

Managing Employee Internet Addiction in a Higher Learning Institution

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Abstract: - The Internet has heralded a new world of commerce, convenience and communication. With the immense benefits it has also brought challenges and problems new to the World. Internet Addiction is one of the new problems facing modern society and modern businesses. This study aimed to determine whether academics displayed the tendency to become Internet Addicts. A survey was conducted at the University of Kwazulu Natal in South Africa. The results revealed that the respondents did not display the tendency to become addicted to the Internet. A number of recommendations were made, including taking disciplinary action, in order to manage Internet Addiction in the workplace.

Key-Words: - Internet Addiction, Over-use of the Internet, Electronic Society, Health, Disorder, Cyber Psychology, Workplace, Managing Internet Addiction

1 Introduction

The World Wide Web (hereafter referred to as the Web) enabled by the Internet has revolutionized the way people communicate, interact and transact with each other. Communication via e-mail takes place almost in real time, feedback is almost instantaneous and business transactions take place 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Web has heralded a new era of convenience. It is possible to extol the virtues of the Web. However, with the benefits, it has also brought with it a number of challenges and problems. Pornography, cyber crime, pedophilia, flame mail and propaganda have flooded the Web. In essence, there has been a breakdown in social values and morals in the electronic society.

The Web has also impacted on people's health and has had adverse effects on posture, eye problems and even psychological problems. It is the latter that this study is concerned with and more specifically Internet Addiction. This paper highlights the psychology behind Internet Addiction; however, it does not take a psychological approach towards solving the problem but focuses instead on the management of Internet Addiction in the workplace.

2 Problem Formulation

In order to answer the question, do academics display the tendency to become Internet Addicts? a literature review and empirical study was conducted.

2.1 The Lure of the Web

The Web and its diverse content are what users are seeking. It has a wide ranging appeal from fun activities such as free music, games, online games, chat rooms, and sport to more serious content such as online learning, research, transactions and even online counselling. Ferris (2003) describes the Web as convenient, informative, resourceful and fun. According to King (1996), people are drawn to the social aspect of the Web. The Web has created a new society that has its own norms and values that allows for anonymous interaction with new people. According to Dubrovsky et al (1991), introverts develop online relationships quicker than they would real world relationships. The fear of rejection is minimised due to the faceless encounter, and individuals are judged on their sentiment and ability to express themselves rather than on physical appearance. If the Web is about fun and socialising, what makes it addictive?

2.2 Internet Addiction

According to the Addiction Resource Guide (2005) an addiction is the physical and psychological craving for a substance that develops into a dependency and continues even though it is causing the addicted person physical, psychological and social harm. The disease of addiction is chronic and progressive, and the craving may apply to behaviors as well as substances. The keywords in this definition are craving and dependence. Linked to

Internet Addiction the definition could be interpreted to mean that people have a craving for using the Internet which results in a dependence on the technology. According to Young (1998) Internet Addiction (IA) involves failed impulse control without involving an intoxicant such as alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. In essence, Internet addicts use the Internet to the extent that they lose control and it gets in the way of the rest of their life (Holmes 2004). This is supported by Greenfield (2000) who states that Internet Addicts are out of control and the Internet takes a central and dysfunctional position in their lives.

Young (1998), Stonecypher (2001) and Ferris (2003) have classified Internet Addiction as a disorder where sufferers need more use to gain pleasure. They suffer from; withdrawal symptoms, affective disorders such as irritability and depression, and a decline or loss of social relationships. However, Suler (1999) and Grohol (2004) are of the opinion that excessive use of the Internet does not make one an addict, neither does it mean that they suffer from a disorder. Suler (1999) is emphatic that there is no official psychological or psychiatric diagnosis of an Internet Addiction, and there is insufficient research in the diagnosis of such a disorder. This is supported by Grohol (2004) who questions the methodology used to define Internet Addiction Disorder, as it does not establish causal relationships between the behaviour and what caused it. He goes on to state that those who spend a long time online are compulsive over-users rather than addicts.

