



ARI KAPLAN: THE HOT LINE

CYBER-DONATIONS—PHILANTHROPY OR THEFT?

WITH THE RECENT SURGE IN CHARITABLE DONATIONS around the country, I wonder if this penchant for giving will spill over into PC philanthropy, i.e., sharing unused computing power and hard disk space for the benefit of medical and other research. There are already several projects out there that allow you to do this, often simply by installing peer-to-peer software similar

to Napster and Gnutella that initiates when a screensaver is activated. Recent high-profile examples include Intel's collaboration with United Devices, of Austin, Texas, in a study to develop better drug treatments for cancer. The essence of these projects is to allow almost anyone with a computer to collaborate on profound social issues by helping provide some of the many millions of hours of data processing cy-

cles needed for research.

But if you are sitting in your office thinking "Wow—this is such an easy way to help a great cause—I'm in," hold your horses, techno-cowboy. Unless you obtain authorization from your employer before using its computers to get involved in such projects, you could find yourself facing legal problems, even jail time.

Consider the case of David McOwen, a former computer administrator at

DeKalb Technical College in Clarkston, Ga. In December of 1999, McOwen reportedly loaded an unauthorized distributed computing program—used for conducting software encryption research—onto a few hundred campus computers. When school officials finally confronted him about this over a year later, he resigned. Now, according to

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press reports, he is facing possible criminal charges, including 30 years in prison and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines under the Georgia Computer Systems Protection Act.

Is this crazy? Maybe. But, the real question is, Could you be next? A number of states have enacted obscure statutes that make unauthorized computer use a crime.

Do you have Napster installed on your computer at work? How about an instant messaging system? Does this violate your company's policy on computer use? If so, you may want to remove those programs or face more than the music. **e**

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