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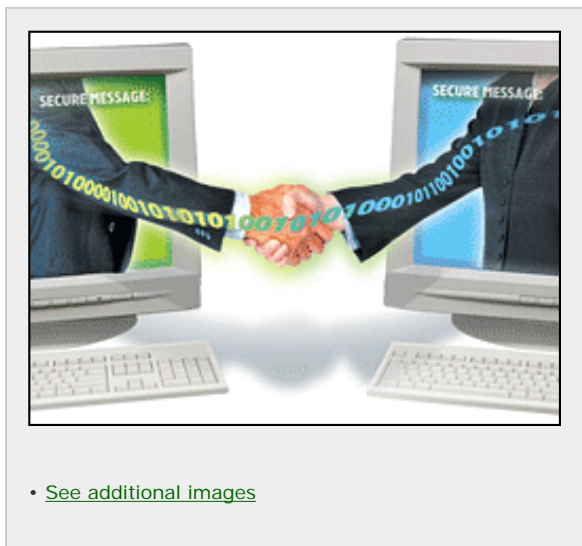
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Fast contact, few limits

Instant messaging is used at 85 percent of firms, researchers report, but experts say most firms are ignoring its risks

By Rachel Osterman -- Bee Staff Writer
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Once the domain of teenagers socializing online, instant messaging has found a

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home in the workplace where a growing list of companies are embracing the software as a tool to improve efficiency.

Many employees praise the technology, known as IM, for allowing them to quickly find out whether a colleague is logged on, but it does bring risks since some employees take more liberties with this informal communication.

"It's great if you have a quick question like 'Hey, are you busy? Can I bother you?' " said Melinda McRae, a public relations vice president at the Sacramento office of Fleishman-Hillard, which began using Yahoo!'s Messenger after Yahoo! became one of the firm's clients. "It allows you to multi-task."

Intel Corp. found that the technology promotes team spirit and interaction among individuals, according to a company white paper. A four-transaction IM conversation took 26 seconds less than sending the same messages over four e-mails, the paper found, leading to estimated time savings worth \$25 million over three years.

Instant messaging also can be a distraction for the 11 million Americans who use it at work, according to 29 percent of 2,204 workers surveyed by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Pew also found that 32 percent of those surveyed say the technology encourages gossip.

IM grew popular with teenagers in the 1990s because the supercharged e-mail program enabled them to see whether their buddies were logged on to computers and then chat in real time.

As those teens have entered the workforce, corporate technology departments have noted that employees are increasingly downloading popular software from Yahoo!, America Online or MSN to their workstations.

The result: Instant messaging is used now at 85 percent of businesses, whether for personal or sanctioned purposes, according to the Radicati Group, a Palo Alto-based research firm.

The corporate response has been mixed, with many businesses simply ignoring the phenomenon. Only about 20 percent of employers have instant messaging policies, compared with nearly 80 percent that have e-mail rules, according to the ePolicy Institute.

In 2004, companies were expected to spend more than \$300 million on instant messaging software, according to estimates by International Data Corp.

The technology not only allows for quick conversations and informal communication but also saves employees from making phone calls or writing e-mail. But the dangers of IM shouldn't be ignored, experts warn.

"Without controls, IM puts the organization at risk for everything from workplace lawsuits to lost productivity to security breaches," said Nancy Flynn, executive director of the ePolicy Institute. "There's greater potential for spam and virus software to come in, and confidential information to get out."

Workplace IM users also take more grammatical liberties than they do over e-mail, which companies stress should be a formal outlet. Many use abbreviations like "r" and "u" (as in "r u free?") and "lol," short for laughing out loud.

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Human resource professionals recommend that companies acknowledge the use of IM in their workplaces and find ways to make it safer. Especially since financial service, health care and other heavily regulated companies are required to archive electronic communications, a marketplace for IM enhancements has taken shape.

Companies can buy software that blocks attachments, keeps records, prohibits sexually explicit language and limits users to communicating inside the company.

"Our employees started using IM, and then we had to really evaluate whether it was going to be a hindrance or a help," said Ari Ramezani, chief executive officer of DSL Extreme, a Southern California-based Internet service provider. "We decided that if we embraced it, we could also control it."

Now, Ramezani said, employees use it constantly, but are reminded that the technology is for business purposes, that it's archived and audited, and that when sending notes to, say, entire departments they should use proper grammar.

DSL Extreme is also one of a small number of companies that use IM for customer service. The firm's sales support staff are available to answer questions over IM, though about 95 percent of service requests come over the phone. Unlike a phone call, Ramezani said, there's no waiting time with IM.

At Intel, corporate leaders have sanctioned the use of instant messaging. Workers now employ it to communicate across state and continental lines, as well as within the building.

"There are IM courtesies," said Walden Kirsch, managing editor of an internal Intel publication. "You shouldn't go back and forth more than a couple times before picking up the telephone."

About the writer:

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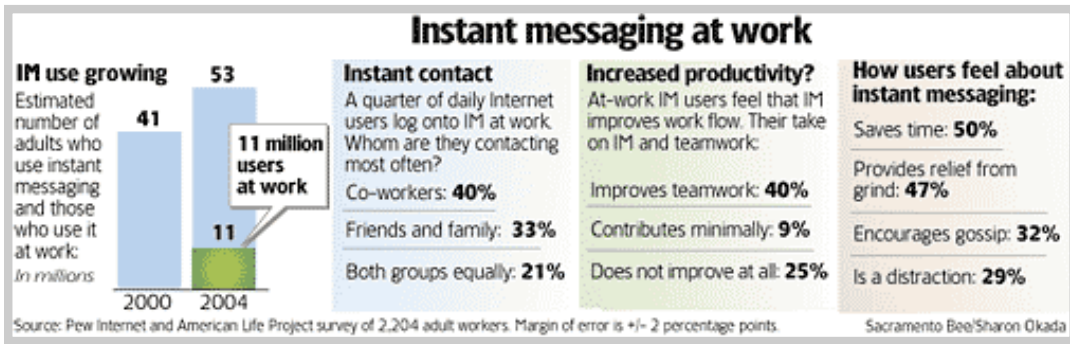
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