

When the benefits outweigh the concerns

By Bob Schmidt

When introducing productivity tools into the workplace, there are usually concerns about the negative aspects of the change. Almost anything worth consideration will be accompanied by uncertainties surrounding potential misuse.

In the mid 1990's, I had the privilege of working for Terry Jones who is widely considered the father of Internet travel. Prior to his tenure as the first CEO of Travelocity, Terry led SabreLabs, the Research and Development group at Sabre that eventually built a case for delivering the Internet to the employee desktop at the AMR family.

As creative minds scrambled to conceive mighty business applications for Internet, Mr. Jones the visionary proclaimed, "While the Internet will undoubtedly one day become a viable channel for commerce, the initial benefit will be as a research tool".

While the Internet has become an accepted commerce channel, Mr. Jones' prediction still holds true today. The Internet is primarily a research tool.

With the advent of robust browsers and proliferation of useful content, it was inevitable that the Internet belonged on the desktop. The quandary was that although the Internet would make employees more productive, it would also make them less productive. How many hours of productivity would be lost as employees surfed the World Wide Web? Would employees spend their days exchanging jokes, shopping and checking stock quotes?

With limitless information at the fingertips, there is no question that the Internet has proved to eventually become the single greatest productivity tool of its generation. It far outweighs the downside of misuse. And in a strange way, it actually accelerated the strengthening of the workforce gene pool by exposing those abusers for what they were. Pardon the Darwinian reference, but wouldn't an employer want to know about slackers sooner than later?

In that vein, another productivity tool has surfaced in the marketplace that harkens back to the objections to the Internet, albeit on a less grand scale. CubeSmart Inc has introduced a cubicle door that actually more resembles a window, as it is transparent except for the prominence of the word "BUSY" on the outside. The product is designed to inform co-workers that the employee is in the midst of a project that requires concentration and would benefit from no interruptions. Think of it as a preemptive strike against the productivity snatchers.

As a business consultant and proponent for process excellence, I subscribe to the philosophy that it is far better to prevent a problem than to fix it. The adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure is an appropriate one. A five-minute interruption

takes on orders of magnitude when it comes to productivity. The interruption may have had a five-minute duration, but the affects linger as the employee attempts to get back to the level of concentration and remember where he was prior to the walk-up distraction. Compound this phenomenon with what we term the elimination-endorphin-syndrome (EES) and the interruption becomes a 20 to 30 minute loss in productivity.

The EES is a concept that says that eliminating “to do” items from a list gives people a sense of accomplishment that is likened to the endorphin high athletes get from exercise. It is quite natural for people whose concentration has been broken to try to compensate by eliminating items from a list that they know needs to be accomplished. This could be returning phone calls, checking and sending emails, or any number of tasks that carry less importance than the project that was interrupted.

There are those that subscribe to the philosophy of, “So what! If our employees don’t get their work done in 8 hours, we expect them to stay for 9 or 10”. We all know that this philosophy leads to employee burnout, sick days, and ultimately attrition. Why go down this road if you can offer up an alternative that provides for a more balanced lifestyle for the employee.

What does Terry Jones think of the CubeDoor? “We used the same concept at Travelocity and people loved them. When used with care, they were a tremendous boost to productivity.”

The concerns around the CubeDoor have mostly centered on the potential ill effects of rendering an open office environment a little less open. Other concerns have been the potential reduction in communication and concern over the secrecy it offers the employee.

The CubeDoor is not intended to be an apparatus that stays deployed. It should be used judiciously in times when periods of concentration are paramount. Think of times when managers close their doors as a benchmark. Will the CubeDoor reduce communication? No, in fact, it will usurp awareness that communication requires consideration and that a co-worker’s time is not a resource to be taken lightly. Finally, the secrecy issue has little merit. The product’s transparency notwithstanding, employees who are doing something inappropriate in the workplace will eventually have to answer to Mr. Darwin.

Bob Schmidt is the CEO of CubeSmart Consulting, a consulting firm that focuses on strategic and technology planning. Visit their site at www.cubesmart.biz. For more information on the CubeSmart Cubedoor[™] visit www.cubedoor.com.