

THE MILLENNIAL IN THE CUBICLE

A new generation of workers expects unfettered access to technology tools. They may end up changing the way governments operate.

By Jonathan Walters

It takes a single-minded sense of purpose for a government worker to rack up 349,170 Web-site visits during work hours over five months. That sense of purpose? "To come to work in the morning, play on the Internet all day and collect a paycheck," says Umesh Dalal, auditor for Richmond, Virginia, whose office uncovered the dedicated employee's antics.

The eye-popping surfing stats racked up by that city print shop support staffer are clearly exceptional, although the employee's supervisor also managed to ride the Internet waves a pretty impressive 23,310 times during the same period.

According to a recent Pew Internet & American Life Project study, 70 percent of working Americans now use the Internet on the job. That means that increasingly both the public and the private sectors are having to figure out how to balance the rights and interests of employees and employers in an environment where opportunities to do too much electronic wandering are virtually limitless, and where lots of employees spend most of the day on computers and tapping away at cell phones and other communication devices for legitimate work purposes.

That balance could swing sharply in up-

coming years—toward a new generation of employees for whom unfettered access to the full panoply of communications technology and online resources is simply a given. "I remember being frustrated because of the Internet-blocking software on

the computer," says Chantel Witt, 21, who recently interned with the Iowa Communications Network, the agency that oversees the state's fiber-optic network. "During my breaks, I would try to log on to news Web sites, and there were certain ones it would let me on and some that it wouldn't. It was most frustrating because it seemed random." In one instance, she says, she couldn't access a site she needed to get to as part of her job.

Witt's experience and frustrations are increasingly common, especially in offices that automatically monitor Web surfing habits and block access to certain sites. Those tools are popular among managers who see them as a way to reduce costly and time-consuming disciplinary procedures for those who violate use policies. But Web blocking also can hinder and irritate those who depend on access to online information and need to request exemptions to do their work.

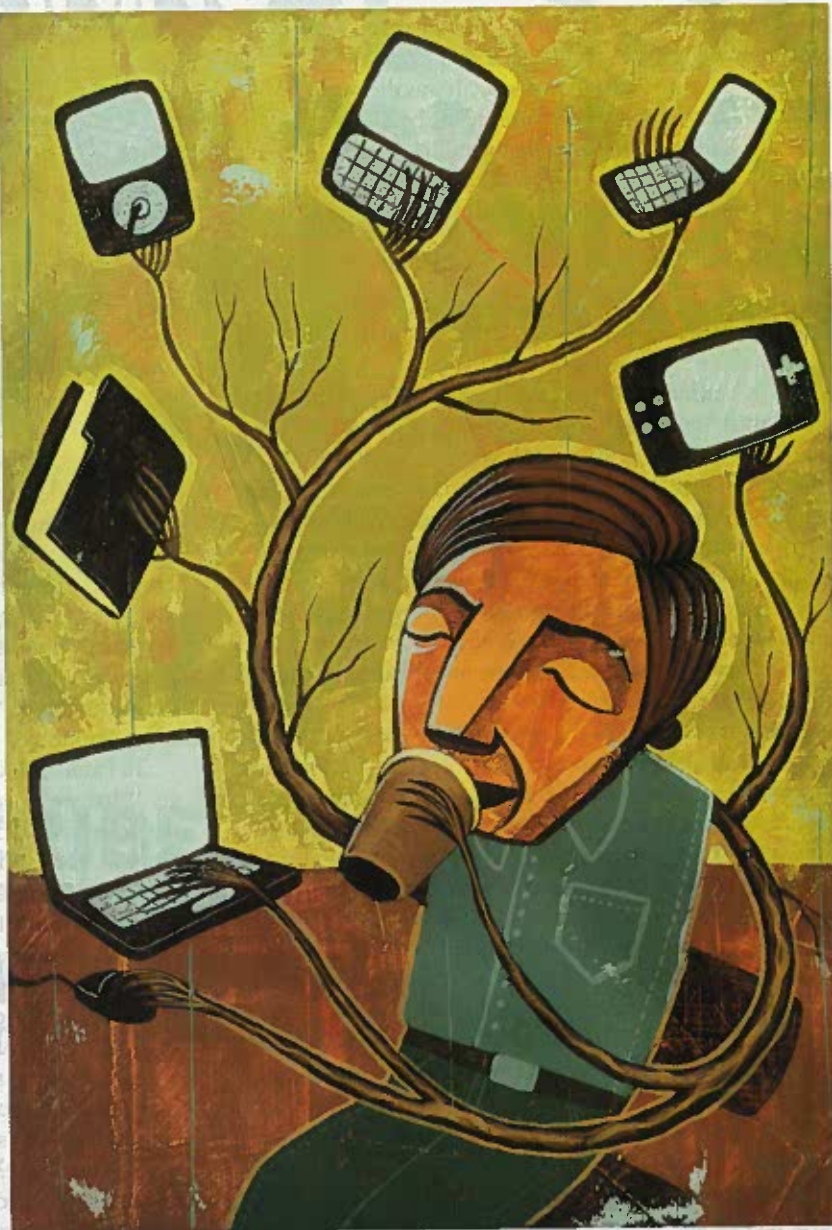
Complaints about overly restrictive use policies and Web blocking ought to be a wake-up call, say many in public-sector information technology and personnel management. Witt's generation—the "millennials," who have grown up texting, Twittering and YouTubeing, and often doing all of those things simultaneously—are going to push

