



Caught in the Web

Some employees can't stop clicking.

Employers can provide discipline—or treatment.

By Adrienne Fox

When you think of Internet addiction, you likely picture someone spending hours playing a game, looking at pornography sites or visiting chat rooms. That's probably why your company has installed firewalls and filtering software on your network that prevent workers from accessing sites that are offensive or unrelated to work.

You're less likely to picture someone like Renae, a state government analyst, who doesn't gamble, isn't consumed by games and does not peruse porn. Yet Renae says she has grown addicted to the Internet.

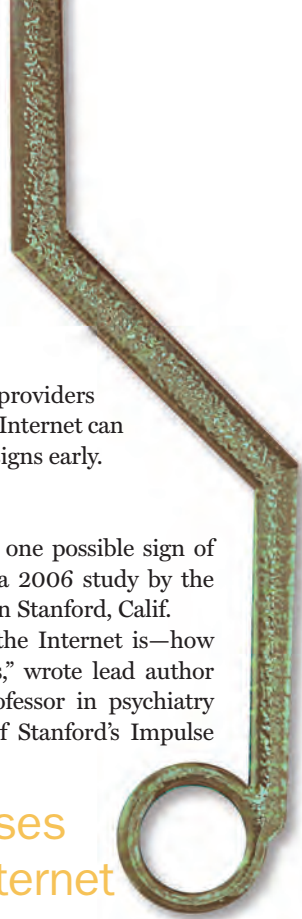
"I spend five to six hours a day surfing the Internet at work," admits Renae, 28, who did not want to give her last name. She has a master's degree and is considered a top performer in her department. "I know I can get my work done in the last two hours a day, so I cram at the last minute and spend the rest of the time reading newspapers online, checking e-mail every five minutes and looking at my bank statements."

Like Renae, an estimated one in eight people show signs of addiction to the Internet. But because she doesn't fit the stereotypes of the gambler, gamer or sex addict, her addiction goes unnoticed—and undisciplined—at work. She and others like her suck millions of dollars of productivity out of the workplace.

Blocking sites containing sexual content, gambling and gaming remains important, especially for legal protection, but this measure represents only the first step to curbing Internet abuse in the workplace, experts say. HR professionals also need to:

- Educate managers and employees on the signs of Internet abuse.
- Create better policies regarding what employers expect from employees' use of the Internet at work.
- Offer resources to employees who get caught in the web. >

ILLUSTRATION BY HUGH SYME



“Companies just haven’t done enough about Internet abuse,” says Kimberly Young, director of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa. “You could have a guy sitting there surfing the Net 20 to 30 hours a week who gets no discipline, and have another guy looking at porn one time and getting fired. But, actually, it’s the first guy who is abusing it more in terms of productivity.”

Technology research company IDC of Framingham, Mass., estimates that 30 percent to 40 percent of employee Internet use is not related to work. A 2006 survey of employees by Websense, a San Diego web-filtering software company, and Harris Interactive, a Rochester, N.Y., research firm, found significant numbers of employees admitting to banking, making travel plans, shopping, job-hunting and taking care of other personal business online while at work (see “Wasting Time,” below).

According to a 2005 Gallup Organization report, the average employee uses office computers for nonwork activity about 75 minutes per day. At \$20 per hour, that works out to annual lost productivity of about \$6,250 per employee.

The personal and professional costs to employees and employers are high. Whether you discipline the employee or offer treatment resources depends on whether you view Internet addiction as a performance problem or a medical problem. Psychiatrists continue to debate the issue. Regardless, current research and empirical evidence from

employee assistance program (EAP) providers suggest that employees consumed by the Internet can get help, if managers catch the warning signs early.

What Is Internet Addiction?

One in eight Americans exhibit at least one possible sign of problematic Internet use, according to a 2006 study by the Stanford University School of Medicine in Stanford, Calif.

“We often focus on how wonderful the Internet is—how simple and efficient it can make things,” wrote lead author Elias Aboujaoude, clinical assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences, and director of Stanford’s Impulse

‘The behavior crosses the line when the Internet becomes your primary or only source of satisfaction.’

Control Disorders Clinic. “But we need to consider the fact that it creates real problems for a subset of people.”

The nationwide telephone survey of 2,513 adults found that the typical affected individual is a single, college-educated white male in his 30s who spends approximately 30 hours per week on nonessential computer use.

Some 14 percent of the respondents reported that it was hard to stay away from the Internet for a several-day stretch. More than 12 percent said they stayed online longer than intended, and nearly 9 percent said they hid their Internet use from loved ones or employers.

