

# Drawing Time Theft Boundaries



What do you consider time theft in your workplace? Do you consider an employee who takes an extra 10 minutes for lunch on occasion to be stealing time? What about the employee who spends time responding to personal texts during working hours? Clearly understanding your definition, boundaries and response to the issue of time theft are useful steps in managing your employees.

## **What is Time Theft?**

The term 'time theft' broadly describes instances where employees intentionally fraudulently represent themselves as working when in fact they were not working. On the surface this is fairly cut and dried.

Among the more obvious examples of time theft includes the employee who has a 'friend' clock him/her into or out of work inaccurately, the employee who reports exaggerated hours of work and the employee who falsely reports being on the job when in fact the employee was not.

Time theft can also include smaller and subtler forms of time theft such as the employee who routinely takes an extra 10 minutes for lunch each day, frequently takes personal calls during business hours or sits at his/her desk playing games instead of working. Although not as egregious these too are a theft of time from an employer. Would you consider an employee who spends 25% or 10% of his/her time engaged in non-work related activities during regular business hours to be engaged in time theft? What if this employee is performing well and completing his/her work on time?

## **Flexible Parameters for Different Individuals**

Within today's work environment the question of time theft is complicated. Certainly falsely or fraudulently reporting inaccurate information or not showing up to a work site or job is inappropriate and should be dealt with accordingly. In 2013 the City of Hamilton in Ontario disciplined or terminated 29 employees for time theft when it was discovered that these employees, members of road works crews were dumping their materials and not even showing up to the job site.

In some instances time theft is obvious, however, not all jobs are as easily defined and the fraud as easily identified. Observing an employee taking an extra 30-minute lunch may not be what it appears if, upon closer examination, it turns out that the employee was working in a coffee shop on his/her tablet during those extra 30 minutes.

Additionally, the need to accommodate individuals on the grounds of protected human rights issues such as disability and family status add another layer of consideration. Within any given workplace there could be numerous employees working under very different parameters. An employee with ADD (attention deficit disorder) may function best when given the opportunity to take frequent personal breaks. A parent who needs to transport a child from school to childcare every other day at noon may routinely take an extra 30 minutes for lunch as part of a flexible work structure. Considering the many layers of this issue is a useful step in managing it in anticipation of potential problems.

### **Establishing Boundaries**

Within your own organization it will be useful to determine the parameters that you consider constitutes time theft requiring discipline and termination. For example you may determine that time theft clearly results when employees:

- Misrepresent their time by indicating they were engaged in a work task when they were not
- Falsely report they were in the workplace or at a job site when they were not
- Falsely record time as worked when it was not including, for example, overtime

Intentional fraud seems to be a clear case requiring discipline and should be spelled out as such in your policies. Subtler forms of time theft should be balanced against performance and productivity.

Indicate to your employees your expectations for work time usage. Your policy may state that employees are expected to focus on and prioritize work related activities during the workday and avoid taking non-authorized personal breaks from work. If an employee must take a break for personal reasons including responding to personal communications the expectation is that this time will be kept to a minimum and compensated for elsewhere during the day.

Consider also your time monitoring policies and activities. Some options for time monitoring include:

- GPS tracking for company vehicles or equipment including phones and laptops
- Biometric time and location monitoring within the workplace
- Computer and Internet usage monitoring including time and specific activities
- Observation and monitoring by supervisors
- Tracking and reporting including time in and out and general location reporting (i.e. out for lunch not specific location identification)

A word of caution! When monitoring employee activity be cautious of overstepping boundaries and invading their personal privacy. For example if you have GPS monitoring on a company vehicle you cannot track or record GPS location during an employee's breaks.

On a regular basis your supervisors, managers and leaders should have a visible presence in the workplace. Not only to monitor employees but also to stay connected to their workforce and show their interest and support to employees to help reduce employees desire steal time unnecessarily.