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This time it is personal: Employee online shopping at work

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Abstract

Online retailers may like to promote the relaxing image of consumers shopping online while wearing pyjamas or lounging on the couch; however, the reality is that online shoppers are more likely to be wearing business attire and be sitting in the office when shopping online, as they have been spending most of their (personal) online shopping dollars while at the workplace. This study focused on exploring some of the underlying factors related to personal online shopping in the workplace. In a survey of 852 employees from the USA and Canada, 72 per cent indicated that they had shopped online at work. Americans were more likely than Canadians to shop online at work. And those in a workplace with a high-speed internet connection were more likely to shop online at work. In fact, the most popular reason for shopping online at work was the availability of a faster connection. The degree of 'permissibility' of a company's online shopping policy was positively correlated to the percentage of online shopping that people conducted at work. But corporate monitoring of online behaviour had no impact on an employee's likelihood to shop online at work; although job satisfaction was less, on average, for employees where monitoring was reported.

Introduction

Online retailers may like to promote the relaxing image of consumers shopping online while wearing pyjamas or lounging on the couch; however, the reality is that online shoppers are more likely to be wearing business attire and be sitting in the office when shopping online, as they have been spending most of their (personal) online shopping dollars while at the workplace. One study reports that approximately 60 per cent of online sales originate from work.¹ Another finds that 59 per cent of US online purchases (in dollars) in 2001 were made from the workplace.² Nielsen/NetRatings reported that more than 50 per cent of all 2001 holiday online shopping (in terms of 'total shopping trips') was done at the workplace.³ Lisa Strand, director and chief analyst at NetRatings, stated that 'Despite the fact that there are three times more internet users who have access to the web at home, the percentage of shopping activity at work matches home activity.'⁴ These patterns are not unique to US consumers, as indicators suggest that UK consumers behave similarly.^{5,6}

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The prevalence of online shopping

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that 32 per cent of online holiday shoppers did some shopping at work.⁷

Given the prominence of online shopping at the workplace and the US federal government's interest in, and monitoring of, internet usage in the workplace,⁸ it is surprising that little has appeared in journals about online shopping at the workplace. Urbaczewski and Jessup⁹ do provide a very important overview of the various internet technologies that are available in the workplace (eg streaming, instant messaging, web surfing, e-mail), examples of how these technologies can positively or negatively impact on productivity, some issues involved in managing corporate internet use such as legal and ethical considerations (ie monitoring) and a framework for establishing an acceptable (internet) use policy.

Indeed, the general concern with 'appropriate' internet use is very important, as estimated costs of 'misuse' or non-work-related usage are significant — more than \$85bn in lost productivity during 2001 for American corporations.¹⁰ These estimates do not consider fully the blurring of home and work boundaries, however, and any resulting productivity losses from efforts to deal with time demands from both aspects of life.^{11–13} Organisations have begun to set policies and implement processes for limiting personal uses of the internet at work, such as online shopping. But awareness and understanding of employee response, as well as marketer response, to these initiatives will be extremely important to understand as, for example, marketers begin to devise marketing strategies to target the online shopper at work.¹⁴

Research focus

Studying personal online shopping and other non-work-related uses of internet technology in the workplace is clearly important given its high level of incidence and companies' growing concerns with this behaviour in terms of issues such as productivity, job satisfaction, security and profitability. This area of enquiry presents interesting questions to researchers and practitioners from a diverse set of disciplines such as marketing, organisational behaviour, strategic management, information systems, law, finance and accounting (see Appendix for several relevant managerial issues/questions).

This study focused on exploring some of the underlying factors related to personal online shopping in the workplace which inform beyond the aggregate statistics reported in other studies, such as the percentage of online shopping sales which originate from the workplace or peak hours when online shopping occurs in the workplace. The study set out to investigate whether differences exist between those who were more or less likely to shop online at work in terms of characteristics, attitudes towards online shopping at work, impact of corporate policy and monitoring on (online shopping at work) behaviour and reasons for shopping online in the workplace.