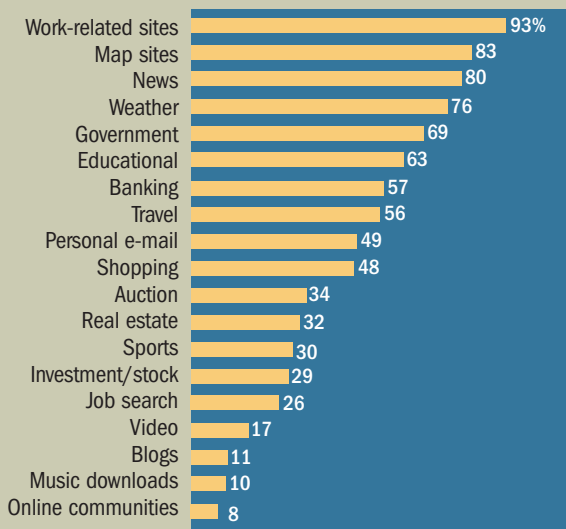
According to Aboujaoude, these respondents’ “strong drive to compulsively use the Internet to check e-mail, make blog entries or visit web sites or chat rooms, is not unlike what sufferers of substance abuse or impulse-control disorders experience: a repetitive, intrusive and irresistible urge to perform an act that may be pleasurable in the moment but that can lead to significant problems on the personal and professional levels.”

Gayle Porter, SPHR, GPHR, associate professor of management at Rutgers University in Camden, N.J., has written numerous articles on addiction to work and technology. “The behavior crosses the line when the Internet becomes your primary or only source of satisfaction and you are no longer getting satisfaction from other activities or other people,” she explains. “Awareness comes when other people start giving you messages about it—your spouse, your children or your boss.”

Psychiatrists split on whether Internet addiction is akin to drug or alcohol abuse or is merely the technology enhance-

Wasting Time

How employees use the Internet at work



Source: 2006 Websense and Harris Interactive survey of random sample of 286 employees.

ment of other compulsive behaviors such as gambling, shopping or sex.

Whatever you want to label it, people like Renae display real symptoms. "I feel like I can't help myself," she says. "The need is physical. I feel jumpy, and I can't fathom not being online. I feel like I have no control over it. And I don't want to do it, yet I can't stop. I'm wasting my life."

Warning Signs

According to the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa., people are considered addicted when answering "yes" to five or more of these questions during a six-month period:

Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet, think about previous online activity or anticipate the next online session?

Do you feel the need to use the Internet for increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?

Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop Internet use?

Do you feel restless, moody, depressed or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?

Do you stay online longer than originally intended?

Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?

Have you lied to family members, therapists or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?

Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving dysphoric moods with feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression?

A 40-year-old communications director for a nonprofit organization in Chicago—who asked that her name not be used—describes her addiction as "an obsessive compulsion to continuously communicate online, whether it be via online chat rooms, e-mail or personals sites."

She is getting help from a psychologist after calling her organization's EAP. "Counselors have called this a compulsion; however, I call it an addiction because as long as I have a computer with online access in front of me, I will do anything I can to communicate with others," she says. "When I am somewhere where there is no access, I am constantly thinking of how I can find a place to check e-mail or chat. It is an obsession of the mind that will not rest until it has been fed."

Michael Cipressi, clinical supervisor at Ceridian LifeWorks,

an EAP provider in Plymouth Meeting, Pa., has seen an increase in referrals for Internet addiction during the past few years. He says employees get referred when co-workers or supervisors complain about their online activities. If an addict calls for help, it's usually when he or she hits rock bottom, feels at risk of losing a job or fears that a marriage is falling apart.

"It would be more beneficial if we caught the addiction earlier," says Cipressi, who adds that after an in-person assessment, employees are referred to therapists who have experience handling addictive behaviors.

Symptoms of Internet Abuse

Cipressi likens filtering software to initial drug screens at hiring. They serve as the first step to monitoring Internet misuse, but then managers need to be aware of behavioral clues, such as those listed to the left.

"It can be really hard to [detect Internet addiction] because the symptoms could be other things as well," says Karen Fritz, contract manager and mental health consultant for the Employee Assistance Program at Family & Children's Service of Ithaca, N.Y.

Another barrier to recognition is that excessive Internet surfing can be done for professional reasons, not just personal. "I've heard of people who legitimately start looking for research or resources related to their projects and find the best information within the first 30 minutes but then spend two or three hours more trying to find even better information when the first few documents would have sufficed," says Porter. "They are doing it for the sake of the process rather than getting the quality of what they need. It doesn't mean they are in full addictive behavior but are maybe at risk."

Other symptoms of Internet addiction include:

Hiding Internet use. Like drug abusers, addicts become adept at hiding their Internet use. "My cubicle faces a window, so when I see people coming I click off right away," says Renae.

