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More companies keep track of workers' e-mail

By Stephanie Armour, USA TODAY

Employers are ratcheting up their efforts to monitor employees, in more cases adding staff whose job it is to read workers' outgoing e-mail.

About 55% of companies retain and review e-mail, according to a 2005 survey by the American Management Association (AMA) and Columbus, Ohio-based training and consulting firm The ePolicy Institute, up from 47% in 2001. A quarter have fired workers for e-mail abuse.

More than 60% of companies with 1,000 or more employees either hire, or plan to hire, staff to read or otherwise analyze outbound e-mail, according to a 2005 study by Proofpoint, which specializes in e-mail security and content issues. A main concern: leakage of trade secrets.

Some critics say personally reading outgoing e-mail is too time-consuming to be effective, as well as a violation of workers' privacy rights.

"We actually think it's invasive," says Gary Steele, CEO of Proofpoint in Cupertino, Calif. "Employers are taking a much more aggressive stance. ... The findings are a little astonishing, and, for employees, quite scary."

Employers are also investigating specific employees they have concerns about, says Manny Avramidis, vice president of global human resources for the AMA. In an investigation, a supervisor will check phone records, e-mail and Web activity, and check how often an employee has used a key pass to enter and exit a building.

"The obvious concern," Avramidis says, "is lost productivity."

The concern goes beyond e-mail. More companies are blocking instant messaging and employee access to personal e-mail accounts, according to a survey by the Society for Human Resource Management and CareerJournal.com.

Employers say such steps can make good business sense. At Array Networks, an application networking company based in Milpitas, Calif., outgoing messages are monitored with an e-mail filter to ensure that no trade secrets are being sent out.

"We check to see the content of what's going out," says Lawrence Lu, chief technology officer. "Everyone is very professional, and we don't have a big problem, but we do check it to make sure the traffic is good."

Another reason for concern: E-mail can come back to haunt employers if lawsuits are filed. Messages must often be divulged as part of the discovery process. One in five employers has had e-mail subpoenaed by courts and regulators, according to a 2004 AMA and ePolicy survey.

"Concern about litigation is a big issue," says Nancy Flynn, executive director of The ePolicy Institute. "E-mail is the electronic equivalent of DNA evidence."

Some employers say they don't monitor e-mail because they believe doing so could hurt morale and erode trust. At Windber Medical Center in Windber, Pa., policies are in place that prohibit, for instance, e-mailing pornography.

When it comes to monitoring, the company is "hands off," says Nicholas Jacobs, CEO of Windber. "It's absolutely a

trust basis, and we deal with sensitive things. I haven't been burned yet."

Other employers have found problems. Conquest, a Holliston, Mass.-based security assessment and solutions company, has found employees planning Disney cruises and sending jokes to executives and board members. One time a sales employee stored naked pictures from a swinger group in his e-mail and sent it by mistake to two customers. He was fired; one customer left.

"It's amazing these things are still happening," says Michelle Drolet, CEO of Conquest.

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