

Chapter XII

Internet Abuse and Addiction in the Workplace: Issues and Concerns for Employers

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ABSTRACT

The Internet as a communication medium has become an increasing part of many people's day-to-day working lives. As with the introduction of other mass communication technologies, issues surrounding use, abuse, and addiction have surfaced. For instance, according to a recent report carried out by the company SurfControl (Snoddy, 2000), office workers who while away one hour a day at work on various non-work activities (e.g., trading shares, booking holidays, shopping online, etc.) could be costing businesses as much as \$35 million a year. The survey found that

59% of office Internet use was not work related and that those who traded in shares, played sports, shopped, and booked holidays cost companies the most. It is clear from research such as this that Internet abuse is a serious cause for concern — particularly to employers. This chapter has a number of objectives. It will first introduce readers to the concept of Internet addiction, before going on to look at the wider issue of Internet abuse in the workplace. Generic types of Internet abuse will be described, in addition to further examination of the reasons why Internet abuse occurs. The chapter ends with an overview of three very specific types of Internet abuse (i.e., online pornography, sexually related Internet crime, and online gambling), that will be of concern to employers, before concluding with some guidelines and recommendations for employers and human resources departments.

INTERNET ADDICTION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

There have been a growing number of reports in the popular press about excessive use of the Internet under the guise of “Internet addiction,” “Internet Addiction Disorder” (IAD), and “Internet Addiction Syndrome” (IAS) (Griffiths, 2000a). For many people, the concept of Internet addiction seems far-fetched, particularly if their concepts and definitions of addiction involve the taking of drugs. Despite the predominance of drug-based definitions of addiction, there is now a growing movement which views a number of behaviors as potentially addictive including those which do not involve the ingestion of a psychoactive drug (e.g., gambling, computer game playing, exercise, sex, and now the Internet) (Griffiths, 1996a).

Research has suggested that social pathologies are beginning to surface in cyberspace. These have been termed “technological addictions” (Griffiths, 1995, 1996b) and have been operationally defined as non-chemical (behavioral) addictions which involve excessive human-machine interaction. They can thus be viewed as a subset of behavioral addictions (Marks, 1990) and feature core components of addiction (Brown, 1993; Griffiths, 1996a), i.e., salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. Young (1999) claims Internet addiction is a broad term that covers a wide variety of behaviors and impulse control problems. This is categorized by five specific subtypes :

- 1) *Cybersexual addiction*: compulsive use of adult websites for cybersex and cyberporn.
- 2) *Cyber-relationship addiction*: over-involvement in online relationships.
- 3) *Net compulsions*: obsessive online gambling, shopping, or day-trading.
- 4) *Information overload*: compulsive Web surfing or database searches.
- 5) *Computer addiction*: obsessive computer game playing (e.g., *Doom*, *Myst*, *Solitaire*, etc.).

In reply to Young, Griffiths (1999a, 2000a) has argued that many of these excessive users are not “Internet addicts,” but just use the Internet excessively as a medium to fuel other addictions. Put very simply, a gambling addict or a computer game addict who engages in their chosen behavior online is not addicted to the Internet. The Internet is just the place where they engage in the behavior. However, in contrast to this, there are case study reports of individuals who appear to be addicted to the Internet itself (e.g., Young, 1996; Griffiths, 1996b, 2000b). These are usually people who use Internet chat rooms or play fantasy role-playing games — activities that they would not engage in except on the Internet itself. These individuals to some extent are engaged in text-based virtual realities and take on other social personas and social identities as a way of making themselves feel good about themselves.

In these cases, the Internet may provide an alternative reality to the user and allow them feelings of immersion and anonymity that may lead to an altered state of consciousness. This in itself may be highly psychologically and/or physiologically rewarding. Furthermore, as with other addictions, the activity can totally take over their life and cause many health-related problems, including both traditional withdrawal-type symptoms (e.g., moodiness, irritability, nausea, stomach cramps, etc.) and anxiety disorders, depression, and insomnia. It would appear for those with an Internet addiction disorder, the health consequences can be just as damaging as other, more traditional addictions. The good news is that the number of genuine sufferers appears to be small. However, the number will almost certainly increase over time as more and more people go online. Because of the small numbers of genuine known cases of Internet addiction, this author is unaware of very few (if any) organizations that have any practices specifically addressing this issue in the workplace (e.g., monitoring Internet addiction in the workplace, Internet addiction work policies, etc.).

