

# Be Alert to the Signs of Employee Internet Addiction

by Mike Foster

For years, addictions such as alcohol, drugs, and gambling were predominantly seen in clinics across the nation. These days, however, there's a new addiction that's running rampant, and your employees may be feeding their habit at their desks every day. It's called Internet addiction, and it's taking its toll in companies across the country.

Consider this: according to the Center for Online Addiction, nearly 6% of 17,251 respondents met the criteria for compulsive Internet use, and over 30% reported using the Internet to escape from negative feelings. The vast majority admitted to feelings of time distortion, accelerated intimacy, and feeling uninhibited when online.

At first glance, employee Internet misuse may not seem like a big problem. After all, how could a little online chatting or shopping at work result in company losses? However, online industry analysts predict that Internet misuse—using the Internet at work for non-work related activities—will cost companies an estimated 1 billion dollars in lost productivity this year alone. Additionally, managers must be concerned with legal liabilities that result from employees sending questionable e-mails and downloading copyrighted materials.

The logical question is “how can the Internet be addicting, especially since it's not a chemical substance like alcohol or drugs?” While the Internet is not a physical addiction, it is a mental one. For example, some people are addicted to Internet chat rooms or instant messaging with family and friends. They spend precious work hours chatting on the computer during the day even though their in-bins may be piling up and that important project they haven't even started is due in a few hours. They opt to chat with their friends because it mentally feels better to spend time with people who love and nurture them compared to people who assign them things they don't want to do and who may even criticize the work that they do perform. People

naturally avoid those things that make them feel uncomfortable or stressed and gravitate towards those activities that feel fun. In these instances, chatting with friends will win out every time.

The same holds true for other online addictive behaviors, such as shopping, gambling, and researching information for personal use (i.e.: vacation planning, buying and trading stocks, etc.). For many people, the Internet is an escape from reality in order to ease the pressures of everyday life.

Many companies who brought the Internet into the workplace are now finding they must implement policies to deter Internet misuse. If your company has recently implemented the Internet into the workplace, you need to know the signs of employee Internet addiction. Below are questions to ask that may alert you to Internet

addiction among your co-workers, employees, or even yourself.

## **Do you or your employees lose track of time when online?**

Do you log on to the Internet with every intention of doing work-related research, only to find yourself still surfing hours later, but now for personal material? Does the amount of time you spend online worry you? Or, are you concerned that your employees are losing track of time when they're online? Granted, everyone may lose track of time once in a while when conducting intensive research; however, if it's a common occurrence and you can't recall the information you've been viewing online, there may be an Internet addiction problem.

## **Do you routinely have more personal than work-related e-mail in your e-mail box every day?**



Everyone likes to socialize, and e-mail offers the perfect way for employees to socialize without leaving their desks. Unfortunately, it's easy to let the messages get out of hand. One online poll conducted by vault.com revealed that 51% of employees admit to receiving 1-5 non-work related emails per day, and 17% receive 6-10. Additionally, 7% admit to sending over 20 personal e-mails per day. If you monitor your company's e-mail activity, you may want to occasionally check who sends what and to where. Those employees who send and receive an unusual amount of personal e-mails may have a problem.

### **Are you or any of your employees preoccupied with the Internet?**

Are you constantly thinking about your most recent online adventure, or do you sit at your desk anxious to log on again? Do you notice employees who continually obsess over the Internet, as if they can't wait to get online again? Or do you have employees whose conversation topics routinely focus around the Internet and something they saw online? If you notice that you or someone else is preoccupied with the Internet, it may be time to intervene and get help. Since disciplinary action or termination for Internet misuse is becoming more and more common, people need to know if their actions are putting them at risk of losing their jobs. In addition, in today's tight labor market, employers need to keep valuable employees in order to reduce their hiring and turnover costs. Helping employees confront an Internet problem can save money in the long run.

### **Do you or your employees become irritated when it's time to log off or when the Internet is down for the day?**

Have you tried to stop your Internet surfing, only to become depressed or angry for no reason? Do you become frustrated when you have to dial up for an Internet connection and can't get through? If your network is down for a few hours or the entire day, do you or any of your employees become hostile? When an Internet addicted employee can't get his or her "fix," it's very common for emotions such as anger and frustration to surface. If you

notice these behaviors, intervention may be necessary.

### **What Companies Can Do**

The above questions represent just a few indicators of Internet addiction. To get a true sense of your company's Internet use and misuse, installing technology devices such as monitoring can indicate if a problem exists and can deter employees from misusing the Internet at work. Other options include rewarding productivity, training employees on effective Internet uses, hiring motivated and self-starting employees who are enthusiastic about working for your company, offering current employees skills training to keep them motivated and challenged, and leading your employees by example on acceptable Internet uses.

When you educate your employees about Internet addiction and the warning signs, you help them realize how their behaviors can be self-sabotaging their own success and career growth, as well as the company's profitability. It's also important to realize that Internet misuse and Internet addiction are not problems that can be solved by technology or policy alone. These are the new societal challenges that must be addressed through education in addition to the policy and technology options. Only when companies recognize Internet addiction as a true disorder and offer ways for employees to combat it can businesses start regaining the profits and productivity the Internet has unwittingly taken away.

### **About the Author:**

Mike Foster's history as the CEO of a computer company for 12 years, and as an international technology consultant and speaker, makes him an expert at both technology and management skills. Mike Foster is a frequent presenter of keynote speeches, seminars, and workshops. His message about how to use technology to increase profits and productivity is welcomed by small business owners and Fortune 10 executives alike. For more information about Foster's programs, call 800-657-7107 or visit [www.fosterinstitute.com](http://www.fosterinstitute.com) or [www.internetmisuse.com](http://www.internetmisuse.com).