

Saudi Arabia Censorship: A Model for Workplace Productivity

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Abstract

Workplace productivity is affected by many factors, but most of all Internet use by employees on company time plagues businesses worldwide. The Internet has much to offer the business world connecting people around the world and transforming the traditional workplace. Yet, despite the benefits that the Internet brings, the Internet can simultaneously negatively impact a business. Even with Internet use policies in place, businesses are still faced with the challenge of maintaining, and even increasing productivity. Saudi Arabia is not faced with this same challenge, but rather the challenge of maintaining its standard of morality. To do so, the government censors the Internet. This paper suggests that the Internet censorship of Saudi Arabia can serve as a model for Internet practices in the workplace. Statistical information demonstrates the negative effect of unauthorized Internet use in the workplace before translating the Saudi Model for businesses.

Keywords: Internet, proxy server, censorship, Saudi Arabia, workplace productivity, Internet policies, productivity

I. Introduction

Censorship, in any form, is a controversial topic. Yet, as the Internet and Internet usage has grown tremendously, so have the amount of pornography, hate speech, and the illegal purchase of pirated movies and music, among other things, that have been disseminated to the masses. As a result, Saudi Arabia has taken on one of the most controversial Internet censorship initiatives to try to eliminate immoral and illicit material from within its borders. Despite the outcry from freedom of speech advocates, the Saudi Arabian government has been highly successful in its efforts. However, as noteworthy as the topic of Internet censorship by governments may be, this paper is not an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate over Internet censorship in Saudi Arabia. Rather this paper utilizes the Saudi Arabian government's use of Internet censorship as a model for business managers to increase workplace productivity.

Internet censorship in the workplace is not a matter of freedom of speech, as private corporations have a right to protect themselves from potential liability and misuse of the company's resources. Abuse of the Internet and email in workplaces is an overwhelming issue that is plaguing businesses around the globe. In the United States, unauthorized Internet use continues to be a threat to productivity. Many businesses have attempted to curb with Internet use policies and monitoring programs. Yet, the problem remains. A solution: censorship. Censorship of non-work related websites can result in a more productive workplace. This paper will provide literature and statistics that comment on the effect of unauthorized employee Internet use on productivity as well as how this negatively affects an entire business. Furthermore, this paper will clarify how Saudi Arabia censors the Internet before translating it into a workable reproduction for the workplace.

II. The Effect of Unauthorized Internet Usage on Workplace Productivity

Productivity can be measured in a number of ways. It is possible, at times, to measure the amount of input and output to determine productivity. Other times, the quality of work must be evaluated to measure the productivity of an employee. Overall, as defined in a final report for the Southwest of England Regional Development Agency (2005),

Measures of productivity typically relate the value resulting from the production of goods and services to some measure of the input used to generate that value. Value is measured in terms of 'added value' the value of outputs minus the value of the inputs used. Productivity is then measured by relating the value of this output to the number of workers involved in the production process or to the number of hours of work needed to produce that output.

However productivity is measured, economic success is dependent on the productivity of a workforce. Yet, there are many factors that can disrupt productivity and result in financial losses for businesses. The Internet is undeniably one such disruption that is affecting countless businesses today. The Internet is a vital and unparalleled tool that brings speed and ease to the workplace. The Internet unlike anything before it has globalized business and created a worldwide competitive market. Still though, the use of the Internet in the workplace is a double edged sword. On one hand, the Internet is necessary and even required for many jobs. But, on the other hand, the illicit Internet usage of employees on the clock effectively steals company time and money.

Unauthorized Internet usage includes any use of the company computer and Internet for personal purposes that are unrelated to the job responsibilities of the employee. Such uses include shopping, gaming, stock trading, checking personal email, banking, reading the news, or checking sports scores. So, how much of a problem is internet usage by employees?

- According to *Snapshot Spy* (2008), a company offering computer monitoring software for personal and business use, 30 to 40 percent of workplace Internet use is unrelated to business.
- Additionally, “cyber slacking” makes up 30 to 40 percent of productivity loss (Snapshot Spy, 2008).
- An Angus Reid Group (2000) study published by *WebSpy* (2002) analyzes the notion of “cyber slacking” and shows that the use of search engines makes up 89 percent of personal Internet use, 75 percent of personal Internet use resulted from checking the news or sports headlines, and 67 percent from comparison shopping.
- The same study showed that 55 percent of employee Internet use was from writing and receiving personal email and checking the stock market made up 49 percent of Internet use.
- Another study shows that nearly 220 hours yearly are spent using the Internet for unrelated business activities (Carswell, 2001).