There are many factors that make Internet addiction in the workplace seductive. It is clear from research in the area of computer-mediated commu-

nication that virtual environments have the potential to provide short-term comfort, excitement, and/or distraction (Griffiths, 2000a). These reasons alone provide compelling reasons why employees may engage in non-work-related Internet use. There are also other reasons, including opportunity, access, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, and dis-inhibition, which are outlined in more detail in the next section on Internet abuse.

Case studies of excessive Internet users may also provide better evidence of whether Internet addiction exists by the fact that the data collected are much more detailed. Even if just one case study can be located, it indicates that Internet addiction actually does exist—even if it is unrepresentative. There appear to be many people who use the Internet excessively, but are not addicted as measured by bona fide addiction criteria. Most people researching in the field have failed to use stringent criteria for measuring addiction that has perpetuated the skepticism shown among many academics. The main problems with much of the research to date is that:

- the sampling methods used have been questionable (e.g., an overreliance on self-selected samples),
- the measures used have no measure of severity,
- the measures have no temporal dimension,
- the measures have a tendency to overestimate the prevalence of problems,
- the measures used take no account of the context of Internet use,
- there is no survey work to date that conclusively demonstrates that Internet addiction exists.

Case study accounts (Griffiths, 2000b) have shown that the Internet can be used to counteract other deficiencies in the person's life (e.g., relationships, lack of friends, physical appearance, disability, coping, etc.). Most excessive Internet users spend vast amounts of time online for social contact (mostly for chat room services). As these cases show, text-based relationship can obviously be rewarding for some people and is an area for future research both in, and outside of, the workplace. As can be seen, Internet addiction appears to be a bona fide problem to a small minority of people, but evidence suggests the problem is so small that few employers take it seriously. It may be that Internet abuse (rather than Internet addiction) is the issue that employers should be more concerned about. This is therefore covered in more detail in the following sections.

TYPES OF WORKPLACE INTERNET ABUSE

It is clear that the issue of Internet abuse and Internet addiction are related, but they are not the same thing. Furthermore, the long-term effects of Internet abuse may have more far-reaching effects for the company that the Internet abuser works for than the individual themselves. Abuse also suggests that there may not necessarily be any negative effects for the user other than a decrease in work productivity.

As seen in the previous section, Young (1999) claims Internet addiction is a broad term that covers a wide variety of behaviors and impulse control problems categorized by five specific subtypes (i.e., cybersexual addiction, cyber-relationship addiction, net compulsions, information overload, and computer addiction). These can be adapted and refined to produce a typology of Internet abuse within the workplace. These are cybersexual Internet abuse, online friendship/relationship abuse, Internet activity abuse, online information abuse, criminal Internet abuse, and miscellaneous Internet abuse. These are examined in more detail below.

Cybersexual Internet abuse involves the abuse of adult websites for cybersex and cyberporn during work hours. Such online sexual services include the conventional (e.g., Internet versions of widely available pornographic magazines like *Playboy*), the not so conventional (Internet versions of very hardcore pornographic magazines), and what can only be described as the bizarre (discussion groups such as alt.sex.bondage.golden showers.sheep). There are also pornographic picture libraries (commercial and free-access), videos and video clips, live strip shows, live sex shows, and voyeuristic Web-Cam sites (Griffiths, 2000c, 2001).

Online friendship/relationship abuse involves the conducting of an online friendship and/or relationship during work hours. Such a category could also include the use of e-mailing friends and/or engaging in discussion groups, as well as maintenance of online emotional relationships. Such people may also abuse the Internet by using it to explore gender and identity roles by swapping gender or creating other personas and forming online relationships or engaging in cybersex (see above) (Griffiths, 2000c, 2001).

