
Bandwidth Control By Web Management

Running out of network bandwidth? Before you order more, think about how much of your current allocation is being wasted on access to unnecessary sites.

By Roger Dalton

Users just love having Internet access at the office. They can download music from sites like Napster or Audiogalaxy and listen to it at home. They can chat to friends in other companies all over the world via systems like Internet Relay Chat. They can browse travel sites to choose their next holiday, order the weekly shopping, watch a live sporting event in a far-away country or access share dealing sites to make a bit of extra cash on the side. And this can be done in company time on a fast line. After all, something like 96% of home Internet usage is done over dial-modems, whereas most large companies have much faster lines.

Sadly, things are about to get worse. Where Napster led with the sharing of audio directly between users' PCs over the Internet, video is next. Pay-per-view porn movies over the Web are widely available and similar access to conventional movies is beginning to appear too. Anyone with an ADSL line or cable modem at home can offer video to anyone in the world, be it the latest Hollywood blockbuster surreptitiously recorded with a camcorder in a cinema, or a feed from a Webcam in someone's bedroom and made available to voyeurs worldwide in seconds. DivX provides such efficient compression that one Web site proudly claims you can download an entire movie from its system in the time it takes to have a pizza delivered.

Clearly employers need to be able to detect and, most importantly, prevent such abuse of the corporate network. Web Management software helps to reinforce a written Acceptable Use Policy and is available from companies such as WebSense and others. The software lets you control who does what from the PC on their desk, with regards to Web surfing. Typically the program relies on a database of prohibited sites, which is updated regularly by the manufacturer of the software, and which groups prohibited sites into a number of categories such as mildly pornographic, very pornographic, online share dealing, holiday booking information, chat rooms, sports fan sites, news feeds, TV listings, radio or TV broadcasts, music downloads and so on. A designated operator, typically your IT or security manager, can then program the system to specify which users are denied access to which groups of sites at which times of the day. You might, for example, choose to deny access to all porn sites at all times, but to allow access to chatrooms before 9am, after 6pm and at lunch time.

Web Management software helps companies in two main ways. First, it helps improve employee productivity. For every staff member who gets distracted by chatrooms, personal email and other Internet attractions for three hours a week, you're wasting 7½% of the salary you pay them. And according to a recent Europe-wide survey, some 41% of employees admit to this degree of Internet misuse at the office. Staff who don't use the Web at home, but who need to surf it at the office for business purposes, often feel scared that they'll run into porn sites by accident. Web management tools can help here too, avoiding upset and embarrassment caused by, say, someone inadvertently surfing to whitehouse.com rather than whitehouse.gov.

Being able to control access to sites only at certain times of the day is obviously important for ensuring that the Web doesn't get misused during working hours. But there's another aspect too. Some Web surfing has to be done at specific times, and simply asking staff to wait until lunchtime before accessing a site may not be sufficient to prevent them doing so. For example, concert or football tickets which are released for sale at 9am on a certain day, or share dealing sites where the time of the sale or the purchase can make a huge difference to the deal.

In addition to preventing loss of productivity, the second major way in which Web Management software can help companies is in controlling bandwidth. Internet usage has a habit of expanding to fill the bandwidth available, and if you can keep usage down rather than purchasing another line to restore acceptable performance levels it can save you many thousands of pounds a year. Although companies tend to have fast Internet connections, most users still only have 56k modems at home so the temptation for employees to wait until they get into the office before downloading the latest must-have game or music track is obvious.

But the biggest problem caused by inappropriate use of company bandwidth is not simply the downloading of files, but the use of streaming video and audio feeds. Thousands of radio stations around the world now also broadcast over the Internet, and listening to them on a PC is easy. Video over the Internet, no longer of interest solely to managers who want to use videoconferencing, is bringing Hollywood and more onto every Internet user's desktop. And while it's quite possible to get on with your work while listening to music in the background, watching a movie requires greater concentration and will thus cost an employer both bandwidth and staff productivity simultaneously.

Of course, there are other reasons why companies are turning to Web management software, apart from productivity and bandwidth. There are legal considerations too. If a staff member downloads illegal pornography or pirated software and stores it on his office PC or a company server, it's not just the staff member who is open to potential prosecution - the directors of the company could also face action. And even if it doesn't get all the way to a court trial, any coverage in the IT and trade press will soon make you realise that there's no truth in the saying about there being no such thing as bad publicity.

True, Web Management software is a contentious issue. Employees generally don't like being spied on, and no one likes being hauled up in front of the HR people to be confronted with a long list of porn sites that The System alleges they have recently tried to log into. However, employers need a tool to help enforce the written Acceptable Use Policy and to deal with the handful of staff in every company who refuse to abide by it, thus costing the company money and potentially opening up the organisation and its directors to legal action.

Perhaps surprisingly, most employees are in favour of companies using Web Management software and appreciate that it can help to protect both employee and employer. In the above-mentioned survey, some 71% of those questioned considered it acceptable to have Internet access managed in this way while at work, though it's also interesting that 73% saw nothing wrong in surfing at work during legitimate breaks.

So the message is starting to become clear. The Internet is going to become ever more pervasive and essential to business life, so some form of Web Management strategy is essential. And if you're sensible and considerate about the way you use it, staff are unlikely to object. After all, you wouldn't allow staff to bring video recorders or porn magazines into the office to use during working hours, and no reasonable employee would expect otherwise. So why should the Internet make things any different?

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