Internet Abuse and Addiction at the Workplace

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Abstract:
This paper attempts to delineate the various issues and challenges regarding internet abuse and internet addiction in the workplace. It acknowledges that internet abuse is a relatively ignored and overlooked field of research and that it’s potentially a grave cause of concern for employers. This paper attempts to establish the seriousness of Internet abuse at the workplace and why it is a cause of concern for employers? And get attention of OB managers who are responsible for employee and organization's wellbeing. The study gives recommendations of employing a sound internet abuse policy. It also suggests that even though internet abuse and internet addiction is hard to distinguish, internet abuse is harmful for everyone in an organization thus, appropriate steps need to be taken for the greater good of the organization.

Internet has changed the workplace beyond recognition. Internet provides instant and ubiquitous access to information, constant connection with customers, employees, business partners and all other stakeholders. It provides an efficient means of research, communication, marketing and collaboration. Internet connectivity at the workplace, whether via a personal computer or mobile device, is omnipresent with intent to improve and enhance employee performance and productivity. It is a well acknowledged fact that, in a very short span of time, internet has proved to be an indispensable and valuable tool for businesses. Nevertheless, internet has also brought about several negative aspects to the workplace. One of which is internet addiction, a rather neglected field of research. This paper focuses on the internet abuse and addiction at the workplace; can excessive internet use lead to internet addiction? Is internet addiction indicative of a mental disorder? Who is the bigger victim, employees or the employer? And how should workplaces proceed when permitted work practices may be contributing negatively to employee and organizational wellbeing?

Where internet abuse in the office characterizes idle time spent using Internet for activities other than work, it is a well established fact that it can result in a loss in employee productivity, give rise to potential liabilities and security breaches at organization, increase distractions and cause loss of focus on more important work related activities (Pee et al., 2008; Clayburgh and Nazareth, 2009; Weatherbee, 2009 cited in Griffiths, 2010). This suggests that internet abuse and abuse is a call of concern for employers. However, it is not unusual for employees to spend time on various non-work activities during office hours, for example reading online magazines, e-mailing friends, playing games etc. According to statistics published by WebSpy, a leading global provider of monitoring and analyzing internet usage at work, workplace broadband internet access can increase the time spent online on non-work related activities by 23% and number of pages browsed by a single employee by 55%. The same report also suggested that Australians spend more time online at work than at home. Statistics show that 37% of employees admit to constantly browsing internet at work, 31.9% say they browse a few time during the day, 21.3% confirm using internet a few times in a week, and merely 9.7% said they never browse during work hours (WebSpy, 2002). Another survey conducted by International Data Corporation (cited in Griffiths, 2010) reports that 90% of employees feel that internet can become addictive. Consequently, some researchers infer that providing unregulated Internet access in the workplace can transform some employees into “Internet junkies” (Stanton, 2002), in other words can cause them to be addicted to the internet.

Internet addiction can be defined in many different ways. Han et al. (2010, quoted in King et al. 2011, p. 297) define internet addiction as the “inability of individuals to control their Internet use, resulting in marked distress and functional impairment...” Orzack et al. (2006, cited in King et al. 2011),
compare internet addiction to features of substance addiction, for example alcohol abuse and impulse control disorders, such as gambling. Kim (2008) and Su et al. (2011), cited in King et al. (2011), also refer to it as an impulse control disorder. In light of these and other findings psychiatrics have even recommended including “Internet addiction” to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) and have suggested that it is very similar to substance abuse and dependence or gambling addiction. Psychologists argue that internet addiction exhibits core elements of substance abuse, such as withdrawal phenomenon, mood modification, tolerance, and negative repercussions and relapse (Pies, 2009, cited in Aboujaoude, 2010).

However, there is still much confusion in regards to this issue and it’s unclear whether internet addiction is a symptom of an underlying disorder, or is truly a separate disease. This issue of internet addiction, as a co-morbid\(^1\) condition, also questions causality of excessive internet use to internet addiction. This suggests that employees with a predilection towards addictive behavior or those that might have other impulse control disorders are more likely to use internet excessively. However, they might not be internet addicts rather just use it as a means to satisfy other addictions. Griffiths (2010) explains that a pathological gambler may engage in online gambling and use internet as only a platform and means to fuel his urge to gamble. He may not be addicted to the internet itself. On the other hand, a person using certain internet functions that may not be available elsewhere, such as online role playing games, might report as being addicted to the internet and may not engage in such activities offline. Distinction, therefore, needs to be made between addiction to the internet and addictions on the internet (Griffiths, 2010).