If there are two opposing groups of specialists with different interpretations of the problem, which one do managers follow in order to manage the problem in the workplace. Before answering this question, it is necessary to understand the effects of Internet Addiction.

2.3 Impact of Internet Addiction

Young (1998) has shown that the Internet can disrupt one's academic, social, financial and occupational life the same way that other addictions do. According to Greenfield (2002) the Internet could alter moods, motivation, and concentration. He also quotes the first legal case on IA where a mother was charged with neglecting her children whilst spending day and night online.

As much as IA is a personal problem it can have an effect in the work place. People suffering from mood swings could be difficult to work with and may result in interpersonal conflicts which affect teamwork. Demotivated workers have no interest in

achieving targets and goals which hampers the attainment of organisational goals. Similarly, employees who can't concentrate make mistakes, and produce poor quality outputs, all to the detriment of the organisation. According to Young (1996) the effect of IA on businesses include: reduced worker productivity, poor job satisfaction, and potential sick leave and disability claims. Excessive access to the Internet has connection cost implications which increases expenses and impacts on the bottom line. It is more than evident that managers can not ignore employees suffering from IA., but how do they identify sufferers?

2.4 Telltale Signs of Internet Addiction

Before trying to manage or cure IA, it is important to identify the symptoms. According to Suler (1999), some of the symptoms of IA include: drastic lifestyle changes to spend more time online, decrease in physical activity, disregard for one's health due to Internet activity, sleep deprivation in order to be online, neglecting self, family and friends, and refusing to spend time offline. Young (1998) lists the signs of IA in the workplace to include: noticeable decline in work performance, preoccupation with the Internet, and staying in late to use the Internet.

2.5 Who Gets Addicted?

According to Young (1996), the profile of an Internet Addict could be described as mainly middle aged unemployed females. Griffiths (1999) described Internet Addicts as young socially unskilled men. According to Suler (1996), people with unfulfilled needs in real life turn to the Internet to fulfil that need. This is supported by Grohol (1999) who suggests that people who believe that they have IA are merely escaping from dealing with other real problems. As mentioned previously, Suler 1999 and Grohol (1999) criticise the existence of Internet Addiction as it has no psychological or psychiatric definition. Therefore to classify a person as an Internet Addict or to create a profile of an Internet Addict is both difficult and questionable. What certainly emanates from the literature is that there are users of the Internet who spend excessively long periods online, but need not be doing so out of addiction. Business Researchers, academics, journalists and students spend lots of time online to perform their daily duties. It is often ones job description that dictates the time one spends online.

2.6 Two Schools of Thought

It is evident that there are two schools of thought with regards IA. The one group believes that IA is real and that it is enough of a problem to be called a disorder and the other school firmly believes that there is no such thing as IA, and it certainly is not a disorder. What is clear is that those who follow the Suler and Grohol frame of thought believe that at worst, people may suffer from a compulsive over-use of the Internet. The question arises which School does one follow in managing the problem in the workplace. It is very difficult to decide which is the more compelling of the two arguments. However, for one looking for scientific evidence to prove that IA exists, then the Young approach is severely flawed, and it can be assumed that there is no such phenomenon as IA. Simply discarding what Young has found could be dangerous, as she may have highlighted a problem that with time could be proved clinically, exists. Whether it is called IA or compulsive over-use, what is important is that excessive time spent online is costly, affects relationships and impacts on productivity.

2.7 Motivation for the Study

According to DeLoughtry (1996), IA has become a concern at college campuses where there are a growing number of students who are unable to control the time they spend with their computers. It is this concern that raised the question "if students are spending too much time with their computers, what about academics". Like students, they have unlimited access to the Internet, access is free and their activities online are unmonitored. As mentioned, this study does not examine the psychological underpinnings of IA, but merely seeks to determine if the potential for IA exists and to determine means to manage it within an academic environment.