Clearly, these statistics demonstrate that personal Internet use by employees on company time is a problem. However, the question still remains as to how the extensive overuse of the Internet for non-work related purposes affects a business.

Lost productivity affects a business and its employees on several different levels. To begin, an unproductive business is unable to pay its employees as high of wages as a productive business (Cashell, 2004). The working conditions in a productive business also differ than those of an unproductive business. Productive workplaces are more likely to involve the employees and acknowledge the efforts and the results of the employees (Hartshorn, 1997). Effectively, the misuse of a company’s resources breeds mistrust between management and employees. Managers are more likely to be weary of employees and critical of their work or progress. Mistrust between management and labor undoubtedly affects the morale of a company. When managers are suspicious of employees work habits and ethics, tensions arise that interfere with productivity and the overall atmosphere of a workplace. The morale of a workplace is also negatively affected when team members or fellow employees are let go because of their misuse of the Internet.

The misuse of company Internet resources results in the firing of countless employees that might have otherwise proved valuable to the company. For example, email abuse, more specifically email abuse involving obscenities, racial remarks, or nudity, have been at the epicenter of many situations that resulted in the firing of employees.

- Dow Chemical Company fired 39 employees and disciplined 200 for sending emails that included nudity and depictions of sex acts.
- The New York Times, in 1999, fired 23 employees for similar reasons.
- Again, in 1999, both Xerox and Compaq fired employees for using the Internet in a manner that was deemed “inappropriate” (Arnesen& Weis, 2007).

Employees come to count on their fellow employees and develop a sense of comradery that helps unify the workplace. As such, the continued and flagrant misuse of a company’s resources has a negative effect not only for the individuals responsible, but also for their coworkers. Being unproductive in the work place tends to have a ripple effect. As employees observe their cohorts surfing the Internet, they too easily become distracted with what the other employees are doing because of noise or become enticed to also surf the web. People often want to share funny stories or emails that they find on the Internet distracting others working in the same area.

Moreover, when employees see that others are pushing the limits of what is permissible in terms of how the Internet can be used and for how long without repercussions from management, it is all too easy to try to do the same. On the other hand, unauthorized employee Internet use may have an adverse effect on one's coworkers. When employees witness their coworkers being unproductive, rather than join in the leisure, these employees become stressed and resentful, and rightfully so. Hard working employees may not take lightly the fact that their coworkers are being paid the same, or more, to do as they please. Stress then ensues from such situations, which again can cause tension and an uncomfortable working environment. While the ramifications of unauthorized Internet use greatly affect the employees and the workplace atmosphere, the unauthorized use of the Internet also affects its capabilities. The bandwidth of the Internet can also be limited by unnecessary Internet use. Yet, still despite the consequences of employee Internet abuse, many companies fail to either put Internet policies in place. Or for the companies that do have Internet policies, many fail to enforce them with consistency or urgency. For any Internet policy to be effective, it must be more than an idle threat and represent the genuine interests of the company and its management.

III. The Saudi Model

Saudi Arabia has long been recognized as a country of tradition. The Middle Eastern country prides itself on its modesty and high standards of morality. However, as the world around it continues to progress and in many ways conform, Saudi Arabia has chosen to do so on its own terms. The Internet has helped transform the modern world to bridge distances for purposes of education, business, culture, religion, entertainment, and science. Yet, with the Internet, the good comes with the bad. For most countries, this is the norm. People have come to understand that Internet is helpful and harmful. Many people use parental controls to filter what their family can access. In a similar fashion, Saudi Arabia filters the Internet in an attempt to block out that which the government deems immoral or illegal. Of course, this approach is questioned by many. However, as previously stated this is not the basis of this paper. The methods that the Saudi Arabian government employs are of more interest.

