



JUSTIN PUMPHREY—TAXI / GETTY IMAGES

WORKPLACE

Stupid Computer Tricks

Here are five ways misusing an office PC can get you fired

By Liz Wolgemuth

It's essential for some jobs, handy for most, but don't be fooled—the personal computer can be a job-ender. What's kosher for computer use at work (and even at home) can be confusing. We communicate, network, watch TV, shop for groceries, and get news on our computers. But it's no free-for-all.

Nancy Flynn, executive director of the ePolicy Institute, says employees should find out exactly what their workplace's

policies are for E-mail and Internet use, because computer-based missteps are costing workers their jobs. Here are five ways to log on and lose your livelihood.

1 Blog. Blogger Chez Paziienza was a producer at CNN's *American Morning* until mid-February. That's when Paziienza says his boss informed him that the company found his name on blog posts written without CNN's approval, and he was fired soon after. Paziienza runs *Deus Ex Malcontent*, where he writes about Oprah and President Bush with equal abandon. He hadn't identified himself as a CNN employee on the blog, but CNN spokeswoman Barbara Levin says company policy is that employees must first get permission to write for a non-CNN outlet. Levin didn't elaborate, noting that the company does not comment on personnel matters.

There's actually a term for a blog-induced dismissal—being “dooced.” While

some blogging advocates say a well-executed blog can boost your career by presenting your best side to the HR executives Googling you, there are limitations. Dooce.com founder Heather Armstrong writes on her site that she lost her job a year after beginning the blog for writing entries that involved colleagues. She now tells site visitors, “Be ye not so stupid” and offers a rule for safe blogging: “Never write about work on the Internet unless your boss knows and sanctions the fact that you are writing about work on the Internet.”

To play it safe, just assume that someone inside the company is reading whatever you write.

2 Play. Solitaire, that seductive way to while away the hours, is probably not a great choice for the workplace. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg caught sight of a solitaire game on a city employee's computer screen in 2006 and canned him. “I expect all city workers, including myself, to work hard,” Bloomberg said.

Richard Bayer, an economist and chief operating officer of the Five O'Clock Club, an outplacement and career coaching organization, says employees who use a company computer for personal matters on company time—whether playing solitaire or checking on their 401(k)'s—are engaging in “a new, 21st-century form of theft.” Bayer says a couple of personal E-mails a day are within reason.

3 Look at pics. Yes, those kind of pics. Think about this: Nearly one third of bosses have fired workers for misusing

the Internet, according to a study by American Management Association and ePolicy Institute. Eighty-four percent of those employers said the reason was the viewing, downloading, or uploading of inappropriate or offensive content. The Washington, D.C., city government recommended the termination of nine employees earlier this year for allegedly looking at pornography sites at work. The key here is privacy—as in, tell yourself you have none. Courts have consistently sided with employers when it comes to computer-related terminations, Flynn says.

4 Post your pics. Social networking may quickly gain an air of formality. The mayor of tiny Arlington, Ore., grabbed headlines after she was recalled by voters this year, in part because the mayor's MySpace page featured photos of her dressed only in her undies.

Employers are beginning to monitor social networking sites, Flynn says. Not only do companies fear employees will post proprietary information; they also don't want to find photos of the boss dancing drunk on a table at the holiday party.

5 Write R-rated E-mails. More than a quarter of employers have fired someone for misusing E-mail, according to the American Management Association/ePolicy Institute survey, and 62 percent of those said it was for inappropriate or offensive language. Just assume that someone inside the company is reading whatever you write. Most of the 43 percent of companies that monitor E-mail do it automatically, but 40 percent have live human beings reviewing it.

Employers largely are concerned with their legal liability, Flynn says. She notes that a growing number of companies are choosing to archive electronically stored information rather than erase it, and it's subject to discovery in a federal lawsuit. ●