CIOs must consider social computing

Tomorrow's workers will not just work, they expect to chat, watch videos and listen to music - during office hours

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be way teenagers work these days, they're like octopi.

They watch TV, chat over the Internet and talk on their cellphones while doing their homework, so my friends with teenaged children tell me.

They cannot understand how the youth can multi-task and yet stay focused.

But two undergraduates Tay Kang Xun and Ma Weiyi told a group of much older chief information officers that that is what youth do.

They were speaking at a CIO workshop here organised by Accenture and the ITMA (Infocom Technology Managers Association) two weeks ago. Their topic – A Youth's Perspective: obsessive-much-tasking, instant gratification on demand.

Both information systems students at Singapore Management University, Mr Tay and Mr Ma said that when they join the workforce in a couple of years, they would like to have a "work and work-life" experience.

Which means they expect to enjoy in the office, what they take for granted today as students – the ability to chat over the Internet, watch YouTube videos, download and listen to music.

Plus, play a game or two. And in between all that, somehow get their work done.

If I could imagine speech bubbles that floated out of the mostly forty-something CIOs' heads, they could well have said: "What cheek!"

As it was, you could hear the gasps.

Technology would also empower youths, they said. Take a wiki on the CIO Workshop itself. (Wikis are collaborative websites that anyone can start and where anyone with access can edit them.)

While researching their presentation, the two young men collected a neat pile of information and decided to start a wiki on the CIO Workshop.

It was only after they had posted it up on Wikipedia, did they seek approval from the organisers. In this case, consulting firmAccenture and ITMA.

The point then, is that technology in the hands of digital natives allows them to instantly create and post something on the Web. Approval or permission is an afterthought.

The unbridled youthful enthusiasm was refreshing, if a little scary, the CIOs and I agreed over post-meeting chats.

Nevertheless, the bombshells hit a couple of places.

The first – and to me, the most interesting – is the thought that future young workers will be able to goof off during office time!

Never mind the considerations for huge bandwidths for all the multi-tasking. Or will these activities be so common that corporations have no choice but to allow it?

Second bombshell: that anyone can put up a wiki. This goes back to the issue of veracity of information.

Are the authors or the editors of wikis subject matter experts in the first place? And consider industrial espionage and terrorism: Wrong information can be deliberately inserted to impact share prices and social stability, among other things.

Self-policing, argued the two SMU undergrads, would ensure that the information is credible.

On the flipside, the two youths also surfaced two issues which CIOs and companies ought to consider.

One is that digital communities are here to stay. The popularity of social networking sites like MySpace, Friendster and Facebook is proved enough.

How can companies use this tool to give their executives a public – and perhaps kinder – face? Or, use it as an internal tool for employees to know each other?

Second thing: The ease with which people can post unauthorised articles already has many companies and public relations practitioners combing the Web daily to look for information – good and bad – about their organisations. And to counter the arguments, if necessary.

Like them or hate them, consumer technologies like social computing, which includes blogging, wikis and social networking sites, can influence consumer decision or act as a feedback channel for customers, staff and business partners.

The question facing companies today should be how to do these things, not why they have to do it.