The Saudi Arabian government filters the Internet through the use of proxy server. All webpage requests in Saudi Arabia are sent to a government controlled proxy server (Drezner, 2005). The proxy server, either a computer system or application, acts as the middleman between a user, who makes a request for information or material from another server, and the other server. The proxy server, using its filtering criteria, assesses the request and responds appropriately (Figure 1). The Saudi Arabian proxy server is run by the Internet services unit at King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology in Riyadh (Black, 2009). The proxy server is edited for content. The server blocks any information that is judged to be contrary to the beliefs of the state (Al-Tawil, 2001). As per the Internet Services Unit website, "All incoming Web traffic to the Kingdom passes through a proxy farm system implementing a content filtering software. A list of addresses for banned sites is maintained by this filtering system. This list is updated daily based on the content filtering policy" (Internet Services Unit, 2006).

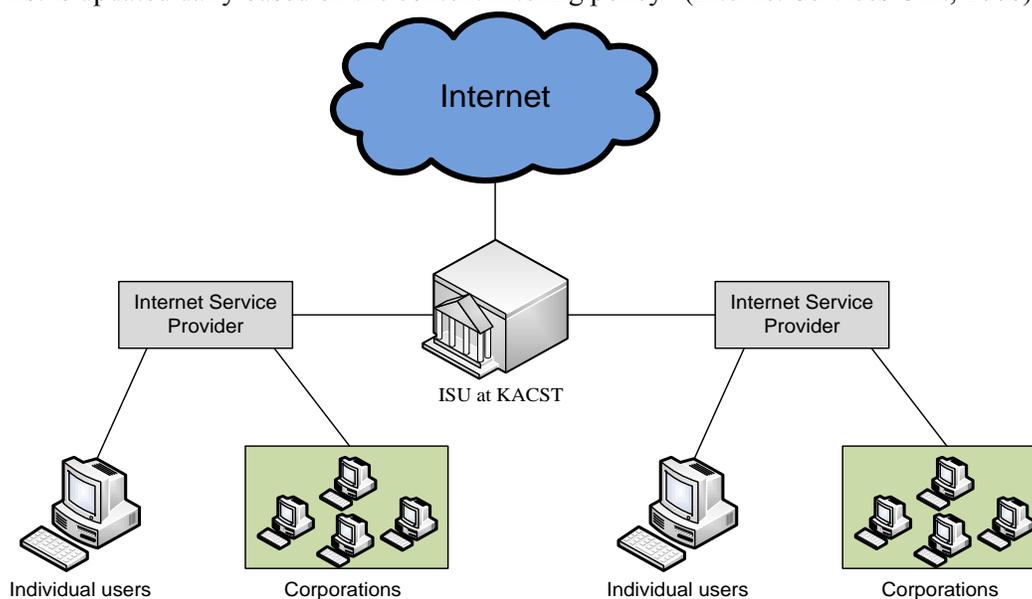


Figure 1

When users attempt to access a webpage that is censored by the government, the user receives a response page indicating that the page is censored (Figure 2). The government makes no excuses and does not hide the fact of its active censorship of the Internet. The government is straightforward about exactly what is censored and why the government feels that the censored material should in fact be censored. What's more is that the government not only defines what it censors and why, but also allows users to submit requests for websites that they believe to be contrary to the beliefs to be blocked. Additionally, if the user believes that the webpage was blocked in error, there is an option to send a request to have the site unblocked (Figure 2). After a request has been made, the government reviews the request and either allows the page for access or ignores the request if the page is impermissible or if it includes any illegal material.

Dear User,	عزيزي المستخدم،
Sorry, the requested page is unavailable.	عفوًا، الموقع المطلوب غير متاح.
If you believe the requested page should not be blocked please click here .	إن كنت ترى أن هذه الصفحة ينبغي أن لا تُحجب تفضل بالضغط هنا .
For more information about internet service in Saudi Arabia, please click here: www.internet.gov.sa	لمزيد من المعلومات عن خدمة الإنترنت في المملكة العربية السعودية، يمكنك زيارة الموقع التالي: www.internet.gov.sa

Figure 2

The filtering of the Internet of an entire country sounds like an extreme job, yet this job is done less people than one would think. The filtering of the Internet is done by fewer than 25 people at the Internet Services Unit at King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (Burrows, 2008). The website maintained by the Internet Services Unit provides statistics and explanations demonstrating the benefits of filtering on society and Internet speed and capabilities. Overall, the Internet Services Unit and the Saudi Arabian government maintain the Internet and its censorship in a manner that is both open and explicit.