Much research suggests that internet addiction does undeniably exist but it doesn’t affect a vast majority of users (Widyanto, cited in Griffiths, 2010). Many people who excessively use the internet are not always addicts of internet. The population affected by internet addiction is indeed small and identifying them is a complex procedure. No such causal relationship has been identified between excessive use of internet and internet addiction at the workplace. Even then, if we rule out the possibility that excessive abuse of internet at the workplace can cause employees to become internet addicts, we can still not ignore the large amounts of research that reports that excessive internet use can have harmful consequences. Some studies suggest that internet abuse may have more negative consequences for the employer than the employee. And in many cases employees may only suffer loss of productivity as a result of internet abuse, whereas the negative consequences for the organization, for which the employees work for, would be far reaching. Research indicates that if 1000 employees expend at least an hour a day on the internet for non-work related activities, it can cost a standard business up to $35 million a year (BBC News, 2002). Therefore, suggesting that employers need to do something about internet abuse.

In view of these concerns, numerous companies providing employee internet monitoring services have emerged. With specialized features, such as key stroke monitoring, desktop screenshots, detailed conversation logs, access to employee emails, they provide employers the ability to stay on top of employee internet usage. Freehill, Hollingdale and Page (cited in Watt, 2009), an Australian National law firm, reported in a survey that 70% employers monitor employee emails periodically while 5% admit to regular monitoring. Further, Watt (2009) affirms that employee monitoring remains mostly unregulated in Australia, except for in NSW and Victoria where workplace privacy laws have been ratified. This raises many challenges and leaves a lot of gray areas regarding employee monitoring practices. Where employees voice concerns regarding their invasion of privacy, employers try to justify that internet is a privilege and these resources belong to the employer giving them the right to monitor. There have also been cases where employers have terminated employees due to inappropriate

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\(^1\) In medicine, co-morbidity is either the presence of one or more disorders (or diseases) in addition to a primary disease or disorder, or the effect of such additional disorders or diseases. Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comorbidity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comorbidity)
Use of internet and been faced with charges of unfair dismissal causing a lot of bad press and legal liabilities. Young & Case (2004), add that such dismissals may also cause an increase in employee turnover and decrease employee morale and job satisfaction.

So now the lingering question is how best to respond to such a challenging issue of employee internet abuse and monitoring for the purpose or organizational and employee wellbeing? Griffiths (2003) supports that employers need to take a serious stance against internet abuse. He suggests that awareness regarding this issue should be raised and the risks involved, for the employees and employers alike, should be appreciated by everyone within the organization and an internet use/abuse strategy should be put in place. Also, even though it is hard to distinguish between internet abuser and addict, employers need to support employees who might be problematic users and approach them with sympathetic attitude (like in the case of many addictions) rather than outright dismissal or strict penalties (Griffiths, 2003). The Office of Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC, n.d.) has also laid out certain useful recommendations relating to monitoring employee emails, web browsing data and application of internet use/abuse policies. The OAIC suggests that the policy relating to internet use at work should be developed in consultation and collaboration with the staff, so that it can is widely accepted and understood. The policy must clearly explicate acceptable and unacceptable practices on the internet, which should be well known and understood within the organization. It also suggests that employees should be aware which online data is being monitored? Why? How? And by whom? It is further suggested that potential penalties that may be applicable in case of a breach of policy be acknowledged as well. Consequently, employees may feel more accountable for their actions online whilst at work and take more responsibility.

In this paper, issues surrounding internet abuse in the workplace have been highlighted. Although Internet abuse and addiction is a relatively new area of research and much progress remains to be made, it can be established that ubiquitous unregulated workplace access can lead to internet abuse. Furthermore, it appears that internet abuse, even though may not be serious an individual level, it is indeed a matter of concern for employers and the larger organization. Therefore, effective policies and procedures need to be put in place to tackle such an intricate issue.

References