2.8 Research Problem and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine if academics displayed the tendency to become Internet Addicts. In answering this question, this study sought to determine:

- If academics displayed the tendency/potential to become addicted to the Internet
- The profile of potential Internet Addicts
- The primary reasons academics used the Internet
- The time academics spent online

- Relationships between demographics and online behaviour.

2.9 Research Tool

A search was conducted online to find a suitable tool to measure IA. There were a number of different questionnaires that had been developed by a number of researchers. The Internet-Related Addictive Behaviour Inventory (IRABI) was developed by Brenner (1996) which focused on issues such as time spent online, sleep deprivation and meeting of deadlines among others. Young (1998) developed the eight-item Internet Addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire (IADQ) where if a respondent answered "yes" to five questions or more, they could be considered dependent. The tool chosen was the Internet Addiction Survey. This tool is comprised of nine simple questions using a nominal scale of yes and no responses. After answering the questions online the respondents were expected to note their 'yes' answers which they then compared with three categories which indicated the tendency to become addicted to the Internet. This tool was chosen for this study as it was short, easily understood and had an explanation for the responses, which the other questionnaires did not. The questionnaire was adapted to add a set of demographic questions and other questions relating to online behaviour, in order to develop relationships between the data.

2.10 Sampling

A convenience sample of forty three Commerce academics was used in this study. The University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa is located on five campuses spread across an area of about 88 kilometres. Getting academics in one place and guaranteeing responses is often difficult. However, the opportunity presented itself when a research seminar was held at one of the campuses. The Faculty of Commerce was selected as all academics had access to fairly new PC's and all had access to the Internet.

The questionnaire was handed out to the delegates who were asked to fill in their responses. On average it took the respondents eight minutes to fill in their responses.

3 Problem Solution

The results of the study were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

3.1 Academic's Tendency to become Internet Addicts

Responses were compared to the scale provided with the Internet Addiction Survey questionnaire (Figure 1). The majority of the respondents (41) scored 0-3 'yes' responses which shows they had very little tendency to become addicted to the Internet. One White, male respondent aged 30-34 gave 4 'yes' responses showing that he may or may not have a tendency to become addicted.

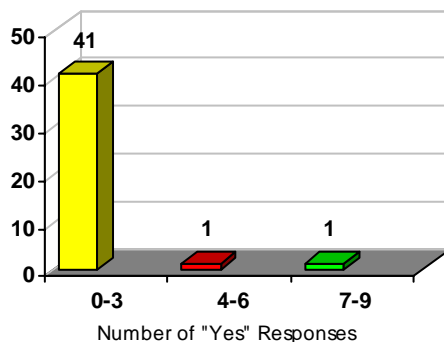


Figure 1 Tendency to become Addicted to the Internet

One Indian, male respondent aged over 40 gave 7 'yes' responses showing that he may well be addicted to the Internet. These results are consistent with the findings of Young (1996) where high-tech white collar workers were the least affected by IA, furthermore, the subjects that were affected in her study were unemployed, unlike the respondents in this study.

3.2 The profile of potential Internet Addicts

As mentioned, the respondent who displayed the tendency to become addicted to the Internet was a White, male aged 30-34. Based on the guidelines of the Internet Addiction Survey, this person may or may not become addicted.

The only person who according to the guidelines is a confirmed Internet Addict was an Indian male aged over 40. Whether this person is an addict or not needs to be questioned. As per Grohol (1999), time online has been used as a measure of possible IA. The respondent spent 2 hours per day online which amounts to 10 hours per working week. According to Morahan-Martin and Schumaker (1997), pathological users of the Internet used the Internet on average 8.5 hours per week. Whether this person could even be classified as a pathological

user is also questionable. On closer examination of his responses, it is evident that he used the Internet for research purposes, which suggests that the respondent may have been a senior academic who needed to be online to perform his job function.

