

Rental employees and the Internet:

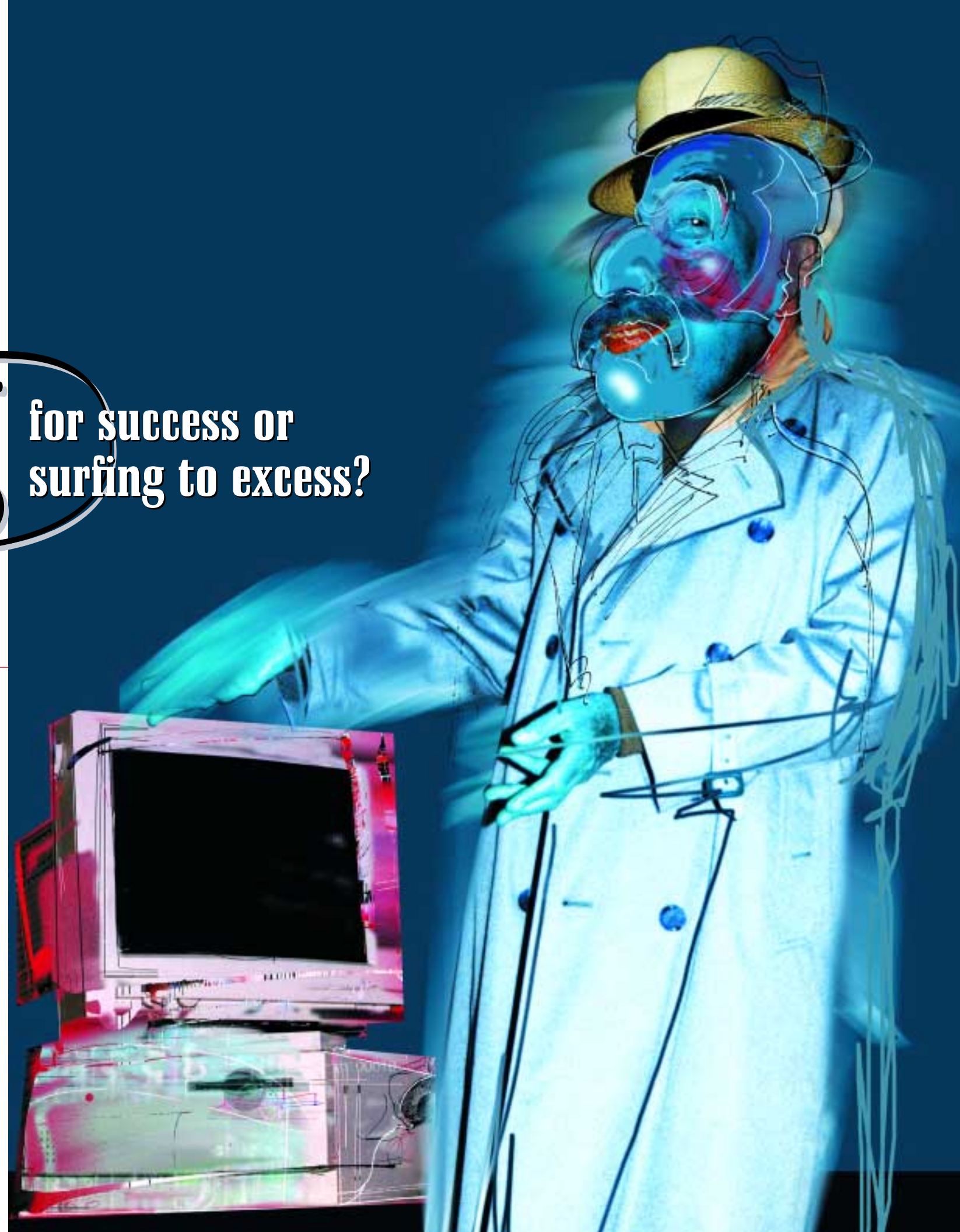
Surfing

for success or
surfing to excess?

