Do any of your employees or colleagues seem to spend an inordinate amount of time using the Internet for non-work-related activities? A growing body of research suggests that a significant number of people are using the Internet in an unprofessional and possibly unhealthy way. For example, a paper by Drs Kimberly S. Young and Carl J. Case of St Bonaventure University [1] reported on various studies indicating that about 2/3 of the companies studied in the US “have disciplined, and more than 30% have terminated, employees for inappropriate use of the Internet. Specifically, accessing pornography (42%), online chatting (13%), gaming (12%), sports (8%), investing (7%), and shopping at work (7%) were the leading causes for disciplinary action or termination.”

In a recent study that has gathered some comment in medical circles already, a team of researchers from Stanford University, California State University San Marcos and Kent State University were able to gain the cooperation of 1380 adults via a telephone survey that started with 2,513 randomly-dialed phone numbers.[2,3] The scientists studied the following eight potential markers for pathological Internet use:

- Relationships suffer
- Person conceals use of Internet
- Pre-occupation when offline
- Difficulty staying away from Internet
- Use Internet for escape or relief
- Attempts to cut back on use
- Very often stay online longer than intended; or
- Often stay online longer than intended.

This study reported that somewhere around 9% of the respondents had one or more of these behavioral markers; however, if diagnostic criteria for “problem Internet use” were narrowed to require sets of the markers, the incidence dropped below 1% of the sample. The authors wrote, “But these proposed criteria sets may be setting the bar too high, and a more liberal definition of problematic Internet use, say excessive use along with one item suggesting impairment or distress, could yield considerably higher rates.

In an unsigned 2004 newsletter from the Employment Law Resource Center of the Alexander Hamilton Institute (AHI) [4], the author listed a similar set of signs of possible addiction to Internet use drawn from work at the Center for Online Addiction <http://www.netaddiction.com/>:

- Increased number of errors and mistakes
- Lying to co-workers and managers about Internet use
- Noticeable decline in work performance
- Pre-occupation with the Internet
• Restlessness, irritability, and anxiety when trying to cut down on Internet use
• Risking important occupational activities or job opportunities because of excessive Internet use
• Spending more time than intended online
• Staying late at work to use the Internet
• Sudden withdrawal from co-workers
• Unsuccessful attempts to cut down on use.

Obvious approaches to reducing the prevalence of Internet abuse at work include clear Internet-use policies, appropriate awareness programs and training, well-documented monitoring of Internet use and consistent enforcement of those policies. On a personal level, managers seeing signs of possible abuse should encourage the affected employees to seek counseling. One of the resources such employees may find helpful is the referral directory at the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery <http://www.netaddiction.com/referral_directory.aspx>. The Center also provides interesting podcasts <http://www.netaddiction.com/PodCasts/podcasts.html> and supports a new blog at <http://netaddictionrecovery.blogspot.com/> where affected individuals (or their friends and families) can exchange information and offer support.

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References


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