Instant messaging proves useful in reducing workplace interruption

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Employers seeking to decrease interruptions may want to have their workers use instant messaging software, a new study suggests. A recent study by researchers at Ohio State University and University of California, Irvine found that workers who used instant messaging on the job reported less interruption than colleagues who did not.

The study challenges the widespread belief that instant messaging leads to an increase in disruption. Some researchers have speculated that workers would use instant messaging in addition to the phone and e-mail, leading to increased interruption and reduced productivity.

Instead, research showed that instant messaging was often used as a substitute for other, more disruptive forms of communication such as the telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face conversations. Using instant messaging led to more conversations on the computer, but the conversations were briefer, said R. Kelly Garrett, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State.

"The key take away is that instant messaging has some benefits where many people had feared that it might be harmful," Garrett said.

"We found that the effect of instant messaging is actually positive. People who used instant messaging reported that they felt they were being interrupted less frequently."

The study involved 912 people who worked at least 30 hours per week in

an office and used a computer for at least five hours in a workday. Randomly selected participants from 12 metropolitan areas took a telephone survey between May and September 2006. The results were published recently in the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication.

The key to unlocking the effects of instant messaging lies in how people are using the technology, Garrett said.

Instead of dropping in unexpectedly, many are using the technology to check in with coworkers to see when they are available. Many also use the technology to get quick answers to general questions or to inquire about current work tasks instead of engaging in longer face-to-face conversations.

"We find that employees are quite strategic in their use of instant messaging. They are using it to check in with their colleagues to find out if they're busy before interrupting them in a more intrusive way," Garrett said.

Because of its unique setup, instant messaging allows users to control how and when they communicate with coworkers. The technology gives people the ability to flag their availability or postpone responses to a more convenient time, and because it is socially acceptable to ignore or dismiss a message, many use the technology to put off more disruptive conversations, he said.

"People see a new technology and they are innovative in how they use it. They will tailor their use of the technology to their needs and their expectations. And with IM, people had enough time to learn about the technology at home and to find ways to use it productively," Garrett said.

"It is not the case that people are engaging in extensive conversations or

trying to resolve complex problems over this very limited medium. Instead, people are using the technology to solicit answers to quick questions from colleagues and coordinate their conversations at more convenient times," he said.

Ease of use and similarities to e-mail could foster greater acceptance of instant messaging in the workplace. And while the study provides clear evidence that instant messaging can be used successfully in the workplace, Garrett said the technology will not likely be as widely used as e-mail.

Source: Ohio State University