

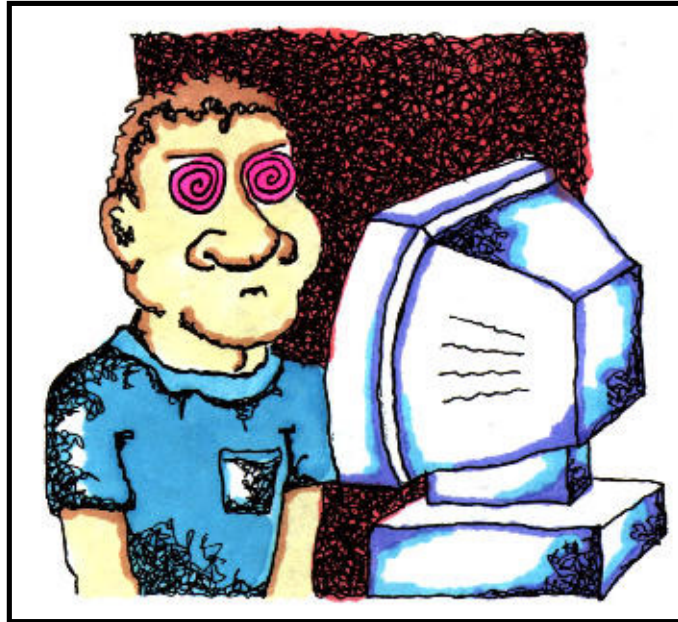
# When Your Employee is an Internet Addict: How to Help Break the Cycle

by Mike Foster

In companies across the country, Internet addiction among employees is a growing problem. As organizations rely on the Internet for everything from new customer acquisition to customer orders to online job postings, employees have more reasons to log on and fewer to log off. This increased usage gives people more opportunities to surf to inappropriate web sites and embark on questionable online activities.

To add fuel to the fire, the majority of employees have personal computers at home where they can continue their online escapades of gambling, chatting, visiting pornography sites, and engaging in online role-playing games. What all this Internet exposure means for employers is an increased risk of having an Internet addicted employee on the payroll who drains your company's resources due to lack of productivity and who opens the organization up to a host of potential legal battles.

When most employers learn that an employee is addicted to the Internet, the most common reaction is to terminate the employee. After all, in many companies, goofing off during paid hours or abusing company resources are grounds for termination. But in today's economic climate, no employer can afford to lose a valuable employee. If you have recently discovered that one or more of your employees is a victim of Internet addiction, there are steps you can take to intervene and break the cycle. The following suggestions will enable you to rehabilitate most Internet addicted employees and keep them as valuable members of your team.



## **Step 1: Ask the Internet addicted employees how they feel when they finally do log-off.**

In order to make the first step to recovery, your Internet addicted employees must first acknowledge that a problem exists. You can help them do this by enabling them to understand what they're feeling. Most addicted employees will reveal that they feel lost, separated, anxious, or empty when they're not online. By allowing them to voice these feelings, they'll get a sense of just how

attached they are to their Internet adventures. Next, find out if they're using the Internet to connect with others or to disconnect from the world. Those who think they're using the Internet to connect will need the most help, as they have yet to realize that they more they "connect," the more they're disconnecting from reality, from their work, from their spouse, and from their friends. Those who realize they're online

to disconnect are ready to acknowledge their problem and begin the recovery process.

## **Step 2: Explain that you're their ally and connect with the employees.**

Just like drug and alcohol addicts, Internet addicts may initially believe that your goal is to belittle them, fire them, or do some other action to make their lives uncomfortable. They'll mistakenly believe that you can't possibly understand what they're going through. However, once the employees admit there's a problem, your focus should be on explaining to the employees how you want to help. Begin by letting the employees know

you understand that Internet addiction is a natural response to receiving Internet access. After all, as more activities and information are available online, it can be common for people to get sucked into the hype and sensationalism. Next, make it clear that your goal is to help them overcome the addiction. Promote a “we’re in this together” attitude to foster understanding and a joint resolution to the problem.

During this process, while it’s imperative to state that the employees’ current behavior is unacceptable, it’s equally important not to place blame on the employees. In most instances, the employees meant no intentional harm to the company and may not have even realized how much time they were spending online. By not placing blame and showing compassion for the addicted employees, you’re helping them see their Internet addiction for what it really is—a potent and addictive “drug” that can wreck havoc on a person’s personal as well as professional life.

### **Step 3: Together create a plan to stop the addiction.**

Instead of having the employees stop using the Internet “cold-turkey,” encourage them to gradually wean themselves off. For example, if an employee spends six hours of the workday online and an additional five hours online at night at home, first try cutting back to perhaps four hours a day. If that goes successfully for a week, then cut down to two hours. Keep going until the employees no longer need the Internet to feel whole. Realize that an addiction is basically a habit gone astray. And since it takes most people 21 days to create a habit, the same holds true for breaking a habit. In order to make the weaning process work, allow the employees to set their own realistic timeframes for breaking the habit. They’ll be more motivated to succeed if they know they’re doing it for themselves at their own pace rather than for someone else.

### **Step 4: Know when to back off.**

In the midst of helping your employees overcome an Internet addiction, take precautions so you don’t become too emotionally involved with the employees and end up neglecting your own responsibilities or family in the process. Realize that you are an employer or manager, not a therapist or best friend. If a particular employee is draining too much of your energy or encompassing too much of

your time, refer the employee to a trained professional who can give him or her the one-on-one help needed. Equally important is to realize that you may not salvage every employee. Some may be so caught up in their Internet practices that no amount of employer intervention can help. In those instances, the best bet is to follow the employee manual and proceed with more specialized intervention practices or a termination hearing. In the end, while you want to help every member on your team succeed, your ultimate goal is the company’s best interest.

Employee Internet addiction is a real problem with serious consequences. Decreased job productivity, lower company profits, and failed relationships are just some of the casualties this seemingly innocent addiction brings on. When you witness a problem in your own organization, intervention is the best process to an agreeable solution. Your help and guidance can make a difference in an addicted employee’s life and can be the determining factor in your organization’s bottom line goals.

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).*