Adds the Chicago communications director, "The extent of my usage of the Internet, as well as the reasons for using the Internet, are things I hide from others. I always have had my own office, and I keep my computer so that the monitor cannot be seen by others."

Porter, a member of the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Corporate Social Responsibility Special Expertise Panel, advises managers to be aware of employees who need the Internet to do their jobs and ones who don't have as much need. If those not needing Internet access spend too much time online, that may be a warning sign.

Peter Shapiro, vice president of human resources at Electro Rent in Van Nuys, Calif., identifies a tier of his employees who don't need—and therefore don't have—access to the Internet at their desks. "If they want to go online, they have to use their manager's computer," he says. >

Missing deadlines. “The Internet is a tool that lends itself to getting lost in,” says Cipressi. “You could start out doing one task and find an hour’s been wasted and you haven’t done anything productive.”

The addicted communications director’s experience bears this out: “There have been days where I have spent every hour I was paid to work chatting on the Internet, or leaving work to meet someone I had talked with online. I have missed deadlines, made poor choices, and ignored employees, co-workers and clients all for the chance to be absorbed in my online life.

“I blame others for my inability to get things done, saying that they are holding up my work, even when that might not be true,” she adds.

When employees start slipping on deadlines or spend more time online but aren’t getting more work done, the manager should step in and ask what’s going on. “It may not have anything to do with Internet addiction, but it at least starts a dialogue between the manager and the employee,” says Fritz.

Losing interest in hobbies. Addicts often lament how the Internet takes over their lives, leaving little time for hobbies they used to enjoy. “I used to take lunch breaks to meet other people, or I would read a book during lunch,” recalls Renae. “But now I need to go online.”

The communications director says her health has deteriorated because she doesn’t go to the gym as often, an activity she used to enjoy.

Losing sleep. Cipressi reports that employees will call the EAP because they have been spending all night gaming online or looking at pornography and come to work exhausted. Employees who complain of lack of sleep or who don’t seem mentally alert may be at risk, he says.

Preferring to be online. Manipulation of people and situations is another hallmark of this addiction. “If the person wants to spend all [his or her] time with the technology, they will go to extraordinary lengths to set it up that way,” says Porter. “So the goal is not to get the job done best but to ensure that they can spend their time online. That can create stress in people [who] work around them.”

That’s the case with the communications director. “I always prefer communicating via e-mail rather than over the phone, and I only make phone calls when absolutely necessary. It enables me to continually multitask in my online life.”

Lacking interpersonal skills. Porter says addicts can become irritable when not online. She says EAP referrals are often couched as interpersonal conflicts,

but assessments reveal that the problems are actually attributable to Internet addiction.

“We encourage supervisors not to diagnose the problem but to evaluate the performance issue and confront the employee,” says Cipressi. “The EAP will sort out the cause.” (See “Warning Signs” on page 37.)

The Discipline Approach

Many cases of Internet abuse never make it to the EAP. HR policies governing technology use in the workplace typically center on inappropriate content in e-mails and forbidding access to chat rooms, games, and sexually explicit and gambling sites.

If an employee violates the policy, then warnings, discipline and termination may follow. In a 2006 study conducted by the American Management Association, 51 percent of businesses nationwide said they have disciplined employees for inappropriate Internet use, and 26 percent have fired workers for misusing the Internet.

Lynette Rentie, SPHR, vice president of employee relations at City National Bank, says the Los Angeles-based financial institution has stringent filters and firewalls because of the nature of its business. “But the monitoring of employee Internet usage has not risen beyond the level of relying on managers to inform HR if there is a problem.”

However, she adds, “If an employee came to us and couched his Internet use as an ‘addiction,’ then we would refer him to an EAP. But if they can’t get a project done because they are spending hours online doing research or other things, then we would address it as a performance issue.”

If an employee was suspected of Internet misuse, “the manager would come to me and we would approach it as a performance issue,” agrees Shapiro. “Sometimes, someone from [IT] will come to us after doing data research on usage and find that someone has been spending too much time on personal sites, and we address that person’s performance” rather than refer him or her to an EAP.

Likewise, Continental Airlines forbids employees to use the Internet at work for gambling, searching personal ads, viewing sexual materials or visiting online chat rooms, according to Louis K. Obdyke IV, SPHR, senior attorney at the airline in Houston. “We have an informal ‘rule of reason’ for personal use of company computers and the Internet that permits some time during the workday for online banking and shopping,” says Obdyke, a member of SHRM’s Employee Health, Safety and Security Special Expertise Panel.

► Online Resources

See the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/07December for links to:

- A SHRM article on employee Internet management.
- Sample corporate Internet usage policies.
- A study on Internet addiction from Stanford University.
- A report from the American Medical Association on emotional and behavioral effects of video games and Internet overuse.
- A study from the American Management Association on e-mail, instant messaging and blogs.
- The Employee Assistance Professionals Association.