IV. Reproducing the Model for the Workplace

Many may argue that the censorship of the Internet in the workplace not only violates employees' rights, but belittles their work efforts by assuming that employees are misusing company resources before it actually happens or assuming that misuse will take place. Managers may for the sake of the morale of their employees choose to wait until the need arises to put a censorship policy in place. However, if management waits until there is a problem, there will have already been a loss of time, money, motivation, and maybe even once valued employees. Or in more serious cases, businesses can be held liable for unlawful actions of its employees potentially resulting in a lawsuit or damaged reputation, either of which corresponds to a loss of money. Censoring the Internet will promote a healthy and productive working environment that helps to keep everyone honest and focused on the task at hand.

The Saudi Model can benefit a business in many ways if implemented following two simple guidelines. The first factor necessary to execute this model in the workplace is the use of a proxy server. Censoring the Internet using a proxy server is vital for keeping employees off of unauthorized websites, as well as for securing the company's system from outside threats, such as viruses and malware that could be potentially harmful to sensitive information stored on company computers. Additionally, the proxy servers logs Internet usage and blocks access to websites listed as inaccessible by management.

Employees will be kept from using company time to surf the web. As such, using a proxy server in a business will help employees to focus on the task at without getting sidetracked by the Internet and all the distractions that it has to offer.

The second factor that makes up the Saudi model is the transparency of its existence. Just as the Saudi Arabian government makes no effort to hide its censorship practices, as many other countries do, so too must a business. Businesses must be open and honest about the Internet policy, whatever it may be. Employees should be aware of the Internet policy from its inception or from theirs. The use of both electronic and hard copies of the company's Internet use policy should be provided to all employees and not just once. Reminders should be given with some frequency and not merely in written form. In the workplace, memos and work related emails are abundant, to say the least. It is easy to overlook a memo that requires no action. Providing employees with the policy, along with the underlying reasons as to why the Internet is censored, demonstrates ethical business practice, which are often lacking from many Internet policiess. While many still dispute the use of Internet censorship in the workplace, informing employees of a policy helps eliminate distrust as employer and employee develop a mutual understanding of what is expected of the employee in terms of Internet use.

Likewise, management implementing Internet censorship of non-work related websites should not attempt to disguise their actions and misplace blame on servers or Internet connections, this would only insult and demean employees. A blocked webpage response page should be designed and used when an employee attempts to access a censored website. This page should also be linked to an electronic version of company's Internet use policy. An Internet use policy should not be ambiguous in the least. Any Internet policy implemented should be clear, concise, and understood by all.

In business, honesty does not always seem to be the best policy for some managers, as well as employees. However, if a company chooses to censor the Internet, honesty must be the best policy. The interests of a company must be clarified and reiterated to its employees if there is any hope of the employees fulfilling those interests in their job performance. The same mentality applies to an Internet use policy. Management must reiterate and support the decision to exercises the right to censor non-work related websites for the sake of productivity and all that entails. Internet censorship in the workplace is not a means to punish employees, on the contrary it is a way to protect them and ensure that their job is secure. Potential liability and financial losses for misuse of the Internet does not simply affect the people at the top; it has a way of trickling down, so that all feel its wrath. Employees should view Internet censorship in the workplace as a safeguard from one of the many threats that modern day businesses are faced with.

V. Conclusion

As technology has progress, its use in the workplace has amplified productivity. Distances between people and businesses are not measured in miles. Today, they are measured in the amount of time it takes for an email to be sent or for a video conference call to be answered. However, at the same, the Internet has decreased productivity as employees check personal emails, trade stocks, and find out who won last night's game. The Internet becomes a distraction that can lead to a ripple effect. The Internet can easily consume hours of an employee's day as reading one more news story turns into reading another, responding to one more personal email turns into responding to another, and watching one more video turns into watching another.

While government Internet censorship may be a debated issue, the censorship of non-work related websites should not be questioned, but trusted as the best practice for business. Statistics and studies have shown again and again the amount of time employees waste on the Internet. The Internet policy implemented by Saudi Arabia is unmistakable. The policy is clearly explained and understood as the practice of the country. Argue with it if you may, but so it stands. Workplace Internet policies also must be well-defined and implicit to be effective. Internet censorship in the workplace is to the benefit everyone. Misuse of the Internet has countless ramifications for those directly involved and for innocent bystanders. For the good of a company, an Internet use policy whatever it is must be in place and executed to ensure a vital and productive work environment

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