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Internet at Work: Tool or Productivity Waster?

The use of internet at work has increased significantly over the years for business communications, transactions, and research.   It has also become one of the biggest time wasters to employers, because of the increased non-work related use by employees. For example, according to a recent report by SurfControl (Snoddy), a web filtering and security software provider, office workers who spend one hour a day at work on various non-work activities (e.g., trading stock shares, booking vacations, shopping online) could be costing businesses as much as $35 million a year. The survey found that 59% of internet use at the office was not work related and employees who traded in stock shares, played online games, shopped, and booked vacations cost companies the most. It is clear from this type of research that internet abuse is a serious cause for concern.

Not only are there concerns for productivity, but also for addiction related to things like pornography, gambling, social networks, and video gaming activities. It has been argued behavioral addictions are no different from chemical addictions (e.g., alcoholism, heroin, or tobacco addiction) regarding the core components of addiction such as salience, tolerance, withdrawal, mood modification, conflict, time waste, and relapse. Most excessive internet users spend vast amounts of time online for social contact (mostly for chat room services). Young (1999) claimed internet addiction was a broad term that covered a wide variety of behaviors and impulse control problems that have been classified by five specific subtypes (i.e., cyber sexual addiction, cyber-relationship addiction, net compulsions, information overload, and computer addiction).

Each of these addictions translates into lost productivity and time wasters for employees with these problems. There are many factors that make internet abuse in the workplace seductive. Research in the area of computer-mediated communication has shown virtual environments have the potential to provide short-term comfort, excitement, and/or distraction (Griffiths, 2000c). They also give anonymity allowing the users to privately engage in their behavior, believing the chance of being caught is minimal.

Fixing the Problem

Finding ways to eliminate internet misuse and addictive behaviors while still allowing the positive benefits to remain in the work environment is possible.

1. **Create Internet Use Policy** – Clearly define company policy on all computer, internet, and email use. This should include the following information:
   a. Computer, internet, and email are all company property and the company reserves the right to monitor use and access information.
   b. Definition of misuse items that would result in corrective action (e.g., gambling, pornography, and other non-job related uses).
   c. A provision prohibiting communications that is contrary to the company's harassment and discrimination policy.
   d. A statement that the use of internet and email are for business purposes only.
2. **Train Employees** – Train employees in the policy defining expectations, proper use, and

1

abuse that will result in corrective actions. Ask employees to be vigilant in using their work time, internet, and computer resources wisely. Give employees a diagnostic checklist to help them see if they might have an internet problem.

3. **Internet Filter** – There are good internet filters available that block or restrict access to undesired websites. Work closely with your IT personnel to develop restrictions to various categories and sites. In addition to restricting sites like pornography and gambling, some organizations even restrict YouTube and Facebook. Consider restricting any site that does not serve a business purpose. Balance restrictions by not being too mistrusting. Allow those who do not abuse the system to do some personal things on the internet during breaks and lunch.

4. **Monitor Internet Use** – In addition to informing employees your organization monitors internet use, monitor access to restricted sites, especially for those who have shown a problem in this area. If you suspect an employee may have a problem with internet abuse, request that the company's information technology specialist look at the history of the employee's internet surfing because the computer's hard disk will have information about everything the employee has ever accessed. One of the simplest checks is to look at an employee's list of bookmarked websites.

5. **Give Support** – For lesser violations, give support to identified computer/internet abusers, helping them understand the problems associated with their misuse. In some instances, creating a performance improvement plan defining the problem, needed changes, and getting the employee's signature can be an effective tool to bring about needed changes. Others may need assistance with counseling services or addiction recovery programs.

6. **Supervisor Reinforcement** –Supervisors must ensure adherence to all company policies and procedures, including the internet, computer, and email policy. Train leaders to remain aware of employees' computer activities and other indicators that show there may be a problem. For example, decreased productivity, missing deadlines, spending excessive amounts of time on the internet, and shifting to another site when someone walks by, can each indicate there is a potential problem. Raise awareness, set expectations, monitor, give feedback and reinforce the need to use the internet appropriately.

7. **Corrective Action** **–** Employees who violate your internet, computer, and email policy should be held accountable. The level of the violation drives the corrective action response. For lesser violations, you may give them support and coaching to help them improve. For more serious violations and repeat offenders, discharge may be the best recourse. Keep in mind other employees know when abuse is taking place. If they see someone getting away with wasting time and misusing the internet, it causes resentment, negativity, and may lead to them adopting poor internet habits as well. Be consistent and take needed actions to enforce your policy.

Internet abuse can be a hidden activity that requires clear policies, training, monitoring, blocking, leader reinforcement, and corrective action to keep the internet a productive tool--not a time waster.

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HR Service, Inc., provides assistance with policies, training, compliance and any HR function. Call (801) 685-8400 or email: Ken@HRServiceInc.com. Visit us on-line at: www.HRServiceInc.com

Sources*:* Internet abuse in the workplace: issues and concerns for employers and employment counselors. By Griffiths, Mark, Publication: Journal of Employment Counseling*;* Young, K. (1999). Internet addiction: Evaluation and treatment. Student British Medical Journal, 7, 351-352.
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