

# 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 & Salting, 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, exercise, sex, and now the Internet) (Orford, 2001). Research has suggested that social pathologies are beginning to surface in cyber-

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

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