Nearly every rental store is online by now and being connected has the potential of making employees more productive. It is not yet the case where all new hires are given laptops with wireless connections to use in and around the store, but that day may not be far off. Rental store employees can and already do use the Internet to communicate with the home office, other stores in the system, customers, vendors and other employees on an increasingly regular basis.

Employees can shop the local competition on the Internet. They can download product features, troubleshooting tips, extra copies of operations manuals and other information about products in the store. They can e-mail reminder notices to customers. They can trace skips and stolens. They can communicate with regional managers and other home office personnel about issues of the day. Employees who are fluent on the Internet can usually rent computers better than employees who are not.

BY ED WINN III



Having the Internet

in the store can also allow employees to waste a lot of time. It can be like a coffee break that goes on for hours. Instead of furthering the work of the store, employees can shop online, gamble, view porn of every variety, check sports stores, buy and sell personal items on EBay, play interactive games, download family photos, movies and music and engage in a host of other compelling activities that have little or nothing to do with the business of renting televisions or collecting money.

There has never been anything quite like the Internet before. Companies around the world now have to deal with its pervasiveness in the workplace. Employers know that employees have always handled a certain amount of personal business at work. The middle of the week can be pretty slow in a rental store as employees wait to see if customer commitments come through and whether the weekend's specials will drive any new business through the front door. Employees used to spend this time watching soaps on the company TVs. Now they may be spending that time surfing the Web on the company's computers.

A new guidance policy

The challenge for rental dealers is to develop a company policy that acknowledges the realities of the rental store and, at the same time, maximizes employee productivity for the company. Happily, rental dealers do not have to start from scratch. There already exists Internet Acceptable Use Policies (IAUPs or just AUPs) to govern the use of company hardware, software, bandwidth and employee time on the Internet.

Rental dealers need to give some careful thought to what goes into such policies. This is especially true if employees have had no guidance previously and may have developed a sense of entitlement to surfing during down times in the store. It will not help store growth if the fancy new Internet policy destroys morale on the way to implementation. Many employees will not see anything wrong with checking personal e-mail during the day when they have a free moment. A recent survey by Vault.com of 670 employers found that 25 percent of Internet use by employees during business hours was for personal reasons (up to three hours per week).

And so, the first step for rental dealers is to acknowledge the issue and to begin formulating an IAUP for employees. At the end of the exercise, the rental dealer should have a short (usually one or two pages) written policy governing Internet use in the store which all current and future employees must sign.

Rental dealers can, of course, grab an IAUP from the Internet and hand it down, but an effective policy, one that is

going to work, will reflect the culture of the company. It might be a good idea to spend some time informally learning exactly what it is that employees are doing on the Internet during store hours. It might also be a good idea to solicit employee input when developing the policy. The IAUP will achieve the company's goals better if it has the support and acceptance of most employees.

Here are some of the issues that will affect an IAUP in a rental store:

1. Privacy

COMPANY AND EMPLOYEE. Employees should not have an expectation of privacy on the company's computers, although they may have to be reminded of this fact. The company should already have policies in place concerning customer records and other proprietary information that the company wants to keep private. The Internet makes this kind of information dangerously easy to disseminate and some new rules may be needed.

MONITORING. Some companies have begun using monitoring software in order to have access to everything that an employee does on a company computer. Some of this software will copy every e-mail and every response, log every site visited and every activity of every employee and deliver the information in real time to the dealer or merely provide periodic summaries. Go to www.websense.com, www.netrics.com or www.surfcontrol.com for more information about monitoring software and services. If rental dealers intend to start monitoring Internet usage by employees, they should tell employees in advance to avoid embarrassment, hurt feelings or worse.

In a survey conducted by *Informationweek*, one-third of the companies surveyed currently monitor employee usage of the Internet.

FILTERING. Some of the same software that monitors employee use of the Internet will also filter information that employees can access. Web sites, e-mail, newsgroups, discussion groups and other Internet activity can be limited with these filtering devices, some of which have begun to use artificial intelligence principles to avoid being overly restrictive.