Internet activity abuse involves the use of the Internet during work hours in which other non-work-related activities are done (e.g., online gambling, online shopping, online travel booking, online computer gaming, online day-trading, etc.). This may be one of the most common forms of Internet abuse in the workplace.

Online information abuse involves the abuse of Internet search engines and databases. Typically, this involves individuals who search for work-related information on databases, etc., but who end up wasting hours of time with little relevant information gathered. This may be deliberate work-avoidance but may also be accidental and/or non-intentional. It may also involve people who seek out general educational information, information for self-help/diagnosis (including online therapy), and/or scientific research for non-work purposes.

Criminal Internet abuse involves the seeking out individuals who then become victims of sexually related Internet crime (e.g., online sexual harassment, cyberstalking, pedophilic “grooming” of children). The fact that these types of abuse involve criminal acts may have severe implications for employers.

Miscellaneous Internet abuse involves any activity not found in the above categories, such as the digital manipulation of images on the Internet for entertainment and/or masturbatory purposes (e.g., creating celebrity fake photographs where heads of famous people are superimposed onto someone else’s naked body) (Griffiths, 2000c, 2001).

WHY DOES INTERNET ABUSE OCCUR?

There are many factors which makes Internet abuse in the workplace seductive. It is clear from research in the area of computer-mediated communication that virtual environments have the potential to provide short-term comfort, excitement, and/or distraction (Griffiths, 2000). These reasons alone provide compelling reasons why employees may engage in non-work-related Internet use. There are also other reasons (opportunity, access, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, dis-inhibition, social acceptance, and longer working hours) which are briefly examined below.

Opportunity and access — Obvious pre-cursors to potential Internet abuse includes both opportunity and access to the Internet. Clearly, the Internet is now commonplace and widespread, and is almost integral to most workplace environments. Given that prevalence of undesirable behaviors is strongly correlated with increased access to the activity, it is not surprising that the development of Internet abuse appears to be increasing across the population. Research into other socially acceptable but potentially problematic behaviors (drinking alcohol, gambling, etc.) has demonstrated that increased accessibility

leads to increased uptake (i.e., regular use) and that this eventually leads to an increase in problems — although the increase may not be proportional.

Affordability — Given the wide accessibility of the Internet, it is now becoming cheaper and cheaper to use the online services on offer. Furthermore, for almost all employees, Internet access is totally free of charge and the only costs will be time and the financial costs of some particular activities (e.g., online sexual services, online gambling, etc.).

Anonymity — The anonymity of the Internet allows users to privately engage in their behaviors of choice in the belief that the fear of being caught by their employer is minimal. This anonymity may also provide the user with a greater sense of perceived control over the content, tone, and nature of their online experiences. The anonymity of the Internet often facilitates more honest and open communication with other users and can be an important factor in the development of online relationships that may begin in the workplace. Anonymity may also increase feelings of comfort since there is a decreased ability to look for, and thus detect, signs of insincerity, disapproval, or judgment in facial expression, as would be typical in face-to-face interactions.

Convenience — Interactive online applications such as e-mail, chat rooms, newsgroups, or role-playing games provide convenient mediums to meet others without having to leave one's work desk. Online abuse will usually occur in the familiar and comfortable environment of home or workplace, thus reducing the feeling of risk and allowing even more adventurous behaviors.

Escape — For some, the primary reinforcement of particular kinds of Internet abuse (e.g., to engage in an online affair and/or cybersex) is the sexual gratification they experience online. In the case of behaviors like cybersex and online gambling, the experiences online may be reinforced through a subjectively and/or objectively experienced "high." The pursuit of mood-modifying experiences is characteristic of addictions. The mood-modifying experience has the potential to provide an emotional or mental escape and further serves to reinforce the behavior. Abusive and/or excessive involvement in this escapist activity may lead to problems (e.g., online addictions). Online behavior can provide a potent escape from the stresses and strains of real life. These activities fall on what Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies (1999) describe as a continuum from life enhancing to pathological and addictive.