hard for governments to open up on-the-job technology so that they can work the way they've become used to. "We're going to be seeing a new generation of employees who say, 'What do you mean I can't look at my Facebook page while I'm at work?'" says Craig Paull, head of IT for Kent County, Michigan.

Fundamentally, technology has helped create a layer of employees who view work in a whole new way, according to Lee Rainie, director of the Pew project. "It's clear that the boundary between work and play is not as bright and distinct as it is for their parents," says Rainie. "Nobody has done a systematic study, but as the digital generation enters the workforce, they will have different expectations about the work environment and using technology, and different norms about what they owe their boss versus what they owe their friends."

Rainie would get no disagreement from John Gillispie, director of the Iowa Communications Network, whose restrictions so frustrated Chantel Witt. "Look at how many windows they have open at the same time," says Gillispie. "They're working on a spreadsheet while their Facebook page is open, while working on a Word document, while texting, and this goes on pretty much the whole time they're awake. They don't draw these hard boundaries between work and play." But governments, Gillispie adds, draw "a very bright line," typically trying to spell out via "acceptable-use policies" just what is allowed and what isn't.

Paull describes Kent County's approach as downright restrictive, mostly because it blocks access to certain Web sites, including



such standards as YouTube and Facebook. He thinks that filters sensibly meant to prevent employees from visiting certain clearly inappropriate sites may have to be replaced by trust that employees will not while away the workday gambling online, playing Internet games or viewing pornography—and that a little face time on Facebook should be OK as long as the work is getting done.

Invasion of the Multitaskers

So far, no obvious inter-generational warfare seems to have broken out in the public-sector workplace over acceptable-use policies, perhaps because there might still be too few millennials working in government to create any significant stir. And for the most

part, those who are working in government are there because they believe in public service and are therefore willing to deal with whatever constraints may come with the job. Bill Schrier, head of IT for the city of Seattle, says that the twenty-somethings he's hired seem genuinely dedicated and aren't emulating the day away at taxpayers' expense.

Indeed, a casual survey of state and local government acceptable-use policies indicates that most actually do recognize that employees may hop on the Internet occasionally to check box scores or make a lunch date. Even in Richmond, where the headlines about employee abuse of the Web in the city print shop were played prominently across the newspaper last summer, auditor Dalal says the city tolerates reasonable personal use of city computers. "If someone is using the Internet to try and find a restaurant to go to lunch, we're not going to worry about it." On the other hand, says Dalal,

the city "doesn't feel that employees have any right to privacy when working on a city computer," and the city can—and does—spot-monitor employees.

While that seems reasonable enough, it's probably not going to do it for millennials. And governments with restrictive policies may be missing some opportunities to harness new opportunities for efficiency. Not only will young workers have different expectations about what technology they can use on the job—including the personal arsenals of gadgets they bring to work with them—but they very likely will be bringing new, creative ways to use all those technologies to get their jobs done that haven't yet occurred to the current

crop of fogies. And so governments are going to be compelled to cut them slack, Paull argues, something he is in the process of trying to explain to his county's human resources shop and the county board. "I'm trying to educate our personnel people and the county board right now

of giving the idea the green light, he nixed it. "I said, 'Oh, and why don't we get them all pillows, too.'" It was the word "chat" that sent him around the bend. "All I was thinking was wait until the press gets ahold of this, that we have employees all over the city idly chatting about sports and the

wrestling with this issue, there seems to be much more talk these days of opening up access than of trying to clamp down.

