

## **Time Theft – A Timeless Workplace Concern**

**By Meaghen Watt\***

**Edited by Marcel Faggioni**

Time theft from employers has been an issue since the development of the employer-employee contract. However, it has only been fairly recently that this has become a prevalent problem within many organizations. This has occurred in part from the increase in employee rights legislation and the activities of unions greatly changing the power employers have over their employees. Additionally, all of the new technologies introduced into the workplace in recent years have completely transformed work arrangements and habits. Some examples of time theft include intentionally sleeping on the job, punching in late, punching in for co-workers and taking extra long breaks and lunches. It has become very easy for employees to take care of personal responsibilities during their work hours in today's technological workplace.

The issue of time theft really came into the forefront in 1983, after Robert Half International published a report that stated that the average employee steals 15 minutes a week and about five weeks a year. This company also published another study in 2005 that stated that many employees spend over an hour online or checking non-work related e-mails. Other studies have suggested that in order to gain a better picture of the cost of time theft in your organization, the first thing you need to do is add up the total number of hours every employee is scheduled to work for one year. You must then subtract vacation and sick days, holidays, time spent in meetings and any other time that the employee is not actually working. This calculation will give you a better estimate of the number of hours the employees are actually working. The next step is to take the hourly pay rate and add additional costs such as the benefit package. Altogether, this suggests that employees often cost the employer 50% to 100% more than their hourly wage.

However, before the future of organizational work culture transforms into a version of Orwell's *1984*, the causes of time theft need to be explored and understood. First of all, it must be mentioned that no employee should be expected to never take care of any personal business while at work. Most employees have families and other responsibilities they have to take care of on a daily basis and sometimes emergencies come up that must be dealt with immediately. Employees need some flexibility from their employers to be able to handle personal situations at work.

A major group contributing to time theft today is the Baby Boomer generation or as they are more affectionately known as the "sandwich" generation. This term relates to the fact many of these people have aging parents and they have children to look after and many find it difficult to manage both sets of obligations. Trying to juggle these responsibilities is what cuts into their work hours since they will often come in late or try to deal with family issues sometime during the work day. Since this generation represents such a large segment of the population, many organizations have been compelled to update their employee policies to allow employees to have a more flexible work schedule, especially if they want to retain their Baby Boomer employees.

Another generation that is becoming a major contributor to time theft is Generation Y. This group is particularly having a big effect due to their different working style in comparison to

previous generations. Generation Y people have grown up with all the new technology, they are experts in it and many have very strong multitasking skills. Also, the ability to send and receive information at such a fast speed has created a generation that becomes impatient very quickly. These employees tend to have a different view about the separation between work and play because for them, no such separation exists. They don't see the harm in using the internet for personal reasons while they are doing their work at the same time, and many can't work any other way. Therefore, this tends to get perceived as wasting time when they may actually be working. Many will even stay late to finish their work if they were unable to finish it during the day.

This topic also raises a very important ethical and controversial issue, which is related to the whole area of employee monitoring. This issue in particular is one that has no easy answer and every organization has their own opinion about whether it is worthwhile for them to monitor their employees. One of the most popular arguments for employee monitoring is to keep productivity up. Many organizations monitor their employees in order to deter them from using their computer and other technology provided by the organization for personal use. Today the leading cause of wasting time at work has become the internet. However, there are also many studies that argue against monitoring employees to increase productivity. Instead, they have stated that this type of monitoring causes increased stress and injury to workers, which causes longer stress leaves and thereby significantly decreases productivity. There is very little conclusive evidence to say whether it is better to monitor employees or not. However, as an organization it is prudent to have policies and procedures in place governing personal computer usage. Moreover, it is important to have some degree of employee monitoring just in case documentation is required for a legal situation involving issues of time theft.

The existing organizational culture also plays an important role when it comes to time theft. The reason for this is a more traditional culture would probably view the issue of time theft as something they have to monitor and correct, but an organization with a more organic culture is more open to change and adopting different work styles. Organizations with more traditional cultures tend to be more rigid because they often believe that time is money. On the other hand, many organic organizations will often give their people the freedom to set their own work schedules as long as they complete their work assignments on time. This is feasible for global organizations such as Microsoft or Hewlett Packard, who can afford to pay their employees for non-work related activities on work time and are willing to do so because of the creative aspect demanded of their employees. However, this is definitely not the case for many organizations, mainly due to cost reasons.

Whether or not you choose to make the control of time theft one of the priorities in your organization will depend on a few different factors. The size of your organization is important, since it will dictate what it can afford to pay its employees and still remain profitable. Organizational cultures are often difficult to change; however, the new Generation Y's flooding the labour market has the potential to radically change the prevailing workplace culture. This may ultimately result in a redefining of time theft in the future.

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\* Meaghan Watt is a placement student from the Human Resources Program at Cambrian College.