The next section describes the research method and sampling used. Then the paper discusses the results. Finally, conclusions and opportunities for future research are summarised.

Research method and sampling

On a twice-yearly basis, Burke Inc. conducts a research survey on a comprehensive set of factors regarding the working environment of North American adults. Questions relevant to online shopping at work were incorporated into the April 2003 survey which was administered online. The sample was drawn from Burke-sponsored employee research panels, where panellists are recruited exclusively through permission-based techniques and are never recruited through unsolicited e-mail. A points-based incentive was offered to panellists for participating.

Panellists were invited via e-mail to participate, and sent a unique URL (ie the internet 'location' of the survey) which was good for only one 'pass through'. In essence, this was meant to prevent a subject from completing the survey more than once *and* a snowballing-like process where a subject might invite others to participate by distributing a link to the survey.

Data were collected from 17 April 2003 to 25 April 2003 from 852 respondents. Fifty-nine per cent of the sample were from Canada and 41 per cent were from the USA. Eighty-nine per cent of the sample were white, 74 per cent were male, 62 per cent were college educated, 25 per cent were less than 30 years of age, 27 per cent were 30–39 years old, 30 per cent were between 40 and 49 years of age and 18 per cent were 50 years or older. Seventy-seven per cent of the sample worked full time in a broad array of professions (see Table 1). On average, respondents worked 38 hours per week and had been with their present employer for 6.5 years.

Results

Who shops online at work?

Similar to other studies,¹⁵ a majority of respondents, 72 per cent, shopped online at work. In addition, this study explored the relationship between respondent characteristics and online shopping at work. Higher-educated individuals were more likely to shop online at work ($r = 0.172$, $p = 0.000$) and the higher one's education, the greater was one's proportion of online shopping performed at work ($r = 0.180$, $p = 0.000$). Salary was positively related to the proportion of online shopping done at work ($r = 0.132$, $p = 0.000$). Consistent with this, hours worked was

Table 1: Profession of sample

Professions	%
Health services	17
Education	16
Retailing	16
Hospitality/entertainment/recreation	11
Financial services/insurance	10
Communications	8
Computer and data processing services	6
Business services (eg printing, shipping)	5
Personal services	4
Consulting/accounting firm	3
Utilities	2

Note: Total does not sum to 100 due to rounding

Factors related to online shopping at work

positively correlated with the proportion of online shopping done at work ($r = 0.116, p = 0.007$).

While the number of hours shopping online per month for part-time workers (7.7 hours) was significantly greater ($F = 4.509, p = 0.034$) than for full-time workers (5.5 hours) — see Figure 1 — the percentage of online shopping time which was performed at work for full-time workers (15 per cent) was significantly greater ($F = 14.818, p = 0.000$) than for part-time workers (5 per cent) — see Figure 2. Those in professions with greater access to computers completed a higher percentage of their online shopping in the workplace ($F = 4.779, p = 0.000$) — see Table 2.

Connection speed available at home and in the workplace was significantly related to the percentage of online shopping done at work. This was analysed from two different perspectives. Individuals *without* high-speed connections at *home* conducted a significantly higher percentage of their online shopping at work than did those with high-speed connections at home ($F = 20.262, p = 0.000$). And those *with* high-speed connections at *work* performed a higher percentage of their online

Figure 1. Number of hours spent shopping online per month

Figure 2. Percentage of online shopping conducted at work

Table 2: Percentage of online shopping done at work by profession

Professions	%
Consulting/accounting firm	29
Computer and data processing services	24
Financial services/insurance	21
Utilities	19
Education	16
Communications	14
Personal services	13
Business services (eg printing, shipping)	13
Health services	8
Hospitality/entertainment/recreation	8
Retailing	2

shopping at work than did those without high-speed connections at work ($F = 26.282, p = 0.000$).