3.3 Primary Reasons Academics used the Internet

One would assume that academics used the Internet mainly for research. However, this was not entirely the case as illustrated in Figure 2. It is evident that the primary use of the Internet was for research (46%), followed by e-mail (33%), shopping (12%) and banking (9%). Research and e-mail could be classified as job related usage of the Internet. Those who used the Internet for shopping and banking at worst could be guilty of abusing the University Internet facilities.

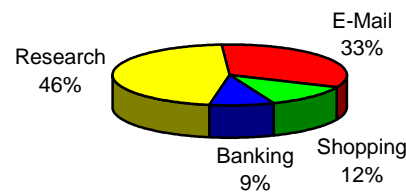


Figure 2 Reasons for Using the Internet

3.4 Time Academics Spend Online

Ninety one percent (91%) of respondents accessed the Internet daily. The other 9% accessed the Internet weekly. These figures suggest that the respondents were on average, regular users of the Internet. The hours spent online of those who accessed the Internet daily are presented in Figure 3.

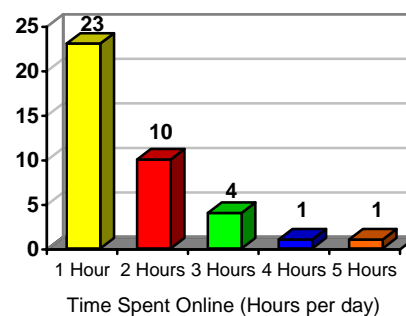


Figure 3 Time Spent Online Daily

Using Morahan-Martin and Schumakers (1997) classifications, the 23 respondents using the Internet for 1 hour show some symptoms as they score less than 8.5 hours per week. The rest of the respondents could be classified as pathological users as they spent on average more than 8.5 hours online per week. If time as suggested by Young (1998) is an indicator that a person is addicted to the Internet then those spending 15 or more hours per week could be considered Internet Addicts. However, Grohol (2004) time online can not be considered alone and has to be considered against other factors such as the relationship with ones job. Online research is part and parcel of an academics job function hence the amount of time spent online. Similarly, according to Holmes (2004), it is difficult to quantify what is normal internet use. Therefore, the time spent by respondents online, can not be used as an indicator of a respondents tendency to become addicted.

3.5 Relationships between Demographics and Online Behaviour

3.5.1 Gender and Online Behavior

It is evident from Table 1 that males answered more questions in the positive than females did, except for one category where one female indicated a problem with limiting the time spent online. Based on theories regarding time spent online (Morahan-Martin and Schumaker 1997, Chou and Hsiao 2000), the first two categories show that men tended to spend more time online than women, and actually had a problem managing time spent online.

	Male	Female
Spend more time surfing than you should	6	
Problem limiting time spent online	5	1
Hard to stay away from the Internet	6	
Derive immense pleasure from the Internet	7	

Table 1 Relationship between Gender and Online Behavior

The last two categories show dependence (Young 1998). Once again six men tended to find it difficult to resist the temptation of the Internet and seven of them derived pleasure by being online. According to Greenfield (2000), cybersex and cyber affairs are becoming commonplace and provide users with pleasure and excitement. There is no evidence to suggest that the respondents in this study went online for sexual pleasure.

3.5.2 Race and Online Behavior

It is evident from Table 2 that more Whites answered yes to the different online behaviors. In every category, Whites had the most respondents except the category finding it hard to stay away from the Internet. In this category, the Indian respondents were the highest. An analysis of the means of each group shows that Whites were more inclined towards the online behaviors, followed by Indians, Coloureds and Africans. However, a Pearson two tailed test showed a positive correlation between race and respondents finding it hard to stay away from the Internet, where Indians were the largest group. There is no evidence from previous studies that show whether any particular race group or culture have a greater tendency to become Internet Addicts.