Dis-inhibition — Dis-inhibition is clearly one of the Internet's key appeals as there is little doubt that the Internet makes people less inhibited (Joinson, 1998). Online users appear to open up more quickly online and reveal themselves emotionally much faster than in the offline world. What might take

months or years in an offline relationship may only takes days or weeks online. As some have pointed out (e.g., Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), the perception of trust, intimacy, and acceptance has the potential to encourage online users to use these relationships as a primary source of companionship and comfort.

Social acceptability — The social acceptability of online interaction is another factor to consider in this context. What is really interesting is how the perception of online activity has changed over the last 10 years (e.g., the “nerdish” image of the Internet is almost obsolete). It may also be a sign of increased acceptance as young children are exposed to technology earlier and so become used to socializing using computers as tools. For instance, laying the foundations for an online relationship in this way has become far more socially acceptable and will continue to be so. Most of these people are not societal misfits as is often claimed — they are simply using the technology as another tool in their social armory.

Longer working hours — All over the world, people are working longer hours and it is perhaps unsurprising that many of life’s activities can be performed from the workplace Internet. Take, for example, the case of a single individual looking for a relationship. For these people, the Internet at work may be ideal. Dating via the desktop may be a sensible option for workaholic professionals. It is effectively a whole new electronic “singles bar” which, because of its text-based nature, breaks down physical prejudices. For others, Internet interaction takes away the social isolation that we can all sometimes feel. There are no boundaries of geography, class, or nationality. It opens up a whole new sphere of relationship-forming.

INTERNET ABUSE: SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES THAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD BE AWARE OF

This section briefly examines three areas (online pornography use, sexually related Internet crime, online gambling) that employers should perhaps be aware of with regards to Internet abuse by employees.

Online Pornography Use by Employees

The pornography industry was one of the first industries to take advantage of the Internet medium. It is estimated that the online pornography industry is

worth \$1 billion. In addition, the research company *Datamonitor* reported that sex accounts for 69% of spending on the Internet (Griffiths, 2000c). Academic researchers also claim that “sex” is the most searched for topic on the Internet (e.g., Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Griffiths, 2001), and as many as one-third of all Internet users visit some type of sexual site. It is also claimed that much of this activity takes place within workplace settings and is therefore an issue of major concern to employers.

All the problems that e-business and e-commerce ventures face today were first experienced by the pornography industry, which continually pushed the envelope of streaming technology because of the potential huge profits to be made. Two particular developments in current use (pay-per-click banner advertisements and real-time credit card processing) were both developed by technical expertise from within the pornographic industry. These developments have had significant impacts on the accessibility afforded to Internet users. Furthermore, theoretical 24-hour constant access has the potential to stimulate Internet abuse, which may in some circumstances lead to addictive and/or compulsive activity. Again, these factors are just as salient to those in the workplace setting as those with home Internet access.

One of the main reasons that the pornography industry has such a vested interest in this area is that in the offline world, the buying of most products is hassle-free and anonymous. However, buying pornography in the offline world may be embarrassing or stressful to the consumer, particularly if they have to go to venues deemed to be “unsavory.” If pornography consumers are given the chance to circumvent this process, they invariably will. Furthermore, in the workplace setting, individuals may also be able to hide this part of their lives from their partner and/or family at home.

Sexually Related Internet Crime by Employees

The actual extent of sexually related Internet crime remains a somewhat elusive figure. However, most commentators assert that it is on the increase. The reality is that advancements in computer technology generally, and the increased availability of the Internet in particular, have provided for new innovations in, and an expansion of, the field of criminality (and more specifically in the area of sexually related Internet crime) (Griffiths, Rogers, & Sparrow, 1998).

In the broadest possible sense, sexually related Internet crime can be divided into two categories: (i) display, downloading, and/or the distribution of

illegal sexually related material; and (ii) the use of the Internet to sexually procure and/or intimidate an individual in some way (e.g., online sexual harassment, cyberstalking, pedophilic grooming). Both of these are possible within the workplace, although it is likely that downloading of pornography is the most common practice within workplace settings. The police crackdown on Internet pornography has been argued by some to be futile as it could drive it underground. However, employers can introduce their own forms of crackdown in the workplace through the use of sanctions (such as wage fines or deductions, or dismissal from the job in the case of persistent offenders).

