

Some workers 'cyberloaf' if they think they can get away with it, so employers need to get creative

Written by Emily Lowe-Calverley, PhD Candidate in Cyberpsychology, University of Tasmania



Employees are not working at work and working at home. [Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock](#)

Sending personal emails, a bit of online shopping, checking out your friend's holiday snaps on Facebook: if you break up your work day with online activities that aren't work-related, you may be guilty of "cyberloafing".

Cyberloafing – engaging in non-work online activities while “on the clock” – is a modern form of [counterproductive workplace behaviour](#)

. Rather than stealing company goods, the modern work environment with its various digital devices easily allows many employees to essentially [steal company time](#)

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Read More: [Gender quotas can work but it depends on how employees feel about them](#)

Cyberloafing can [lack malicious intent](#), but not always. In fact, in [our study](#), we found cyberloafing can be associated with everyday levels of “dark” personality traits and a perceived ability to get away with it.

So who is likely to cyberloaf, and why?

Taking advantage

[We had](#) 273 employees complete an anonymous online survey measuring cyberloafing and everyday levels of “dark” personality traits.

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These traits are considered to be a [socially exploitative](#) dark triad, characterised by callous and parasitic self-interest (psychopathy), manipulativeness (Machiavellianism), and arrogant superiority (narcissism), and are found in varying levels among the general population.

We expected that because of their willingness to pursue gains at the expense of others, among comparative feelings of entitlement, individuals with higher levels of dark triad traits would be more likely to engage in cyberloafing.

We also examined the extent to which people believe they can get away with things at work (their [perceived ability to deceive](#)). Unsurprisingly, given the feelings of superiority associated with the dark triad, these individuals tend to feel [very capable of outsmarting others](#)

Among our participants, we found that psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism were associated with cyberloafing behaviours through their relationships with perceived ability to deceive. In other words, higher levels of dark triad traits led to a greater belief in the ability to get away with things, which in turn was related to higher levels of cyberloafing.

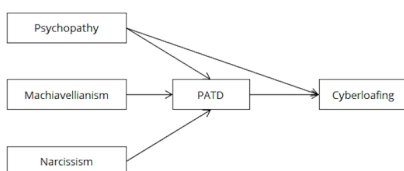


Figure 1. Proposed model of the relationship between the Dark Triad traits, perceived ability to deceive, and cyberloafing.

The relationship between dark triad traits, perceived ability to deceive (PATD) and cyberloafing.
Emily Lowe-Calverley

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Author provided

Our findings suggest that individuals high in subclinical psychopathy will engage in some cyberloafing behaviours regardless of their perceived ability to deceive. This fits with the nature of psychopathy: individuals high in psychopathic traits tend to lack remorse and don't feel guilty, and perhaps are not too concerned with getting caught.

More research is needed, given that our study was self-reporting and favoured female participants, but the results raise some interesting questions for workplaces and their ability to handle this behaviour.

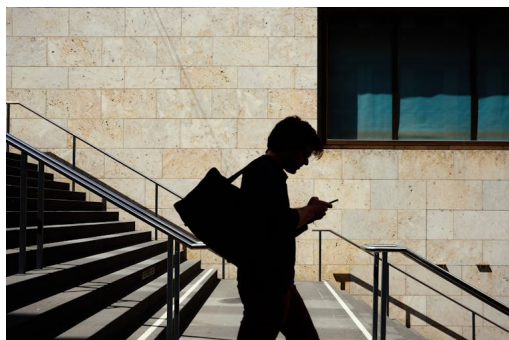
Should the boss be concerned?

The organisational consequences of cyberloafing can range from brief employee distraction to more serious drain on company resources or security (for example, slower network performance or computer viruses).

Our study suggests that if an employer wants to reduce cyberloafing, strategies that counter employees' perceived ability to deceive could be useful. Stressing accountability could act as a deterrent.

Employees could be informed that all web-based activity will be monitored, but surveillance runs the risk of invading employee privacy and creating an unpleasant work environment.

Fortunately, cyberloafing is not a purely negative workplace behaviour. Internet browsing can have a positive impact on [employees's emotions](#), allowing a measure of stress release. It can also [boost productivity](#) in some circumstances by providing employees with a short break so they can recover their concentration.



Feeling constantly connected? You're not the only one. [Ivan Rigamonti/Flickr](#), [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

Hyperconnectivity is also an issue

While employees slip personal online activities into their work time, their work may also be encroaching on their personal lives.

Devices and online tools encourage 24-7 connectivity to the workplace. One study suggests

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that employees who receive company-provided smartphones feel expected to be [constantly connected](#) and responsive to work at all times.

For employers this is both good and bad news. The perception of being “on call” might increase the volume of work they get from their employee. However, constant connection might lead to exhausted, burnt-out workers.

Read More: [Our healthcare records outlive us. It's time to decide what happens to the data once we're gone.](#)

Employees have traditionally sought to find “work-life balance”, but for some people this line is now blurred.

Cyberloafing and hyper-connectivity can be seen as two sides of the same coin. People are engaging in personal online activities while in the workplace, and work activities while at home.

A new definition of ‘balance’?

Some studies suggest that the terminology should evolve, with employees now seeking [“work-life flexibility”](#), where an employee controls the amount of time they dedicate to work and life, integrating the two as necessary.

For example, you might take a work call while watching your child’s soccer match, but duck out of work to post your best friend’s birthday present. The key point is that the employee feels they have the ability to handle competing demands.

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Exploratory research indicates that [home-work boundary flexibility is associated with higher job satisfaction](#). The same study suggests that for those with a permeable work boundary (that is, the ability to do personal tasks at work), there was less time-based work and family conflict. However for those with a permeable home boundary (allowing work tasks to be done during personal time), there was more time-based work and family conflict.

Our study suggests that a worker's perceived ability to take advantage of an employer is a key part of cyberloafing. But it's a two-way street: employers need to think about whether they are also taking advantage of their hyper-connected workers.

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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