PREVENTING INFORMATION HIGHWAY ROBBERY

- Occupational theft
- What employees steal
- Why employees steal (false assumptions)
- Monitoring employee theft
- Punishment
- Backlash
- Prevention

Occupational theft has its origins in feudalism. Though the problem is not new, in the Information Technology industry, it assumes a new character. Since stolen information is usually not lost, only reduplicated, the most significant commodity your technical workers steal is their own attention.

Note that occupational theft is distinct from corporate espionage and arguably more serious, inasmuch as a corporate spy still has allegiance to the corporate world. Occupational thievery, while not as damaging, demonstrates a more dangerously unacceptable disobedience.

Your employees might jot an email to a friend, glance at news headlines, or listen to the radio online. An extra window open on the computer desktop displays an auction whose moment of termination is rapidly approaching, in front of it a large spreadsheet is frozen in the middle of a data-entry task. A dialog between friends scrolls jerkily in a small rectangle which, with the touch of a key, disappears behind a half-finished graphic that allegedly requires hours of fine tuning before its creator's tenacious design intuition can release its hold on the problem. All the while the employee will continuously and instinctively create the illusion that he or she is devoting all his or her attention to his or her assigned task, on a state-of-the-art computer wired to a high-speed network, routinely appearing to work unpaid overtime, in many cases performing in his or her assigned tasks as well as or better than his or her peers. In a flurry of activity, paper pours out of the printer and photocopier, mysterious computer work is accomplished, late hours are worked. Their desks face the doorway so their monitors cannot be observed from behind, and they favor cramped private cubicles over shared office space of higher quality. Such subtleties as text-only browsers allow them to surf the web without telltale colors, graphics, or the conspicuous burst of sound that accompanies some websites — audio clips

generally not in keeping with any imaginable clerical activity. It is even possible to write or download software that allows the user to maintain two simultaneous desktops on the same computer — one work, one play — and to switch between them at the stroke of a thumb. An employee, especially a skilled liar for whom pursuing a private agenda while on the clock is a deeply ingrained reflex, can get away with much in the way of leisure unwittingly sponsored by your organization.

However the real danger is not leisure, but rather that the employee will work on an unauthorized project, for another employer, or, worse, for themselves. When the phenomenon known in the discreet IT employee parlance as "multitasking" (what the French call *la Perruque*) is perpetrated by a seasoned worker with a personal agenda, it can be a fearsome force.

There are many false assumptions your employees may hold. They may think that limited use of company resources, such as an emergency phone call, is excusable. They might feel that the company owes them time to pursue their personal life at work if they have spent the previous weekend working at home. They might think that what matters is how well they do their job. And the uncomfortable fact is that they may be right. Many computer workers still consider themselves professionals and expect to be treated as such. Their skills may in fact be hard to come by. This is due to a temporary fluctuation in the market caused by the rapid proliferation of technology, and the problem will take care of itself within a decade. For the time being, you may be forced to compromise your desire to fire. Like it or not, if the employee meets and exceeds expectations, you should think twice before calling him or her on the carpet for having written that lewd love letter on his or her company email account, brought to your attention by security, and circulated among a circle of senior managers, who deliberated the magnitude of the impulsive text's betrayal of office protocol.

While employees holding false assumptions like those above are legion, what may be the most dangerous is the valuable and effective employee with no demonstrable attitude. This type, the chronic obsessive-compulsive vocational kleptomaniac, may be more widespread than we know. Corporate psychologists speculate

that there exists among professionals an identifiable cycle of overachievement, burn-out, resentment, theft, and guilt, followed by overachievement, and so on.

Today's workplace has gone beyond the drug tests and security cameras of previous decades in developing electronic means to monitor employees. Every keystroke, every action across the network, even inactivity, can be logged and automatically brought to the attention of the employer. The solution to the problem of occupational theft does not lie in detecting it — it cannot be hidden. Neither does the solution lie in punishment. If occupational theft could be stopped through punishment, then the problem would have been solved in the Middle Ages. Studies have found that, in the largest corporations, where the policies about monitoring employees may be the most intrusive (those companies where security policies are dictated many layers of administration above those affected), concerted efforts to stem workplace theft may in fact exacerbate the problem by provoking employee ire.

Even in a clear case of abuse, how do you measure these indiscretions: in hours or in megabytes? Our principle is that the amount of time or data matters less than the intensity of thought. The danger is not that the profiteering employee will steal objects for their value, reducing the assets of the organization, but that they will use your telecommunication and network resources to pursue their own noncommercial agenda. Distractions such as online television schedules will not seriously disrupt the employee's work, but a genuine intellectual pursuit may command a disproportionate share of the employee's attention.

We suggest that the best way to prevent occupational theft is by proactively striving to eviscerate employee thought. Rather than put the employee on the defensive through overt disciplinary measures, instead foster a workplace environment where the life of the mind cannot be sustained. Disrupt concentration. Reinforce a climate of disinterest through platitudes, corporate language, and the use of non sequiturs. Play commercial radio. Do not openly encourage creativity or personal initiative even when it appears to be to the advantage of your organization. While you will certainly want to pay your employee as little as possible, working is not an ascetic or spiritual pursuit, and should not be described as such. In fact, it is in your best interest not to encourage spiritual

development of any kind.

Attached please find a list of strategies, culled from vast amounts of data. Studies have found, for example, that fostering a materialistic mindset by discussing with your employees luxury items such as cars, gadgetry, and vacations is effective. While the pursuit of consumer goods may appear to pose a distraction to the work at hand — indeed buying things may appear to be a passion — in reality consumerism makes the employee more dependent on their position and, as a result, a more conscientious worker.

Many managers have learned from experience that changing the subject abruptly can be an effective means of disrupting any conversation that might be dangerously thoughtful or stimulate the workers' interest in the extra-corporate world. We have found, though, that a shrewd manager may take this technique a step further and nurture employee ambivalence by introducing a stimulating topic, then dropping it. Try talking about politics, for example, and, when the employee starts to appear engaged, change the subject to buying shoes. Virtually all television programming is appropriate to discuss, and television in general has been found to be highly conducive to employee indifference, materialism, and even punctuality. To inculcate the proper mindset to perform adequately at a corporate task without the intensity of thought that can lead to a full-blown intellectual pursuit, there may be no healthier practice than regular television watching. Also attached are a list of popular celebrities, films, and magazines that experts consider ideal topics of conversation to implement an atmosphere of lackadaisical indifference. More advanced variations on these techniques entail using such positive thinking slogans as "The world is what you make it" — not to promote optimism and cheer so much as to discredit the idea of "reality." For a long time we have let our workers know that their contagious dissatisfaction with their jobs reflects only their poor attitudes, not the nature of their work. Carried to its extreme, this method can train employees to doubt the evidence of their own senses.

All people are smarter, swifter, more capable, passionate and decisive than they appear at work. The better your employees do their jobs, the more power they have over you.