



The Boss Puts The iPod to Work

Companies Give the Device To Employees for Business Use; Waking Up Early for a Podcast

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When Gaddis Rathel needed to learn Spanish for his job, his boss gave him an unusual tool to help: a black video Apple iPod, preloaded with language lessons.

Last month, Mr. Rathel's employer -- ACG Texas LP, a Plano, Texas, franchisee of the pancake-house chain [IHOP Corp.](#) -- started testing [Apple Computer Inc.](#)'s digital media player on a few employees to save money on Spanish-language classes. Now, rather than sit in a class on company time or read a textbook, Mr. Rathel uses the iPod for audio training in his spare time. "I've used it in several scenarios around the house and in the car," says Mr. Rathel, 45 years old, who, as a manager of field training, spends a lot of time on the road. He also uses it while waiting to pick up his daughter from soccer practice.

People used to hide their iPods from their bosses, if they used them in the office at all. Now the bosses are passing them out to their employees. Companies from health-care suppliers to fast-food chains are handing out free iPods so that employees can download audio and video files of CEO announcements, training courses and sales seminars.

The trend, which follows the widespread adoption of the BlackBerry, threatens to further blur the increasingly fuzzy line between work and leisure time.

Last summer, [National Semiconductor Corp.](#), a chip manufacturer in Santa Clara, Calif., spent \$2.5 million on video iPods for its 8,500 employees, including those overseas, for training purposes and company announcements. At [Capital One Financial Corp.](#), a financial-services company based in McLean, Va., more than 3,000 employees have received iPods since the company began using them in supplementary training classes. [Siemens AG](#) unit Siemens Medical Solutions, a health-care supplier based in Malvern, Pa., purchased about 100 iPods for its molecular-imaging group last year for training and sales support. Other divisions within Siemens are now considering giving iPods to their employees.

The content available for download varies. At Pal's Sudden Service, a restaurant chain based in Kingsport, Tenn., new employees listen to audio files teaching them how to prepare food while they are in the kitchen, enabling them to physically act out the steps. At National Semiconductor,

one of the video files available for downloading off the company's intranet Web site features a senior-ranking engineer illustrating the history of the company by dressing up in costumes from different decades, such as hippie clothing from the 1960s.

While buying iPods en masse may seem costly, Apple offers bulk discounts, and employers say the device enables them to cut down on training costs. Siemens says it was able to reduce the number of training sessions it held for its molecular-imaging group to two per year from four. Each training session cost the unit \$125,000, which includes the cost of food and lodging. The price of 100 iPods: \$30,000.

Getting a free iPod is undoubtedly a perk. But as employers adopt new technologies to boost worker productivity, it is getting harder to separate life and work.

"The boundaries blur quite dramatically," says Paul Sanchez, global director of employee research at Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "That blurring in some instances is welcomed and not noticed by people generally in younger cohorts." But for employees who are 50 or older, the thought of having to use an unfamiliar device can be exasperating, he says.

At Siemens, older employees were skeptical of the iPod at first. "We got a mixed reaction," says Mike Rittman, a product manager for the molecular-imaging group. "We did get a lot who were like, 'What the heck is this?' They had no idea what it was."

For employees of any age, the idea of your boss encouraging you to put on your headphones can be perplexing. "It was weird," says ACG Texas's Mr. Rathel, who was learning Spanish so that he could use it while training new employees. "I didn't carry it around often at first. As I got more used to navigating it, it was easier."

Some employees say they prefer using the iPod to complete work-related tasks on the go, as opposed to spending additional time at their desk. Sue Sunday, 39, a project manager at Capital One, took a company-sponsored leadership and management course and listened to the materials a few times a week while on the elliptical machine at the gym. Instead of tuning in to National Public Radio, her usual fare, she would listen to the materials in the car by connecting the iPod to her car stereo.

Robert Brait, 55, a sales executive in the molecular-imaging group at Siemens, says he uses his iPod to familiarize himself with product information before he meets with customers. "It does give me the opportunity to use it in the evening or in the morning when you normally wouldn't be at work," says Mr. Brait, of North Andover, Mass. He says he sometimes wakes up extra early to put on his headphones to listen to work-related material.

Different employers have different rules governing the use of a company iPod. While many don't mind if you use it to download and listen to music on your own time, they tend to discourage

illegal downloads at home, even though there's no way to monitor it. Capital One employees, for example, sign a user agreement stating they will not store or distribute content in a manner that violates copyright laws.

Employees at National Semiconductor learned recently that their iPod wasn't a gift. When the company laid off 35 workers in its Arlington, Texas, plant in June, it asked them to hand in their digital media players at the door.

National Semiconductor, like many other employers, had required the employees to sign a document saying they would give their iPods back if they left, similar to what they are required to do for personal digital assistants and cellphones. Still, the move drew a heated reaction from technology bloggers, many of whom encouraged the laid-off employees to keep the iPods in defiance.

"Some people were disgruntled about it," says David Kirjassoff, the director of National Semiconductor University, the internal training school for employees. "We might have been able to be more clear in our communications."

The company clarified its policy after the ruckus: Employees who leave National Semiconductor can purchase their iPods at a discounted price.

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