

Christmas Shopping

With the number of shopping days left to Christmas rapidly decreasing, more people than ever will be buying some or all of their presents online this year. While much of this will be done from home, for most people the easiest access to the internet is from the office, and lunch hours will be spent visiting numerous sites choosing gifts for loved (and not so loved) ones. The question is, does this have any impact on the firm? And if so, what should firms be doing about it?

In reality, online shopping (and banking) has been increasing rapidly over the past few years, so there is no big change. This Christmas is likely to see another leap and some more significant volumes. This is likely to highlight problems, and may be the first time that firms need to formally address the issue.

Personal time

One complaint that management brings to IT departments from time to time is that one or more staff are spending all their time surfing the web and not doing any work. While tracking the use of the internet is technically quite simple, it can give rise to problems with data protection and human rights. It is also almost impossible to interpret the data to judge what is and is not an unacceptable amount of time.

The advantages of online shopping for the employer are huge. It is much better for a secretary to spend half her lunch hour shopping online than take an hour and a half to go to the nearest shopping centre. The only practical solution is for line managers to take the lead in supervising their staff and ensuring that personal use of the systems is reasonable. Audit trails kept by IT are usually best used for technical purposes (and should normally avoid long term storage of personal data) and their use for more detailed tracking should be under the instruction of the HR department.

With fee earners, for the most part they are trying to meet targets for chargeable hours and are grateful for the time saving possibilities of buying over the internet. Any time lost during the day is likely to be made up at some other time, so many of these issues do not occur.

Who is buying

As staff will be using work computers, and more often than not a work email address with the firm's disclaimer automatically added, a certain degree of care will need to be taken to make it clear that the contract is with the individual and not with the firm. In 99% of cases this will be obvious, but where deliveries are made to the firm or office contact details are used there is a potential for confusion and staff should be given some guidance in how to avoid this.

Similar problems can occur with ongoing contact being linked to the office address rather than the home address, especially if support contracts are involved. Luckily most sophisticated online stores support multiple addresses and understand the purpose of each, while simpler ones will often only deliver to the credit card address.

Deliveries

Following on from the above, it will be common for people to have deliveries made to the office rather than to their home address, as it is easier for them ensure someone is in. An added benefit in law firms is that the post room is normally geared up to accepting parcels reliably. Firms need to make sure that this increased volume does not increase the costs of running the business, and also make sure that responsibilities are clear if items go missing between delivery to the office and to the individual they are addressed to.

As well as deliveries of the goods, after Christmas there may well be an increase in people wanting to use the post room to help with returning items, and a policy should be in place before this occurs. There may also be advertising mail from suppliers using the delivery address. Once this has started it will be very difficult to stop, so staff should be given some advice on how to prevent the firm being bombarded with junk mail over the coming year.

Costs

The incidental costs of using the web and email for shopping are low, although some estimate should be made as to how much of the bandwidth is used for personal browsing in order to put a figure on the cost of providing that facility. Most firms will probably be happy with what they are spending, although it is unlikely that a full analysis of the costs of running the internet connection will be made. Even if a fully detailed costing of bandwidth, support services, staffing and hardware were done, most firms would find that the additional costs of providing 'personal' bandwidth are low compared to the fixed costs of running an internet connection for the business in the first place.

Higher costs come in once staff start to use the phone as well to make queries and deal with problems. A particular issue here is the use of 0870 and premium rate numbers for support and query lines, and also the increases use of overseas shopping sites that the internet has made available. This is probably an area where some monitoring of costs is required, although many firms will already have call loggers in place and policies around recharging of personal call costs.

Actions

The use of the internet for personal shopping is only going to increase, and this Christmas is probably a good time to monitor this and start to set some more formal policies.

- Get HR and IT to agree on the level of auditing and monitoring of internet use, and get HR to communicate this to the firm.

- Create some guidelines on internet shopping, especially concerning deliveries and use of office contact details.
- Make sure that real expenses such as phone calls are monitored
- Provide advice to line managers on managing staff who appear to be spending too much time on personal issues when they should be working. If necessary create a policy and inform the firm.

Overall, internet shopping should be a benefit to the firm rather than a problem. With some basic thinking in advance, everyone should have a very Merry Christmas!

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