Internet Addiction in Court

Last February, former IBM Corp. employee James Pacenza filed a \$5 million lawsuit against the computer maker after being terminated in 2003 because he entered an adult chat room while at work. Pacenza, a Vietnam veteran who operated a computer- chip machine in an East Fishkill, N.Y., plant, claimed that he is addicted to the Internet and that, rather than firing him, IBM should have helped to treat his disorder.

Pacenza says that visiting adult chat rooms helps combat his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to federal court documents, Pacenza stated that having PTSD directly resulted in his becoming "a sex addict, and with the development of the Internet, an Internet addict." He contends that his illness should fall under the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act and that he should have been

treated the same way IBM treats other employees with addictions to alcohol and drugs.

IBM claims Pacenza had been warned against visiting sex chat rooms four months prior to his firing and says he violated the company's written policy against visiting pornographic web sites. The case, *Pacenza v. IBM Corp.*, No. 04 CIV. 5831 (S.D.N.Y. July 27, 2004), has not yet been decided.

"I personally have not seen anything that leads me to believe that extensive or excessive Internet use is an addiction, and therefore I would not recommend someone for EAP assistance," Obdyke adds.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) does not recognize Internet abuse as an addiction in its authoritative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the basis for many Americans with Disabilities Act claims related to mental disabilities. However, in June, a leading council of the American Medical Association presented a report at the

we need to have another approach.' I know there's a legal liability with pornography addiction, but it's no different from safety concerns with an alcoholic on the job. We should be firing the problem, not the individual."

Getting help is hard for these individuals because "there's so much shame associated with Internet addiction," he adds. HR professionals need "to continue to communicate with employees that the EAP is confidential and if they reach out to the EAP, their anonymity will be protected."

Such communication would help Renae. "I thought if I contact the EAP that [counselors] were required to notify my boss because my addiction interferes with work," she says.

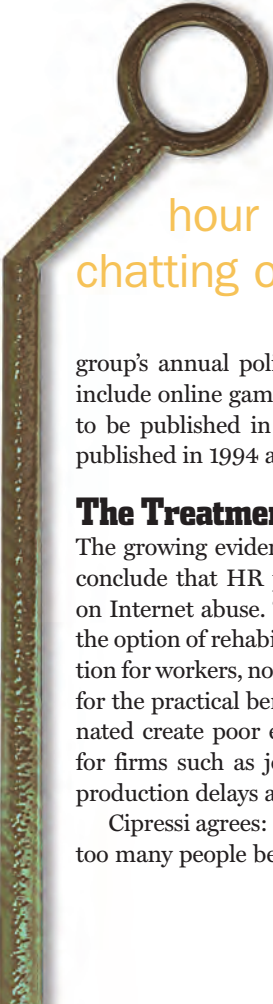
HR Policies

The state government office where Renae works has a policy stating that she may use the Internet for work-related purposes only and that her Internet use could be monitored. Renae suspects that her employer does not have the resources to monitor her Internet use. She thinks that as long as she has no performance issues, they will not check her Internet history. "The policy says you should limit your time online but doesn't say by how much," Renae notes.

Porter says HR professionals need to be more explicit with all technology use and expectations: "If the company supplies cell phones, BlackBerrys or computers with Internet access, then you need to set specific guidelines," she advises. (For examples of technology policy statements, see the online version of this article at www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/07December.)

Renae thinks more oversight would help her get her life back. "I really want to do my job. I'm not sitting there laughing and saying, 'I'm getting away with something.' It's physical that I can't stop doing it. I go home and think of all the time I spent [online], and I want to puke. I hate the control it has over my life." ■

ADRIENNE FOX, A FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR IN ALEXANDRIA, VA., IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR AND FORMER MANAGING EDITOR OF *HR MAGAZINE*.



'There have been days where I have spent every hour I was paid to work chatting on the Internet.'

group's annual policy meeting recommending that the APA include online gaming addiction in the manual's next edition, to be published in 2012. It will update the current edition, published in 1994 at the dawn of the Internet age.

The Treatment Approach

The growing evidence of Internet addiction has led Porter to conclude that HR professionals should rethink their stances on Internet abuse. "It would be prudent for firms to examine the option of rehabilitation, if warranted, rather than termination for workers, not only because of the legal ramifications but for the practical benefits," she notes. "Workers who are terminated create poor employee morale and increase other costs for firms such as job turnover, recruitment of new workers, production delays and training."

Cipressi agrees: "I heard one HR professional say, 'We fired too many people because of this issue of Internet misuse, and