Why bosses should let employees surf the web at work

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you're like most workers, you don't spend 100% of your time at the office doing what you're supposed to be doing.

In fact, on average, U.S. workers spend about [10% of their work day](#) surfing the internet, emailing friends or shopping online. This so-called

[cyberloafing](#) [costs employers](#) up to US$85 billion a year.

But it turns out, these behaviors may not be a sign a worker is lazy or just wasting time. New research [I conducted](#) with several colleagues suggests cyberloafing can help workers cope with an exceptionally stressful work environment.

Cyberloafing and stress

Existing research on cyberloafing, a term [first coined in 2002](#) by researchers from the National University of Singapore, typically assumes that this behavior is problematic and counterproductive.

Therefore, the majority of cyberloafing research focuses on ways to deter employees from engaging in this behavior through interventions such as [internet monitoring](#) and [computer use policies](#).

However, more recent research has found that using the internet at work for personal purposes may also have some positive outcomes. For instance, social media use at work has been linked to higher levels of employee [engagement](#) and [job satisfaction](#).

And other studies indicate that cyberloafing may provide a way for employees to manage workplace stress. For instance, [empirical research](#) suggest that employees surf the web as a response to [boredom](#) and [unclear instructions](#).

Impact on employee stress

But is cyberloafing actually effective at reducing [employee](#) stress levels?

That's the question [Stacey Kessler](#), [Shani Pindek](#), [Gary Kleinman,](#) [Paul](#)

Spector and I wanted to answer in <u>our new study</u>. Our hypothesis was that cyberloafing may serve as a mini break during the workday, giving employees an opportunity to recover from stressful work situations.

To test this, we recruited 258 university students who also worked at least 20 hours per week to complete an online survey about their experiences on the job. Specifically, we asked them to rank how much time they spent doing a variety of cyberloafing behaviors such as checking non-work email and shopping, ranking them from "never" to "constantly." We also asked participants to rank job satisfaction, their desire to quit and how often they've experienced mistreatment at work, such as being bullied, threatened or yelled at.

As you might expect, we found that participants who reported more workplace mistreatment had lower levels of job satisfaction and were more likely to want to leave their companies.

More interestingly, we found that cyberloafing effectively buffered this connection. That is, mistreated workers who spent more time surfing the web and checking emails reported higher <u>job satisfaction</u> and were less likely to want to quit than similar participants who didn't cyberloaf as much.

This suggests that cyberloafing acts as a sort of relief valve for workers, helping them recover from stressful experiences.

Overall, about 65% of participants reported spending at least some time at work cyberloafing, in mostly moderate amounts, with the most common form being the use of personal email.

While we did not directly assess how cyberloafing affects <u>worker</u> performance, we believe that by relieving stress this buffering effect may ultimately help employees be more productive. This fits with <u>other</u>

[recent research](#) that suggests taking short breaks throughout the work day is indirectly associated with higher levels of daily job performance.

That isn't to say that cyberloafing is always good. Too much time spent on non-[work activities](#) likely causes performance to suffer.

Cut 'em some slack

All in all, managers should cut workers a bit of slack when it comes to cyberloafing.

Our results do not mean, however, that they should simply let employees cyberloaf instead of directly addressing workplace problems like bullying. If managers only focus on cyberloafing, they would be addressing a symptom rather than the root of the problem.

And of course, there are other reasons workers cyberloaf. For instance, some individuals do it to ["get back" at their organizations](#) for a perceived slight or [simply because they see coworkers cyberloaf](#). Future research needs to be done to better understand the factors that motivate employees to cyberloaf.

But maybe, just maybe, a little bit of shopping or surfing at work could make you more productive in the long run.

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