

How to Keep Your Small Business Employees Out of Internet

"Trouble"

By Joshua Feinberg

How to Keep Your Small Business Employees Out of Internet "Trouble"

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In last issue's "How To" Tips, Top 10 Ways to Get Better Small Business Computer Tech Support, we looked at how to reduce your frustration level by becoming a more effective consumer of small business computer technical support resources.

Now, we turn our attention to an issue that may already be plaguing your small business: how to give your small business staff unrestricted access to the Internet, without compromising productivity, destroying employee morale, or getting your company into a mountain of legal troubles.

In this first in a two-part series, we'll give you an overview of what to plan for as you develop a company-wide Internet access policy.

Then, in the next installment of "How To" Tips, we'll detail the topics you'll need to address in drafting your company's written policy document.

1. Set the goals of your company's Internet access policy statement at the outset.

These might include keeping the document to one page and making the statement as tech and legal jargon-free as possible.

Other important considerations are whether you want to just spell out what's unacceptable and inappropriate, or whether you want to list examples of what is acceptable and appropriate.

2. Survey existing usage of Internet access resources.

Start asking around to find out what your small business staff is doing with e-mail, web browsing, and newsgroups.

While this needn't be an exhaustive or scientific "study", you may want to keep a basic journal or list of your findings for future reference.

3. Get input from key parties.

This should include, at the minimum, key managers, your small business computer consultant, and attorney.

4. Hold a company-wide meeting to brief staff on the new Internet access policy.

Try to keep the gathering and discussion as upbeat as possible, encourage questions, and be sure to give plenty of examples of how management will monitor Internet usage and enforce the small business computer support policy.

5. Make the Internet access policy a condition of employment.

This should be equally enforced at all levels, as well as with both new and existing small business employees.

You should also consider having small business employees sign off on a copy of the policy and adding the signed copy to their personnel file. Again, be sure to consult with your attorney before adopting this small business computer support stance.

6. Add your Internet access policy to new employee orientation.

Each new hire to your small business should be briefed on this topic and given typical scenarios.

7. Spell out sanctions for violations.

If you intend to set up a procedure to address written or verbal warnings and escalation, up to and including termination of employment, be sure this is crystal clear in your company policy.

8. Post the policy conspicuously.

Your small business Internet access policy statement won't be too effective if it's just buried in some binder in your office manager's or human resource director's office.

Be sure your small business Internet access policy is displayed prominently on company bulletin

boards and incorporated into your employee handbook.

9. Update the policy regularly.

Small businesses change fast. The Internet changes even faster.

Be sure your company's small business Internet access policy stays relevant by setting a time each year to review the document with your key managers, small business computer consultant, and attorney.

10. Keep the policy in front of your staff.

Be sure to provide a "refresher" briefing on your small business Internet access policy, at least once a year, through company meetings and by sending around a reminder e-mail or memo.

The Bottom Line

Your small business can get tremendous benefits out of tapping the power of the Internet selectively for e-mail, web browsing, and newsgroups.

However, you need to be prepared to address some of the inherent risks of providing your staff with access to Internet resources. Use this list as your starting point for planning your company's small business Internet access policy.

At the same time you consider adopting an Internet access policy, it's also a great time to think about extending the scope of these policy efforts to other computer support and technology resources such as company PCs, laptops, and servers, as well as voicemail. In the next issue, we'll walk you through preparing a simple, one page written small business Internet access policy statement to tie all of these elements together.

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