One area that has been given little consideration is that of online harassment (which is not uncommon in workplace settings). Online harassment is certainly not a new phenomenon, as there have been reported cases throughout the 1990s. For instance, in the UK, Maxine Morse gave up her £60,000-a-year job when male colleagues at the company she worked at bombarded her e-mail address with images of bestiality and naked men taken from the Internet. She was awarded £22,000 in compensation.

Electronic Harassment

In addition to Internet addiction, it is also worth highlighting the issue of online harassment and “flaming” (i.e., an abusive textual attack by another person). Such behaviors can be psychologically traumatic for the victim (Griffiths, 2001b). Words can hurt and seeing the abuse in print makes it stronger to the victim as they can read it again and again. If the post is on a list or a newsgroup, there’s the added effect of knowing that lots of other people can see it, and that it’s permanent. For the victims of online harassment and bullying, the health-related consequences appear to be similar to those having an Internet addiction, i.e., anxiety-related disorders, depression, and insomnia. The psychological and health effects will almost certainly impact on an employee’s productivity as a result.

Online harassment and flaming can also be a pre-cursor to more serious Internet-related offences (e.g., online sexual harassment and cyberstalking). Cyberstalking is also an emerging issue that employers should be aware of. Very recently the first prosecution case of cyberstalking or harassment by computer occurred in Los Angeles when Gary Dellapenta, a 50-year-old security guard, was arrested for his online activities. It all began when Dellapenta was rebuffed by his 28-year-old victim, Randi Barber. As a result of this rejection, Dellapenta became obsessed with Barber and placed adverts

on the Internet under the names “playfulkitty4U” and “kinkygal,” claiming she was “into rape fantasy and gang-bang fantasy.” As a result of these postings, she started to receive obscene phone calls and visits by men to her house making strange and lewd suggestions. Although such a phenomenon is by definition a global one, it was the Californian legal system that took the lead in an effort to combat it. Many other cases of cyberstalking and/or persistent and unwanted e-mail messages have also been reported, some of which have originated in the workplace.

Online Gambling by Employees

Gambling in the workplace is a little researched area despite the potential far-reaching consequences. Part of the problem stems from the fact that employers are reluctant to acknowledge gambling as a workplace issue and the possible implications that may arise from it. This section briefly examines the major issues surrounding Internet gambling in the workplace.

Internet gambling is one of the newer opportunities for gambling in the workplace. There are now a huge number of websites offering opportunities for gambling on the Internet by using a credit card. At present there are few legal restrictions to stop this form of gambling taking place. An increasing number of organizations have unlimited Internet access for all, which allows such activity to take place without arousing suspicion. Internet gambling is a somewhat solitary activity that can happen without the knowledge of both management and the employee’s co-workers. Furthermore, problem Internet gambling has few observable signs and symptoms that are commonly associated with other addictions (e.g., alcoholism, drug addiction, etc.). This makes identification of problem gamblers hard for employers. However, there are a number of behaviors and “warning signs” that might be indicative of a gambling problem. Many of these involve the exploitation of time and finances.

Problem Internet gambling can clearly be a hidden activity, and the growing availability of Internet gambling is making it easier to gamble from the workplace. Thankfully, it would appear that for most people, Internet gambling is not a serious problem, although even for social Internet gamblers who gamble during work hours, there are issues about time wasting and impact on work productivity. For those whose gambling starts to become more of a problem, it can affect both the organization and other work colleagues. Managers clearly need to have their awareness of this issue raised, and once this has happened, they need to raise awareness of the issue among the work force. Employers

should seek to introduce a “gambling policy” at work that includes Internet gambling. This should include a checklist that employees can assess themselves, but also include a list of behaviors and warning signs.

Finally, in this section, it might perhaps be argued that in some cases, abuse of the Internet may actually make the employee feel happier about themselves. If this is the case, it could perhaps be speculated that these individuals would actually increase (rather than decrease) productivity in the workplace. Unfortunately, there is no empirical evidence to confirm or refute such a speculation. However, it is unlikely many employers would want to facilitate Internet abuse even if it was shown that productivity could be increased in this way. There are also questions about how much Internet abuse would be acceptable and at what point the gains from feeling good start to be outweighed by excessive time spent on the Internet.

