

Companies Confront Cybersex on the Job

"Attention Kmart shoppers, cyberporn links are available in aisle three."

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As the workplace has become an increasingly Internet-friendly environment, employers have begun to grapple with workers visiting sexually oriented sites in cyberspace.

Employees at Kmart and Texaco, were caught in the act of cybersex and cyberporn, reports a story in a recent issue of Network World. Kmart dismissed their corporate Webmaster, when it found out that he had linked his own personal Web pages containing erotica to Kmart pages.

At Texaco, when an employee is found surfing Web sites and newsgroups with sexual themes by a network tracking system, the company issues a general memo detailing the employee's misbehavior. Texaco has a clear policy that lets everyone know that employees are forbidden to surf sexual Internet waters.

Alan Raymond, manager of Texaco's computer security group says the memo appears to be an effective means to bring the wayward back into the fold.

Jacob Reinbolt partner at the law firm of Procopio Cory, Hardgreaves, and Savage in San Diego, CA, who deals with Internet and Software issues says ready access to cybersex from work can be problem.

"The first line of defense is to only allow Internet browsing access to those who need it. You can allow other employees to just have e-mail but not Web access." Reinbolt says.

Other options include having an administrator on site who monitors each person's access to the Internet, and advising employees about what kind of sites they can visit for work, he says.

"The monitoring is not an invasion of privacy issue if you clearly state to your employees that they are being monitored and that they are being provided Internet access for work-related purposes only."

Reinbolt further warns, "Employers should also be aware that if an employee downloads objectionable sexual material and it is passed around the office. It may be deemed sexual harassment."

Downloading files from the Internet could have another undesirable effect. It could introduce viruses into an entire network.

"Therefore employers should set up firewalls to guard its system from outside intruders and to not allow employees to download software without permission," Reinbolt says.

Users of e-mail and their companies are not immune from litigation, despite some protections under the Electronic Communications Privacy Act (1986).

"Be aware that what you say online and the Web sites the sites that you access, can potentially be traced back to you, thereby subjecting you and/or your company to liability," he says.

To assist companies concerned with employees access to sexual Web sites at work, Microsystems Software of Framingham, Mass., has produced CyberSentry and Cyberpatrol to filter out cyberporn.

"Companies are using filtering software for increased productivity of workers, stopping downloading of materials onto the network and to protect themselves from liability," says Susan Getgood, Microsystems director of marketing. "Most of our clients are concerned with productivity and downloading problems."

CyberSentry software allows a company to filter access to unacceptable sites, track usage and set times that certain sites can be accessed. "We have a category of sites called sports and leisure which a company can allow access to during lunch or after work but not during business hours," added Getgood.

No businesses are exempt from cyberporn problems, even attorneys, relates Charles Gillepsie, Vice President of Publishing of the Web development firm BienLogic.

"While doing some checks of a directory on an Internet host computer for one of our law firm clients, we found 100 megabytes of pornographic images taken off the Net by an automated infobot that searches for and collects erotic material. We think it may have been put there by a hacker."

Who's liable for that pornographic material? The law firm's answer, "No comment."

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