

It's Your Call

Using the Office Phone for Personal Business

By William Santiago
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Just because a best friend moves to Alaska doesn't mean one has to lose touch. Not when the price is right. In other words, why call from home when there's a perfectly free phone at the office?

And don't worry about guilt. As the index finger boldly pecks out the number, the brain's rationalization lobe simultaneously works out the ethical kinks.

It's against the rules-bleep-but you're underpaid. It slows down productivity-bleep bleep bleep-but you need a break. Technically, it's stealing-bleep bleep bleep-but everybody does it. It's grounds for dismissal-bleep bleep bleep bleep-but you won't get caught.

Permission or not, by stealth or with brazen disregard for policy, employees regularly pick up the nearest extension to indulge in one of the most popular on-the-job vices: the personal call.

"Oh sure, four times a day, long-distance to family and friends, which is excessive," admits a technical writer at United Parcel Information Services in New Jersey.

"Last year my supervisor called me in and showed me the bill I'd run up, about \$75, and told me to keep it down. I told everyone to call me on the 800 number the next day. There's a way around everything."

Die-hard personal callers are not easily discouraged. With fundamentalist zeal they curse attempts to restrict a practice they hold secretly as a sacred job benefit, rivaling dental coverage, 401(k) plans, day care and those complimentary pencils when no one is looking.

Even more reserved employees still regard making and receiving (but especially making) personal calls with a sense of entitlement.

"I take it for granted, as a given," says a soft-spoken Margaret Luongo, manager for Community Music Inc. in Silver Spring. "It would be hard for me to work for a place where I couldn't make a few a day."

However, where the meek blanch at the first verbal warning from employers, die-hands resort to clandestine strategy.

Typically, calls are made when the boss steps out for lunch, after hours or from that unsupervised phone in the conference room. When calls are made within earshot of a supervisor, many employees rely heavily on the "Mmm-hmmm" technique: The party called carries on the conversation while the personal caller limits responses to vague, non-incriminating guttural cues.

To avoid drawing attention on the phone bill, some employees make personal calls only to area codes normally dialed for business. Others hide behind an anonymous access code, innocently stumbled upon after trying 3,567 combinations.

Collusion is not unknown. Personal callers generally cover for each other, transferring calls with a winking, "It's for you."

Seasoned personal callers can justify any nonbusiness phone conversation at work. It's all in the categorizing.

For example:

- Necessary-calling your spouse to finish the argument about getting rid of the cat.
- Reasonable-calling Victoria's Secret to change your order from two sets of sand-washed silk charmeuse lounging pajamas to one sherpa-lined suede jacket with matching gloves.
- Medical-calling your cardiologist to see if the poker game is still on.
- Family emergency-calling to talk your parents out of getting remarried.
- Work related-calling to see if the headhunter got the resume you just faxed.
- Social (under special circumstances)--calling to beg last night's date for another chance.
- Marginally inappropriate-sneaking into the office on a weekend to place an international conference call so your Exchange Students Alumni League can vote whether the reunion should be held in Baghdad, Paramaribo, Rangoon or Newark.
- Unethical-charging any call to your own credit card.

Employers maintain an entirely different perspective. Supervisors like David Theis of World Bank media relations staunchly denounce nonbusiness phone use. Theis considers long distance personal calls theft. Frivolous dialing, even locally, Theis says, "reflects an employee who's an overall problem, a slacker."

He recalls how one such employee, long since "let go," gave herself away.

"She was Persian," he says. "I [called] her in one day and say, 'I'm hearing an awful lot of Farsi, lately.' They were local calls from her family. But she didn't discourage them."

Yet most employers allow limited personal calls, if kept short, local and don't hinder job performance.

Even federal employees are permitted local calls deemed "Necessary In The Interest Of The Government," according to General Services Administration guidelines.

That includes: calls home or to a doctor in case of injury or illness; one daily call to a spouse or minor children; and calls only possible during the day, such as to a bank.

Violations carry penalties. An Army supervisor, conducting personal calls to run a side business selling and servicing sewing machines and computers, was suspended for 30 days.

But phone rules don't apply to everyone in government.

Not only does President Clinton enjoy unlimited personal calls from the Oval Office, but "all calls made from the executive residence" are paid for by tax dollars, according to a White House spokesman.

Nor must you be the president or live in his house to make calls with impunity over government lines, observes John Morogiello, a Maryland playwright and former employee at the Smithsonian Discovery Theater.

"The box office has a line reserved for personal calls. I'd use it to speak with actors a lot, long-distance if necessary, and while my wife was pregnant I was calling home constantly," he says.

A theater manager says such calls are no problem as long as the work gets done. Costs are of little concern. "Being a part of the Smithsonian, we never get to see the actual bill."

Such vulnerable phone lines are likened by employers to leaky faucets, or in extreme cases, open fire hydrants. To minimize phone abuse they depend on system restrictions, detailed billing, deterrents, and close supervision of personnel.

Restrictions include blocking access to 900 numbers, certain area codes, international calls and the information operator. Employees also may be assigned access codes to identify them on the bill from any extension. Bills often are itemized by extension and broken down by department, sometimes even tracking incoming calls and calls to 800 numbers.

Companies such as Potomac Electric Power Co. not only comb through bills to spot unauthorized use, but charge employees a \$5 penalty per personal long-distance call, in addition to mandatory reimbursement, according to spokesman Nancy Moses.

A former Lockheed Martin Corp. employee says, "They don't check the bills so much as watch you, even ask you who you're talking to."

Granted, no telephone system is impervious to abuse. Should that abuse reach alarming levels, stopping it may require a specialist. That was Ron Mayr's vocation before he became supervisor and general manager of the Jiffy Lube in Leesburg. Working with the AT&T Network Fraud Control Center in the late '80s, Mayr ferreted out personal callers who had run amok.

Ironically, the worst case he solved involved a ring of nearly a dozen AT&T employees based in Virginia."

"Someone got hold of an access code and passed it around." Mayr says. "And even though it was a phone company, each call is accounted for as the company's electronic product. and they were running up thousands of dollars a week."

What started as tentative, negligible phone abuse, escalated, he says, "and went on for four years before somebody noticed."

In such cases, a search begins by poring over bills, going back years if necessary. When other long-distance companies are involved, "they're usually very cooperative in sharing records," notes Mayr.

Records are narrowed to the 50 most repeatedly dialed numbers. which investigators call to inquire about who made the mystery calls."

"Usually, whoever answers won't name anybody," Mayr explains. "But you just sit back and wait for them to call the person you're looking for. And then you've got a matching number. Lay everything side by side and eventually you solve it."

Needless to say, Mayr's lube technicians know better than to risk personal calls.

But most employees who can get away with personal calls keep right on dialing, downplaying their indiscretions by pointing to a more abusive colleague. Every office has one, a reigning champion personal caller, invariably with a decibel control problem, who tortures co-workers mercilessly with even last detail of a nauseating private life.

Says Morogiello, "I may be jacking up the phone bill by 80 bucks, but at least I'm not as bad as that guy."