In developing its acceptable-use policy, Chris Bezruki, head of personnel for Champaign, Illinois, says city officials tried to be practical, acknowledging the reality that employees are going to use city computers for personal reasons. "When we were drafting the policy, we knew we couldn't close down the Internet, so managing it became our guiding principle." It's the same principle the city now applies to a proliferation of new gadgets, such as BlackBerrys and iPhones, says Bezruki.

And while Bezruki says the city has had to discipline and even fire a few employees for abusing the privilege, for the most part employees understand the pros, cons and dangers associated with technologies that essentially put the world at an individual's fingertips while putting the city's computer networks at risk. "We have a very sophisticated workforce," Bezruki says.

To Paull, "this isn't about technology per se. What we're actually dealing with is a whole new world of management challenges." That's exactly the view of Dana Jefferson, Delaware's head of personnel and president of the National Association of State Personnel Executives, who says she has been involved in lengthy discussions about how to open up the Web to the vast majority of trustworthy and hard-working employees in state governments.

"I think what you need to do is look at the bottom line," says Jefferson. "First, is the work getting done? And, second, is a person interfering with co-workers getting their work done?" If employees pass those two tests and aren't violating any of the boilerplate policies around forbidden Web sites and illegal activity, says Jefferson, then governments should recognize that "different people have different styles of work, and that while these new technologies might present problems for us, we need to turn that around and see how they can be made to work for us."

Besides, says Paull, it's really not in any CIO's DNA to be an enforcer. "I don't care for that part of the job. My job is to enable people, not disable people, so I try to be careful when it comes to control."

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The Private-Sector Take

Government hardly has the market cornered on employees who want to spend part of the workday checking out the latest YouTube offerings. The issue of acceptable use of communications technology is one that vexes the private sector as well.

Scott Frazier, chief technology officer and founder of Portico Systems, a medical software developer based outside of Philadelphia, says his company's policies are fairly typical. New hires get a handbook on acceptable use of the company's IT infrastructure that makes clear that the equipment and any messages or material transmitted through the company's system belong to the company. Furthermore, the company makes it clear that employees can and will be monitored from time to time. Gambling, visiting inappropriate Web sites, sending inappropriate messages and so forth are prohibited.

Having said that, Frazier, like his counterparts in government, understands that "we're now dealing with a generation who has grown up with this stuff," and he thinks that the private sector will be following the millennials' lead when it comes to using new communications technologies in creative ways. "There's no doubt that as managers see people coming up with new ways of communicating—through Facebook and the like—that that will get adopted and used by corporations as a business practice," he says, noting that some companies are already setting up internal versions of Facebook and Twitter to be used by and among employees. "It's crazy," Frazier says. "Some of these kids don't even use e-mail anymore."

and impress on them that everything right now flows from offering only filtered Internet access, and that we're going to have to loosen this up and maybe even pay for new technologies that allow people to work in ways that before were considered unconventional, even unacceptable."

'So Stinking Smart'

Still, it's easy to see how governments get frozen in place on Internet access and other communication advances. Even public officials who view themselves as tuned in and enlightened seem to have to go through an educational phase with each new techno-twist.

Former Nashville Chief Information Officer Richard McKinney tells a story about his own failure to evolve when his staff approached him about the possibility of activating a "chat" function on city computers. "I thought I was hip and forward-thinking," McKinney laughs. But instead

weather." It wasn't until McKinney left Nashville to go to work for Microsoft in 2005 that he came to understand the value of instant messaging, something he now views as absolutely necessary for work.

Meanwhile, Nashville has come around on chatting, says Margaret Keck, the city's assistant director for communications and security, for a couple of reasons: First, the whole idea of "presence" has infused Nashville's government—that is, being able to quickly establish contact with other employees, or at least being able to establish where they are and whether they're available to talk or meet. The second and more pointed reason: "If we don't come up with ways to fill our customers' needs, then they'll go off and do it themselves," says Keck. This is especially true, she says, with newer, younger city employees. "They're so stinking smart it scares me. If you don't give them the tools to work with, then you're going to lose them."

Indeed, in governments that are