

Help Your Employees Avoid the Dangers of Internet Misuse

by Mike Foster

Employee Internet misuse is on the rise. As a result, more and more companies are conducting full-scale computer audits and enforcing a zero-tolerance rule when employees are found abusing their Internet privileges at work. This includes employees who visit questionable web sites, shop or gamble online, spend time in chat rooms, and send inappropriate e-mails

Unfortunately, with unemployment rates holding at a steady low, these computer-related firings place employers at a disadvantage. While they only want dedicated workers on the payroll and can't afford the productivity losses Internet misuse causes, many also can't afford the added expense of recruitment and training for new employees. Additionally, as turnover rates increase, significant production delays can occur until the new hires are up to speed.

In order to retain current employees and deter Internet misuse, many companies have installed monitoring and/or filtering software to curb the epidemic. While effective, these technology devices are only one part of the solution. The best way to minimize Internet misuse in your organization is to educate your employees about the inherent dangers of Internet misuse and guide them on the path of healthy Internet practices. The following suggestions will help your employees recognize and avoid the pitfalls of Internet misuse.

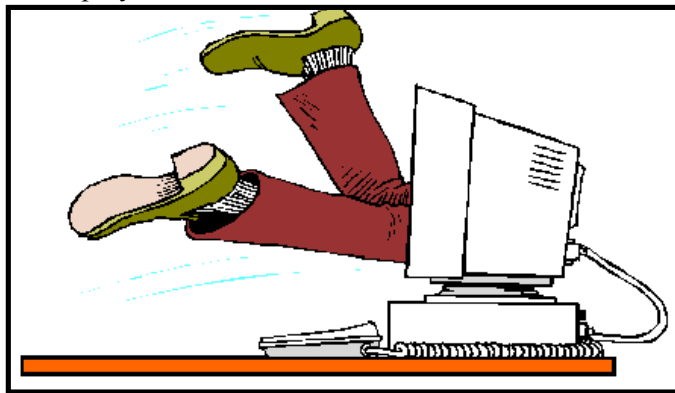
Administer an Internet Addiction Quiz

Simply monitoring how long an employee spends online is not a precise indicator of whether or not he or she is misusing or addicted to the Internet. Some employers assert that simply sending one personal e-mail to mom constitutes misuse, while others are more tolerant and only take action against blatant misuses, such as visiting pornography sites or gambling online during company time. The real indicator, however, should be how much damage the Internet misuse causes the company.

To help your employees recognize an Internet misuse problem, administer an Internet Addiction quiz to everyone employed. Since the purpose is to make employees personally aware of any Internet misuse problem, assure them that the results are for their

viewing only. If they find their score indicates a problem, allow them the opportunity to voluntarily seek help from someone on staff or an outside source. When employees know their job doesn't hinge on their score, they'll be more apt to give honest answers.

You can find Internet Addiction quizzes at various web sites. The most noted is Dr. Kimberly Young's Internet Addiction Test available at www.netaddiction.com. If you choose to create your own Internet Addiction quiz, some questions to consider are: "How often do you begin looking for work-related material online only to get sidetracked with personal Internet searches?" "How often does your work suffer as a result of being online?" "How often do you choose to check your e-mail instead of completing a work-related task?" "How often do you become angry when a co-worker or supervisor interrupts you while you're online?" "How often do you visit non-work related web sites?" and "How many personal e-mails do you send and/or receive in a given day?"



Encourage Employees to Self-Monitor Their Internet Usage

Many companies require employees to keep a daily activity log of all assignments they work on and complete. In most cases, it's nothing more than a sheet of paper or spreadsheet application that lists the start and stop times of each activity and a brief description of the tasks. Employers can use this concept of help employees recognize the amount of time they spend online at work.

Create a form so employees can monitor and track their own Internet and e-mail usage. Encourage employees to fill it out for a 21-day period. This will give them a general overview of their Internet use habits. In order to promote honesty, assure employees that the form is for their information purposes only. Once employees see the actual number of hours they spend online or the number of personal e-mails they send and receive, they'll be more conscious of how they use their time at work.

Allow Your Employees to Attend an Internet Misuse Seminar

After employees realize their Internet misuse habits and/or online addiction, help them put the Internet misuse into perspective by offering them an Internet Misuse Seminar. At the meeting, give examples of the dangers Internet misuse can lead to, such as decreased productivity, lower company profits, higher chances of layoffs, etc. Put the examples in terms of actual dollars and cents. For example, if an employee earns \$35,000 annually and is spending 20% of his or her time being unproductive on the Internet, that equals \$7,000 of lost revenue. Add to that figure 20% of the organization's share of Social Security payments, unemployment taxes, and worker's compensation insurance, and the true amount lost can be staggering. Also alert employees to the possibilities of copyright infringement for downloaded materials, lawsuits pertaining to sexually explicit e-mails, and computer malfunctions because of downloaded viruses.

In addition to showing the dangers, also give examples of how they can decrease their Internet usage at work. Offer the tips for making work-related Internet use quicker and more effective. If you are unable to present this material yourself, consider bringing in an Internet and/or technology specialist to assist.

Hold Monthly or Quarterly Social Functions

The more employees misuse the Internet at work, the more they begin to enjoy online interactions rather than real social situations. To keep your employees interested in company affairs and their co-workers, hold regular social functions that encourage employee interaction. This can include a monthly "pot-luck" luncheon, a quarterly "all employee" meeting held off-site, or even a weekend picnic that includes spouses and children.

At these events, take a few moments to recap any important information regarding the company. Also, give public recognition to every department and an overview of each department's accomplishments. Be careful not to single out specific individuals. The goal is to unite people department and company-wide to instill a feeling of teamwork and loyalty. When employees feel appreciated and understand that their work matters to the company's overall objectives, they'll be more apt to dedicate themselves to that successful outcome.

Focus on Training and Goal Setting

The more knowledge your employees have about their job, the more willing they are to put that knowledge to work. If your employees are opting to surf the net for recreational use rather than complete their job duties, determine whether or not they have the necessary skills to complete the tasks at hand. Sometimes employees are reluctant to admit their shortcomings for

fear of being let go. Instead, they chose to "look busy" in order to please the boss.

To ensure that you have the most skilled employees, provide training options for each department. This training could involve on-the-job skills training, off-site seminars, and classes at a local community college or training center. Encourage your employees to seek out the training they need so they can become more productive and better contribute to the company's bottom line.

Once your employees are adequately trained, help them develop a crystal clear idea of what they are to accomplish at work. Also, require them to write out professional goals for themselves so they can be accountable for their progress. By doing this, you're enabling your employees to develop their skills and ambitions while reducing the chances for Internet misuse.

When you teach employees how to recognize the dangers of Internet misuse and give them the tools and information they need to stay productive, your company benefits in terms of both productivity and increased profits. As fewer employees lose their jobs due to blatant Internet misuse, companies can once again invest their profits into company advancement rather than employee recruitment.

In today's tight labor market, education is the best deterrent for Internet misuse, creating a win-win situation for all parties involved. Employees gain the resources they need to stay productive and employed, while employers reap the benefits of lower staffing costs and a goal-oriented workforce.

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 or www.internetmisuse.com.