2. Legal issues

COPYRIGHT ISSUES. If employees are allowed to download copyrighted material onto company-owned servers and computers, the company may be liable, especially if there is no policy against such activity in place.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT. If employees are given free access to the Internet during business hours, some will visit porn sites, which are prevalent and easy to find, even hard to avoid, on the Internet. Not everyone is interested in such sites and if there are no rules, access to these sites may give rise to allegations of sexual harassment due to a hostile work environment.

3. Productivity

A good IAUP will balance the interests of both employee and employer over Internet use. Employees may be more productive if they can check e-mail or ball scores or stock prices during the day. Some companies have different rules during lunch hours and breaks than they do for the rest of the day. Some companies allow employees to use the company's broadband access before and after work.

Even if the employees feel that they are not wasting company time, or at least no more than usual, there still may be a loss of productivity if employees are downloading bandwidth-hogging music and videos and slowing the network during business hours.

4. Incoming

Anything coming into a company's computer system can bring with it the risk of infection via viruses, worms and other debilitating computer programs. The company must protect itself against such attacks and can do so, but the means for self-protection may have some impact on employee freedom of movement on the Internet or privacy.

5. Illegal activity

An IAUP probably should have a brief statement outlawing employees from participating in any illegal activities using company equipment. The statement can be broad and simply refer to "illegal activity" or it may be more specific and list out some of the more likely illegal activities for a particular store.

6. E-mail

An IAUP will have to adopt a policy concerning an employee's e-mail account(s). Employees need to be cautioned that e-mail, even after the sender and the recipient have deleted it, can be retrieved and that employees need to be circumspect in what they say in any e-mails sent out on company machines.

7. Deletion of e-mail

An IAUP will need to address how long e-mails are to be kept by employees before being deleted. There may even be a hard policy that all e-mails will be deleted by the system administrator after some period of time, say 30 days or 60 days, and that if information in an e-mail needs to be kept

longer than that, then the employee needs to make a hard copy or save it to the server or to a disk for storage.

8. Surfing

Regarding surfing the Net, newsgroups, message boards, discussion groups, e-learning, etc., consider making some rules with some examples of permitted and forbidden activities. Be sure to include all of the various elements of the Internet and be aware that those elements are likely to change over time.

9. Administration

A company policy is useless unless there is a mechanism in place for implementing it. An IAUP needs to have instructions for reporting violations with an explanation of the penalties for violations of the policy.

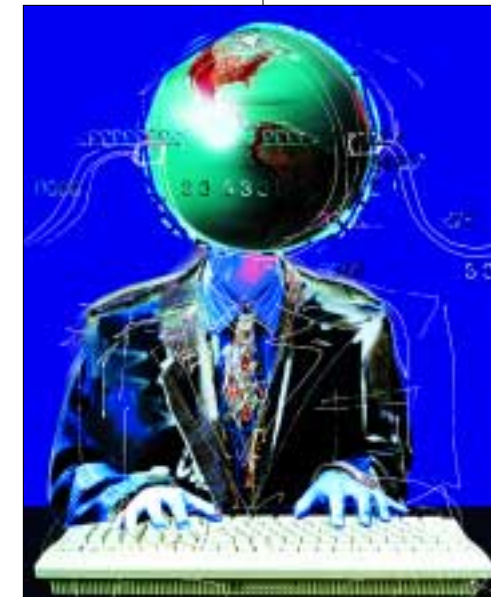
10. Communication of the policy

Beyond getting the policy in written form and signed by all employees, the company will need procedures for orienting new employees about the policy as well as making the policy a part of the company's ongoing training. That way, employees are reminded from time to time of what the rules are concerning Internet usage.

Rental companies without acceptable IAUPs are not getting the most out of their employees. The Internet can help business and most employees merely want to know what the rules are so that they can do their best for their employer. It is unfair not to think through what those rules should be and to publish them within the company.

Rental companies with IAUPs willing to share with other rental companies can send them to Julie Sherrier at jsherrier@apro-rto.com or via mail at 1504 Robin Hood Trail, Austin, TX 78703. Then APRO members can access those policies by accessing the member's only section at www.APROvision.org.

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