Interestingly, country differences were significant ($F = 10.592, p = 0.001$), as the percentages of online shopping done at work by Americans and Canadians were 16.5 per cent and 9.4 per cent respectively. This may be explained by the significant difference ($F = 57.872, p = 0.000$) in the (sample) percentage of Americans having high-speed connections at home (50 per cent versus 74.5 per cent for Canadians) and Canadians being more concerned about privacy ($F = 11.461, p = 0.001$).

Attitudes towards shopping online at work

Respondents were asked about the type of policy that should be in place in their organisation with respect to when online shopping at work should be allowed (see Table 3). Most employees believed that online shopping at work should be limited or restricted in some reasonable way (eg allowed only during lunch or work breaks). Only 5 per cent felt that online shopping at work should be allowed at any time. These beliefs were consistent with behaviour, as the percentage of shopping online at work increased significantly ($r = 0.380, p = 0.000$) with the degree of 'permissibility' preferred (see Table 4).

Table 3: When personal online shopping at work should be allowed, by country

When online shopping at work should be allowed	USA (count column %)	Canada (count column %)	Total (count column %)
Anytime	20 5.7%	16 3.2%	36 4.2%
Lunch or break times	143 40.9%	176 35.1%	320 37.5%
Emergency basis only	4 1.1%	11 2.2%	15 1.8%
Never	125 35.7%	208 41.5%	333 39.1%
No opinion	58 16.6%	90 18.0%	148 17.4%

Table 4: Percentage who shop online at work by opinions on when it should be allowed

When online shopping at work should be allowed	% holding this opinion who shop online at work
Anytime	42.3
Lunch or break times	20.8
Emergency basis only	8.5
Never	1.1

Policies and behaviour

Corporate policy

Respondents were asked about corporate policy with respect to allowing online shopping and whether the policy had impacted on their shopping behaviour. The corporate policy's degree of 'permissibility' of online shopping was significantly related to the percentage of online shopping that people conducted at work ($F = 8.649, p = 0.000$). In organisations with a no-shopping-online policy, only 2.6 per cent of online shopping was performed at work; in companies with a somewhat more lenient policy, ie allowed shopping online at work during designated times, 17.1 per cent of online shopping was done at work; and in companies that allowed shopping online at work 'if it didn't interfere' with work, 31.3 per cent of all online shopping was done at work by respondents. Corporate policy had a significant impact on respondents'/employees' online shopping behaviour.

Those working in an organisation without a policy carried out 16.5 per cent of their online shopping at work. Employees may not perceive this as the most 'permissible' situation, however, as 'no policy' is not necessarily equivalent to an explicit policy of 'shop anytime desired'. With no policy articulated, employees may behave in accordance with their own opinions or a prevailing culture about online shopping at work. The results suggest that this may be the case as, for this group, their opinion about 'permissibility' of online shopping at work was significantly correlated to the percentage of online shopping done at work ($r = 0.379, p = 0.000$).

Monitoring and job satisfaction

The results about monitoring and, more specifically, the relationship between monitoring and job satisfaction are relevant to corporate policy makers. Although permissibility was significantly related to employee online shopping at work, monitoring, on the other hand, was unrelated to it, no matter (the degree of permissibility of) the company's online shopping policy (F-test results were non-significant for all policy types). One would expect that monitoring would reduce the amount of online shopping, but monitoring did not impede employees' online shopping at work! Further, job satisfaction was greater on average for employees in companies that did *not* monitor ($F = 7.988, p = 0.005$). This suggests, perhaps, that a company's online shopping policy alone can result in desired behaviour, and that the decision to monitor would not incrementally influence (ie reduce) the likelihood of an employee shopping online at work, but will undesirably impact on job satisfaction.

That is, while monitoring provides no ‘bang for the buck’ with respect to online shopping at work, it does negatively impact on job satisfaction!

