

# Internet Abuse and Addiction in the Workplace

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## INTRODUCTION

As with the introduction of other mass communication technologies, issues surrounding Internet use, abuse and addiction have surfaced. This article 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. In this section, generic types of Internet abuse will be described, in addition to further examination of the reasons why Internet abuse occurs. The chapter ends with some guidelines and recommendations for employers and human resources departments.

## BACKGROUND: INTERNET ADDICTION

There have been a growing number of academic papers about excessive use of the Internet. These can roughly be divided into four categories:

- Studies that compare excessive Internet users with non-excessive users (e.g., Brenner, 1997; Young, 1998)
- Studies that have examined vulnerable groups of excessive Internet use; for example, students (e.g., Nalwa & Anand, 2003; Scherer & Bost, 1997)
- Case studies of excessive Internet users (Catalano, Catalano, Embi & Frankel, 1999; Griffiths, 2000a; Tsai & Lin, 2003; Young, 1996)
- Studies that examine the psychometric properties of excessive Internet use (e.g., Armstrong, Phillips & Saling, 2000; Charlton, 2002; Pratarelli et al., 1999).
- Studies examining the relationship of excessive Internet use with other behaviors; for example, psychiatric problems, depression, loneliness, academic performance and so forth (e.g., Kubey, Lavin & Barrows, 2001; Nie & Ebring, 2000; Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla & McElroy, 2000)

Despite the predominance of drug-based definitions of addiction, there is now a growing movement that 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, exer-

cise, sex, and now the Internet) (Orford, 2001). Research has suggested that social pathologies are beginning to surface in cyberspace. These have been termed “technological addictions” (Griffiths, 1996a) and have been operationally defined as non-chemical (behavioral) addictions that 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); that is, 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:

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

In reply to Young, Griffiths (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; 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 feeling 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. There are many factors

that make the Internet 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, 2000a). These reasons alone provide compelling reasons alone why employees may engage in non-work related Internet use. There are also other reasons that are outlined in more detail in the next section on Internet abuse.

Case study accounts (e.g., Griffiths, 2000b; Tsai & Lin, 2003; Young, 1996) 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.). 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.

## **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 than the Internet abuser works for than the individual himself or herself. 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. 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:** this involves the abuse of adult Web sites 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 (various discussion groups). 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 (Cooper, 2000; Griffiths, 2001).

- **Online friendship/relationship abuse:** this 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, 2001; Whitty, 2003).
- **Internet activity abuse:** this 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:** this involves the abuse of Internet search engines and databases. Typically, this involves individuals who search for work-related information on databases and so forth 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:** this involves seeking out individuals who then become victims of sexually-related Internet crime (e.g., online sexual harassment, cyberstalking, paedophilic "grooming" of children). The fact that these types of abuse involve criminal acts may have severe implications for employers.
- **Miscellaneous Internet abuse:** this 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, 2001).

## **WHY DOES INTERNET ABUSE OCCUR?**

There are many factors that make Internet abuse in the workplace seductive. It is clear from research in the area of computer-mediated communication that virtual envi-

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ronments 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 (opportunity, access, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, disinhibition, social acceptance, and longer working hours), which are briefly examined next:

- **Opportunity and access** – Obvious pre-cursors to potential Internet abuse include 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.
- **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 be-

haviors 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.

- **Disinhibition** – Disinhibition 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 and perception of being online 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. Internet interaction takes away the social isolation that we can all sometimes feel and there are no boundaries of geography, class or nationality.

## FUTURE TRENDS: 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.

- **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.

- 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 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) for the company can be very great.
- 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 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 that 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 disc will have information about everything they have ever accessed. The fact that specific individuals may be monitored should be outlined in the organization's "Internet Abuse At Work" policy so that employees are aware they may be monitored.
- 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 simple check is to simply look at an employee's list of "bookmarked" Web sites. 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).

- 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.

## CONCLUSION

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 that 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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## KEY TERMS

**Conflict:** This refers to the conflicts between the addict and those around them (interpersonal conflict), conflicts with other activities (job, social life, hobbies and interests) or from within the individual themselves (intra-psychic conflict) that are concerned with the particular activity.

**Cybersex:** The act of computer-mediated sex either in an online or virtual environment. Examples include two

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consenting adults engaging in an e-mail or real-time chat sex session. The advantages to this are that two people who are at opposite ends of the globe can maintain a relationship.

**Internet Addiction:** This is a term used to describe excessive Internet use and has been also been referred to as Internet addiction disorder (IAD), Internet addiction syndrome (IAS) and pathological Internet use. As with other addictions, Internet addiction features the core components of other addictive behaviors (salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse) and can be defined as a repetitive habit pattern that increases the risk of disease and/or associated personal and social problems. It is often experienced subjectively as “loss of control” and these habit patterns are typically characterized by immediate gratification (short-term rewards), often coupled with delayed, deleterious effects (long-term costs). Attempts to change an addictive behavior (via treatment or by self-initiation) are typically marked by high relapse rates (see also technological addictions).

**Mood Modification:** This refers to the subjective experiences that people report as a consequence of engaging in the particular activity and can be seen as a coping strategy (i.e., they experience an arousing “buzz” or a “high” or paradoxically, tranquilizing feel of “escape” or “numbing”).

**Relapse:** This is the tendency for repeated reversions to earlier patterns of the particular activity to recur and for even the most extreme patterns typical of the height of the

addiction to be quickly restored after many years of abstinence or control.

**Salience:** This occurs when the particular activity becomes the most important activity in the person’s life and dominates their thinking (preoccupations and cognitive distortions), feelings (cravings) and behavior (deterioration of socialized behavior). For instance, even if the person is not actually engaged in the behavior they will be thinking about the next time they will be.

**Technological Addictions:** These addictions are operationally defined as non-chemical (behavioral) addictions that involve human-machine interaction. They can either be passive (e.g., television) or active (e.g., computer games, Internet), and usually contain inducing and reinforcing features which may contribute to the promotion of addictive tendencies. Technological addictions can be viewed as a subset of behavioral addictions and feature core components of addiction, that is, salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse.

**Tolerance:** This is the process whereby increasing amounts of the particular activity are required to achieve the former effects. For instance, a gambler may have to gradually have to increase the size of the bet to experience a euphoric effect that was initially obtained by a much smaller bet.

**Withdrawal Symptoms:** These are the unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects that occur when the particular activity is discontinued or suddenly reduced, for example, the shakes, moodiness, irritability and so forth.