Blog-watching slows US workers
Correspondents in Washington
OCTOBER 28, 2005

THAT colleague staring at his computer may look like he's sweating through another hard day's work. But he just might be one of the growing number of office jockeys who, according to new research, have their minds not on their jobs - but on a blog.

Trade paper AdAge.com reported this week that US workers would waste the equivalent of 551,000 years during 2005 reading blogs, online web diaries and gossip sheets, which have exploded in numbers in recent years.

Around 35 million workers - one in four of the labour force in the United States - spend three-and-a-half hours, or 9 per cent of their working week on blogs, the survey found.

Blogs, which range in tone and quality from scandal sheets to semi-professional news sites to in-depth "geek" technology forums, are often seen as the ultimate expression of online freedom.

"Forget lunch breaks - blog readers essentially take a daily 40 minute blog break," AdAge quipped, presenting its survey as a best-guess extrapolation based on blog related data.

The AdAge survey mirrors a poll conducted by America Online and Salary.com in July, which found that American workers were goofing off for two hours a day on the internet, costing their employers 759 billion dollars a year.

But some blog and internet experts argue that reading a blog in itself does not necessarily equate to wasted time - and may replace time when workers could be idling away their boss's time doing something else.

"I think it is a little broad brush to turn around and say 'oh, they are reading blogs and it's a waste of time,'" said Steve Ferrer, head of sales and marketing firm The Propaganda House, which specialises in the internet, e-commerce and technology.

"If they weren't reading a blog they might be doing something else not necessarily productive either," said Ferrer, pointing out that some jobs require workers to use blogs and the internet for research.

Lee Rainie, a researcher at the Pew internet and American Life Project, said not all blogs were trashy journals - many are now put out by reputable media firms, and used increasingly by corporations.

"It is not the case that a blog, is a blog, is a blog - blogs run the spectrum from being ridiculous to the sublime," he said. Still, "the notion that some people might not be optimising their time is probably legitimate", he said.

Pew earlier this year released research that suggested that eight million Americans have created blogs, while blog readership jumped 58 per cent in 2004 and stood at 27 per cent of internet users.

The AdAge survey coincided with new reports that America's companies may be waking up to lost productivity as desk-bound workers surf the net.

Wired News reported this week that more and more corporations were installing security filters that block out phrases that include the word 'blog' in the URL.

Corporate America has also been alarmed at the prospect of workers actually writing blogs from their desks.

In the United States, flight attendant Ellen Simonetti was fired for posting photographs of herself in her uniform and a Google employee was dismissed after questioning his firm's finances in a blog.

Last year, Jessica Cutler, an intern for a US senator, transfixed official Washington with an anonymous steamy blog dubbed "Washingtonienne" devoted to her bed-hopping, after-hours antics, before she too was fired.

Agence France-Presse

This report appears on australianIT.com.au.