whole day dealing with e-mails and not getting anything else done. But they don't need to take up your whole day - if you're educated in how to deal with them effectively."