

Acceptable Use of King County Information Assets FAQs

1. Q: I have read that minimal use of information technology assets is allowed. What is a minimal use anyway?

A: A minimal use is an infrequent or occasional use that is brief in duration and it does not impact your ability to perform your work and results in no cost to the county.

2. Q: May I send a personal e-mail using my King County e-mail account?

A: Yes, you may send and receive personal e-mail on the King County email system provided your use meets the "minimal use" criteria and is not otherwise prohibited under the policy. Remember that any e-mail sent or received via the King County e-mail system may be subject to public disclosure under Washington State Law and/or disclosure due to legal action. All e-mail whether for business or personal purposes should be professional in nature.

3. Q: May I access and use my personal e-mail account under the Acceptable Use Policy?

A: Yes, you may access your personal e-mail account provided such access fits in the definition of minimal personal use. Remember, accessing your own e-mail over the internet may expose the county to viruses; users should exercise extreme caution when accessing personal e-mail.

Generally such access should be done during non-work times (i.e. breaks, lunch time, etc.) and must not impact workflows

4. Q: Minimal personal use requires that there is little or no cost to the county. What costs are associated with the use of the internet and/or the County's e-mail system?

A: The County's resources are for business use. Here are two examples of how use incurs costs beyond what is allowed under minimal personal use:

- **Using the Internet for personal use during your regular work time costs the county your wages, which are paid to you for public services.**
- **Sending or receiving chain e-mails to friends and storing them on the e-mail server, especially if they contain photographs, requires the county to use its resources for your personal use. E-mails with photographs occupy large amounts of storage space on County owned equipment which should be used to store County data.**

5. Q: Does the new policy mean that I can use my county-provided cell phone for (limited) personal use? If so, what (if any) are the limits on its use?

A: Cell phones are not generally considered Information Assets even though smartphones and Blackberries have some computing capabilities. Therefore this policy does not directly address cell phone usage. Cell phone use would fall under the County's Employee Code of Ethics (KCC 3.04) and any department-specific policy. Consult your supervisor or the Ethics Help Line at 206-296-1586 for more information.

6. Q: Are my e-mail messages private?

A: No, if you use county equipment do not expect a right to privacy for any of your e-mail communications. E-mail communications may be considered public records and could be subject to disclosure. Aside from disclosure, employees should consider that e-mail communications are subject to alteration by others and may be forwarded to unintended recipients. Avoid these potential problems by treating e-mail communications as another form of business correspondence.

7. Q: What happens if I receive a pornographic e-mail/offensive spam?

A: First of all you should not open an e-mail from anyone that you do not know. Messages of this type often contain malicious code that can compromise the network. That said, don't panic; this happens occasionally. Mistyped internet web site addresses can result in accessing inappropriate sites and e-mail recipients have little control over the spam they receive. If you receive any kind of spam (offensive or otherwise) simply delete it. If you inadvertently access an inappropriate web site, close your browser immediately.

8. Q: Is personal use of IT resources limited to breaks and lunch? If so, does that mean that I can't call my car-pool/doctor/childcare/.... during working hours?

A: Not necessarily. This question implies the use of the telephone which is not addressed in this policy. The Employee Ethics Policy (KCC 3.04) does allow minimal personal use of telephones for personal business. Consult the Employee Ethics Policy and Ethics Board Advisory Opinions or contact the Ethics Help Line at 206-296-1586 for further information. The Employee Ethics Policy and Ethics Board Advisory opinions can be found at <http://www.kingcounty.gov/ethics>.

The Acceptable Use Policy takes a similar position and allows you to respond to personal e-mails whether through your King County e-mail account or your personal e-mail account as long as it meets the requirements of minimal personal use.

9. Q: May I use my county computer to check my bank balance online?

A: Yes, you may check your bank or deferred compensation account balances as long as such use meets the specifications of minimal use. However you cannot engage in such transactions as online banking (paying your personal bills, transferring funds, etc.) on county computers. You also may not want to engage in such activities at the office for other reasons of security. Engaging in such activities in a public or semi-public place as the office exposes you to "shoulder surfing". Shoulder surfing is the concept of others looking over your shoulder and seeing what is on your screen and sometimes watching what you type on a keyboard. In this way others, whether they are coworkers or customers may be able to see your private information and possibly even obtain your login name and password for your account. In addition, many financial institutions now register information about the PC used to access account information. If you access the information on a King County computer it may complicate or make it impossible for you to access this same account from your home PC.

10. Q: May I contact my union representative or shop steward over the County e-mail system?

A: Yes, you may use e-mail to conduct official union business at a reasonable level and that does not interfere with County business. Remember, such e-mail is not secure or private and is part of the public domain..