Reasons for shopping online at work

Respondents who shopped online at work were asked to identify their reasons for carrying out this behaviour from a list of alternatives, and were given the opportunity to articulate (other) reasons not explicitly listed (see Table 5). Aside from the reason ‘other’, which is discussed later, the most popular reason for shopping online at work was the availability of a faster connection (19.2 per cent). This is consistent with the finding detailed earlier that a higher proportion of online shopping was done at work when a high-speed connection is unavailable at home and a high-speed connection is available at work. Clearly, a fast connection can be a valuable resource for accomplishing ‘personal’ activities. Less clear is how a company will use this information to set policy with respect to minimising company costs and maximising employee job satisfaction.

Employees also shopped online at work when they were bored or when there was not enough to do (17.0 per cent). This particular reason is distinct from the other reasons because it may be unrelated to an employee’s situation ‘outside of work’ (eg no high-speed connection, not enough time to shop) and it is, perhaps, unrelated to a need to shop or shop ‘better’. Rather, shopping online at work for this reason may be primarily due to ‘at-work’ job conditions, requirements or definitions. As part of a diagnostic, this information is arguably less related to assessing efficient resource utilisation (eg use of internet or technology for ‘company’ tasks) and more related to appraising employee job satisfaction.

Convenience was indicated by 15.2 per cent of those who have shopped online at work. It is interesting to consider this factor in greater detail. What did consumers find convenient about online shopping at work? In-depth interviews with individuals who shopped online at work revealed two key underlying dimensions: *access* and *efficient use of time*.

Access refers to the availability and ease with which one can connect to the internet. At work, access was instantly available for employees with computers; the only effort required was, in essence, a wrist-turn and

Connection speed

Boredom

Convenience

Table 5: Reasons for shopping online at work

Reasons for shopping online at work	% shopping online at work for this reason*	
Faster connection speed	19.2%	(117/610**)
Boredom/not enough to do	17.0%	(104/610)
Convenience	15.2%	(93/610)
Balance work and life commitments	15.1%	(92/610)
No time outside of work	13.6%	(83/610)
Other	53.4%	(326/610)

* Sum of percentages in column is greater than 100 because respondents could indicate multiple reasons.

** Only 610 of the 852 subjects shopped online at work.

Access	finger-click of an input device such as a mouse or touchpad. In addition, access at work was not only absolutely high, but also relatively higher than at home. Individuals who shared an internet connection with others at home realised reduced access.
Efficiency	Respondents also highlighted the <i>efficient use of their time</i> when discussing convenience. For example, during a lunch break one could get some shopping done quickly and thereby allocate more time to alternative lunch-time activities, such as eating lunch, visiting with others or reading; or one could get all shopping tasks done online, whereas this would have been impossible if done otherwise. Multi-tasking was also noted as a behaviour that enabled efficient use of time, such as being able to click back and forth between 'work' and 'shop' windows (on the computer monitor) depending on the 'activeness' of a particular window. For example, while one is waiting for work data to download from a database (in a work window), one could switch over and shop online (in another window) during the 'wait' time of the 'work' window.
Work/life balance	<p>Consistent with the literature on time strain and work/life boundary blur,^{16–19} respondents shopped online in order to balance work and life commitments (15.1 per cent) and because not enough time outside of work was available (13.6 per cent). More than 50 per cent indicated 'other' as a reason for shopping online at work, but the 'other' reasons indicated were either reflective of one of the 'listed' reasons (eg 'auction ended while at work' or 'co-worker told me about something great and I had to buy it immediately' could be equated to <i>convenience</i>) or were stages/'types' of buying behaviour (rather than 'reasons' for doing it <i>at work</i>) such as 'researching products' or 'was ready to buy'.</p> <p>These results are interesting. First, they confirm the generally held belief expressed in popular press articles and in private conversations with industry experts that people shop online at work partly because of the availability of a faster internet connection. Second, convenience was the overwhelming reason for shopping online at work. Recall that this is among respondents who <i>have</i> shopped online at work.</p>

Summary and future research

Prior studies have reported that a majority of online sales were originating from the workplace. The focus of this study was to extend understanding of online shopping at work by providing additional information about the relationship between consumer characteristics and the propensity to shop online at work, relevant behaviours and attitudes of those who shop online at work, the reasoning for shopping online at work and understanding more about the relationship between corporate policies and online shopping at work.

