

What's more, you might not know you're under the eye until it's too late. About 20 percent of employers that snoop don't publicize the fact.

calls from competitors on the same day that Boatscape.com laid off some staff triggered suspicion among executives, says Peter Wigenhauser, 23, a former employee of the Boston-based start-up. "They went back and read our email and tried to figure out who had been sending messages to competitors. First the CEO asked us about certain emails. A week or so later, the CEO questioned us about joke emails we had sent to each other," says Wigenhauser. "It was an eye-opener."

If your supervisor reads your personal email, you might blush or feel indignant. But it could also cost you your job. What's deemed unfit for the workplace is the boss's call and can range from off-color jokes and chain letters to profanity or pornography. Consequences also span the map, ranging from warnings to docked pay to outright dismissal. This year, the New York Times Company, Xerox, and Dow Jones each fired upwards of 20 employees for what they saw as inappropriate Internet or email use. It's an issue that is even more relevant for the many whose office and home lives have merged (e.g., having social lives at the office or working from home). In this gray area, simply knowing whether your company monitors is vital to protecting yourself.

according to Paul Tobias, chairman of the National Employee Rights Institute, it's often to an employer's advantage to be truthful about monitoring. So talk to your boss, the human resources department, and even the IT folks to learn about your company's monitoring habits. And find out whether your company turns off the monitoring software during times you're allowed to use the Net, such as breaks and lunchtime, advises Deborah Pierce, staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation. The larger the company, the more likely it is to monitor its employees, says the AMA, with financial companies taking the prize for the most snooping. (Many small firms simply can't afford a person whose sole job is to browse through their colleagues' email.)

Understanding what's on your company's radar screen is key to ensuring you're not next on the surfing hot seat. "The absolute no-nos are visiting porn sites and sending email that could be construed as sexual harassment or that contains racial epithets," says Pierce. Resumes, criticism of supervisors, and

foul language are also often taboo. And employers aren't just checking out the content, they're also watching the clock. "Time hijackers," like online auctions, news sites, and sports pages, are often out of bounds at firms worried about limited bandwidth and productivity.

Most companies offer a little leeway for personal email and surfing, so the key is common sense. "Somebody might go online to check the location of a movie theater. It's not likely that incidental usage is going to be an issue," says Anne Crowley, a spokesperson for Fidelity Investments, which monitors its 30,000-plus employees. "What we're talking about is where it's obvious that more time is being spent on personal business than business purposes."

if your company monitors web use—or if you don't know for sure—you're best option is to limit your surfing. But if you can't resist taking a peek at your stocks, there are several other steps you can take. Don't rely on the delete key or trash cans—companies save backup copies of your files, email, and sites surfed. Instead, try services that hide where you're surfing (like the Window Washer at Anonymizer.com); scramble your email messages with encryption (Hushmail.com, Pretty Good Privacy, and S/Mime all will do the job); and set up an account on Hotmail or Yahoo! for personal email.


None of these is foolproof, however. Employers might still be able to access messages sent from personal email accounts. If your company is using keystroke software, which records every word you type, nothing will keep your activities and prose out of your manager's reach. The safest things to do, says Pierce, are to bring your own laptop to work for personal matters and keep separate email accounts for work and personal business. If you receive an



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email that your company would frown upon, don't respond to it, she adds.

Above all, exercise common sense: "Before you send out that email message, review it," says Pierce. "Think about how you'd feel if the email was posted to the front page of the paper." 

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