11. Q: May I use my county computer to purchase items on the internet?

A: Employees may transact a limited amount of consumer purchasing activities on the Internet at work, as long as such use meets the specification of minimal, but may not conduct transactions for personal financial gain. For example, the purchase of a book through the Internet is acceptable, but the sale of a book is not. Buying or selling non-consumer items such as stocks or other securities trading is prohibited by both the King County Code of Ethics and the Acceptable Use Policy as activities that can result in private financial benefit or gain.

12. Q: May I send an e-mail message to my child to make sure she arrived home safely from school?

A: Yes, such use is consistent with the policy provided the e-mail drafting is brief in duration and does not interfere with the performance of official duties. It is suggested that this may not be the most efficient method for checking on your children's welfare however.

13. Q: Are there any uses that are prohibited, even if they are brief in nature?

A: Yes, the allowance for minimal use does not apply to the following uses:

- **Conducting an outside business;**
- **Political or campaign activities;**
- **Commercial uses like advertising or selling products (including selling products on e-bay, Craig's list, etc.);**
- **Lobbying that is unrelated to official duties;**
- **Engaging in illegal or inappropriate activities;**
- **Distributing chain-e-mails. Sending bulk e-mail that is not related to official business is prohibited because it disrupts other county employees and may obligate them to make personal use of county resources.**

14. Q: There is both a policy and a guideline with the title of "Acceptable Use". What is the difference?

A: A policy is defined as a high level statement of the organizations beliefs, goals and objectives and the general means for their attainment for a specified subject area.

A guideline is a set of recommended "how-to" instructions that support some part of a policy or standard.

There is also the concept of a standard which is: A mandatory Statement of minimum requirements that support some part of a policy.

15. Q: What are the guidelines on internet use?

A: Just like the guidelines for e-mail use discussed above, any personal use of county provided Internet access must be both brief and infrequent. Extensive personal use of county provided Internet access is not permitted. In addition, your department or agency may have adopted a policy that prohibits all personal use of the Internet. Please check with your supervisor if you are unsure of your department's policies.

Example A: Several times over the course of a month an employee quickly uses the Internet to check her child's school website to determine if the school will end early that day. The transaction takes approximately three minutes. This use is considered minimal and permitted under the policy.

Example B: An employee routinely uses the Internet to manage her personal investment portfolio and communicate information to her broker. This use is not permitted under the policy. The King County Code of Ethics and the Acceptable Use Policy prohibit using county resources to engage in activities that can result in private financial benefit or gain.

Example C: An employee spends thirty to forty minutes of work time looking at various web sites related to a personal interest. This use is not permitted under the policy because it is not brief in duration and interferes with the employee's work.

16. Q: Can I watch streaming video and/or listen to internet radio through my computer at work?

A: Yes you may, however it is not recommended unless you are doing it for work purposes such as listening to council meetings. Such activities use an excessive amount of network resources called bandwidth. This use of network bandwidth for you to listen to internet radio can result in others not being able to access their files, print documents, and access e-mail efficiently. It slows down the entire network. These activities also may be disruptive to those around you depending upon your work environment.

17. Q: My county computer can copy CDs. My computer at home cannot. Is it permitted for me to make copies of CDs using my county computer if I provide the blank CDs there is no cost to the County, right?

A: You are correct relative to the cost of the CDs if you provide the blanks. However this would still be a violation of the policy because making copies of CDs is a time consuming process and would violate the definition of minimal use in two areas:

- **Not brief in duration;**
- **Would probably interfere with your ability to perform your work.**

In addition copying of CDs even for personal use is a violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998.

18. Q: My county computer has a DVD player. Can I bring a DVD movie in to the office to watch on my breaks and lunch?

A: This would be permitted under the Acceptable Use Policy as long as you kept the activity to your breaks and lunch times; however you should consider other impacts. Is this activity likely to interfere with the ability of others to do their jobs? What would be the perception of a customer or constituent observes you watching a DVD? You should consult your supervisor or manager. As a general rule if watching the DVD is for entertainment purposes and not work related it is not recommended.

19. Q: What are the Acceptable use guidelines and what happens if I fail to follow one of the guidelines?

A: The guidelines are not part of the policy but rather are illustrations of best practices. The guidelines exist to inform county employees about how to use the public's information technology assets assigned to them responsibly and prudently. If the county experiences problems associated with continued use that is currently suggested as contrary to best practices under the guidelines, the county may seek to revise its policy to outright prohibit such use. All of us are responsible to ensure we use these assets appropriately