	African	Indian	Coloured	White
Spend more time surfing than you should		1		5
Problem limiting time spent online		2	1	3
Hard to stay away from the Internet	1	3	2	
Derive immense pleasure from the Internet		2	1	4
Mean	0.25	2	1	3

Table 2 Relationship between Race and Online Behavior

3.6 Discussion

The results of this study may seem inconclusive at first. However, as the data is dissected it is clear that academics do not display the tendency to become addicted to the Internet. The reasons for this could be that they are too busy with other academic and personal activities and have no additional time to spend online; alternately, the lure of the Internet does not grab them beyond performing work related activities online. Furthermore, their real life needs may be fulfilled and they therefore do not need to seek fulfillment elsewhere.

The results of this study do not paint a clear picture of potential Internet Addicts. However, as evidenced in the relationships between demography and online behavior, men, especially Indian and White men showed behavior consistent with excessive use, and seemed to need the Internet more so than others.

The reasons that academics used the Internet are mainly job related and as such excessive use could not be considered as signs of addiction.

The time that academics spent online as per the averages provided by Morahan-Martin and Schumaker (1997) would suggest that at least one third of the respondents were pathological users. However, as there is no norm to measure normal Internet usage within the academic environment, the classification does not hold.

3.7 Recommendations

Managing Internet Addiction in the workplace needs two approaches. If IA is a real phenomenon, and is a psychological disorder, then it needs to be managed as an illness. However, if it is merely excessive/compulsive use then it has to be managed within the parameters of the organisations policies and procedures.

As an illness, IA sufferers need to undergo some kind of progressive or corrective discipline. Managers who observe that the employees work or relationships is suffering must initially speak to the employee to find out the basis for the poor work performance. The manager must ascertain that the employee is seeking professional help for his/her disorder. Follow-up and review dates need to be set to determine the progress that the employee is making. This first stage is to try and rehabilitate the employee. Should these measures fail, then punitive measures such as verbal warnings, written warnings, and final written warnings need to be issued to try and enforce the employee's corrective process. If corrective measures fail then the employee could be summoned to an internal hearing which has the power to dismiss. The employee could be dismissed on the grounds of incapacity to perform his expected duties.

Excessive or compulsive use of the Internet does not require corrective discipline as it could constitute abuse of the employers Internet facilities. However, organisations need to have an Acceptable Internet Usage Policy (AIUP) in place. According to Singh (2004), an AIUP should clearly state who are the parties affected by the policy, what is acceptable usage, what is unacceptable usage, and what are the consequences of unacceptable usage. According to Mitchell (2001) the AIUP should address issues such as interpersonal etiquette, and overuse and misuse of resources. Employees found in breach of the policy may be punished according to the guidelines provided in the policy for different types of offences.

Managers should constantly check usage logs to identify the heavy Internet users in order to protect them from Internet Addiction, its effects and possible punishment. Managers could use the guidelines provided by the Center for Internet Studies (2004) and encourage heavy users of the Internet to reduce their time at their computers, take exercise, find other interests, talk about their use of technology, shorten their times online and consider counseling or psychotherapy if the employee is unable to stay away from the Internet.

4 Conclusion

No study is complete unless the limitations are declared. The small sample size can not be used to generalize the results to all academics. However, it does highlight some pertinent issues in the study of IA. The reliability of the tool used may have also resulted in findings that do not display a causal relationship between variables. However, using the Internet Addiction Survey, this study has proved that academics in the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Kwazulu-Natal did not display any tendency to become Internet Addicts. It has shown that some individuals spent more time than others online for activities that did not add value to the organisation, in which instance, the actions are more closely linked to Internet abuse and need to be managed using measures as defined in the employer employee relationship. However, a few respondents displayed certain behavior consistent with Internet Addiction, although this was not conclusive. The differences in opinion whether IA is a real problem or not leaves researchers and managers with more questions than answers. Managers have to manage IA as best they can until such time that the problem is properly researched by psychologists who may then generate more substantive recommendations for managing Internet Addiction in the workplace.

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