A number of new and statistically significant relationships were uncovered in this study. It observed country differences, in that Americans were more likely than Canadians to shop online at work. Further, the extent of employee online shopping at work behaviour was related to the corporate online shopping policy of the company. Monitoring had no impact on online shopping behaviour at work, but it was negatively related to job satisfaction! This finding may be a

provocative subject to pursue further, particularly among HR and IT decision makers. Finally, employees mentioned several reasons for shopping online at work, including efficiency, convenience and work-life balance/role integration.

Future research could continue along the direct lines done here by investigating further the important relationships explored in this and other studies, such as the impact of various corporate policies on online shopping behaviour, productivity and employee morale. This type of research would certainly make a positive incremental contribution in these established lines of research. Similarly, one could explore further the work balance or blending issues of personal and work life and spaces, which are established streams of research in domains such as organisational behaviour, human resources and sociology.^{20–22} The findings are consistent with research concerning time strain management, but also suggest a strong respect for company-declared boundaries and conduct-at-work policies. This suggests a clear understanding of individual roles and how to transition between them. Finally, it would be interesting to perform qualitative research in this area to get additional insights into specific types of online shopping at work and to uncover other finer-grain reasons why people shop online at work.

There is also an opportunity to break a new path in researching online shopping at work. No studies of which the authors are aware have looked at this phenomenon from the marketer perspective. Given the high incidence of online shopping at work, marketers would probably benefit from targeting this segment of online shoppers and proactively devising strategies and tactics with HR input to serve them better. This may involve forging new types of relationships with corporations or providing special ‘work-shopping’ portals or shopping environments/websites.

The winds of corporate control and employee preferences — at least as was found with this sample — for limited or no online shopping at work have to be a serious consideration for any retailer or organisation that is selling online. Marketers should be concerned about the possibility that they could become cut off from more than 50 per cent of their revenues! The authors recommend that they become more proactive in serving the online shopper at work. Clearly, research in this area would be of significant practical importance. In addition, the authors believe that there is a good opportunity to develop innovative theory for this problem.

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Appendix: Important questions on personal online shopping in the workplace

Factors influencing the decision to shop online from work

Why is a great amount of online shopping occurring at work? How many workplace online shoppers have internet access at home? Does high- (or higher-) speed internet access influence the decision to shop from work? Do family or other personal responsibilities influence workplace shopping? How do employer policies influence online shopping from work? How does the perception of privacy affect the decision?

The nature of workplace online shopping behaviour

How much time is spent shopping online from work? What factors, such as workplace policies, workload and time pressure, affect the amount of time spent shopping online from work? Is online shopping done strictly to accomplish a personal task, or for other purposes, such as stress reduction? To what extent is online shopping at work done covertly? Do people shop only from work or from home? What types of online shopping behaviours are performed at the workplace in concert or coordination with those at home, such as product information search at work on a high-speed connection, followed by product ordering at home with a slow-speed connection? What percentage of the workforce conducts personal online shopping from work?

Impact of workplace shopping on employer company

What are the implications of employees shopping online at work on work-related measures such as employee and company performance, employee empowerment and trust, employee resistance to policies, employee job satisfaction and attitude toward the organisation, managers or other employees (eg attitudes of those who do not shop online towards those who do shop online)? How does personal online shopping at work affect productivity and profitability of the firm?

Employer company response to workplace shopping

How do companies respond to such behaviour? How should companies respond to such activity? What are the implications of various response methods on company and employee performance and attitudes?

Impact of workplace online shopping on retailing industry

How does it impact on overall retail online sales in terms of growth and sales level? (That is, what would online retail growth and sales be if online shopping were prohibited from the workplace?)

Privacy, security and legal issues

How do managerial and legal issues with respect to privacy influence employee and company behaviour? What are the legal implications? How does online shopping impact on employer company IT security measures?