GUIDELINES FOR MANAGERS AND HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENTS

As has been demonstrated, being able to spot someone who is an Internet addict or an Internet abuser can be very difficult. However, there are some practical steps that can be taken to help minimize the potential problem.

- *Take the issue of Internet abuse/addiction seriously.* Internet abuse and addiction in all their varieties are only just being considered as potentially serious occupational issues. Managers, in conjunction with Personnel Departments, need to ensure that they are aware of the issues involved and the potential risks it can bring to both their employees and the whole organization. They also need to be aware that for employees who deal with finances, the consequences of some forms of Internet abuse/addiction (e.g., Internet gambling) can be very great for the company.
- *Raise awareness of Internet abuse/addiction issues at work.* This can be done through e-mail circulation, leaflets, and posters on general notice boards. Some countries will have national and/or local agencies (e.g., technology councils, health and safety organizations, etc.) that can supply useful educational literature (including posters). Telephone numbers for these organizations can usually be found in most telephone directories.

- *Ask employees to be vigilant.* Internet abuse/addiction at work can have serious repercussions not only for the individual but also for those employees who befriend Internet abusers and addicts, and the organization itself. Fellow staff need to know the basic signs and symptoms of Internet abuse and addiction. Employee behaviors, such as continual use of the Internet for non-work purposes, might be indicative of an Internet abuse problem.
- *Give employees access to diagnostic checklists.* Make sure that any literature or poster within the workplace includes a self-diagnostic checklist so that employees can check themselves to see if they might have (or be developing) an Internet problem.
- *Monitor Internet use of your staff who you suspect may have problems.* Those staff with an Internet-related problem are likely to spend great amounts of time engaged in non-work activities on the Internet. Should an employer suspect such a person, they should get the company's IT specialists to look at their Internet surfing history as the computer's hard disk will have information about everything they have ever accessed.
- *Check Internet "bookmarks" of your staff.* In some jurisdictions across the world, employers can legally access the e-mails and Internet content of their employees. One of the most simple checks is to simply look at an employee's list of "bookmarked" websites. If they are spending a lot of employment time engaged in non-work activities, many bookmarks will be completely non-work related (e.g., online dating agencies, gambling sites).
- *Develop an "Internet Abuse at Work" policy.* Many organizations have policies for behaviors such as smoking or drinking alcohol. Employers should develop their own Internet abuse policies by liaison between Personnel Services and local technology councils and/or health and safety executives.
- *Give support to identified problem users.* Most large organizations have counseling services and other forms of support for employees who find themselves in difficulties. In some (but not all) situations, problems associated with Internet use need to be treated sympathetically (and like other, more bona fide addictions such as alcoholism). Employee support services must also be educated about the potential problems of Internet abuse and addiction in the workplace.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, major issues that surround Internet abuse/addiction issues in the workplace have been highlighted. Internet abuse/addiction can clearly be a hidden activity, and the growing availability of Internet facilities in the workplace is making it easier for abuse to occur in lots of different forms. Thankfully, it would appear that for most people, Internet abuse is not a serious individual problem, although for large companies, small levels of Internet abuse multiplied across the workforce raises serious issues about work productivity. For those whose Internet abuse starts to become more of a problem, it can affect many levels including the individual, their work colleagues, and the organization itself.

Managers clearly need to have their awareness of this issue raised, and once this has happened, they need to raise awareness of the issue among the work force. Knowledge of such issues can then be applied individually to organizations in the hope that they can develop an Internet abuse policy in the same way that many organizations have introduced smoking and alcohol policies. Furthermore, employers need to let employees know exactly which behaviors on the Internet are reasonable (e.g., the occasional e-mail to a friend) and those which are unacceptable (e.g., online gaming, cybersex, etc.). Internet abuse has the potential to be a social issue, a health issue, *and* an occupational issue, and needs to be taken seriously by all those employers who utilize the Internet in their day-to-day business.

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