

Managers, Beware of the IAD!

A Wizard

'Star Trek, X-Files, Doctor Who, Sex, Chat, Football, The Simpsons, Film Reviews, News.... Anything! As long as it was in Cyberspace! I Just couldn't get enough of it! When I awoke in the Annette Ford Clinic for Netaholics I knew I had a problem.' This is the entree of a funny web site called the Netaholics Anonymous. Here, 'Binary Bill' tells you of his addiction to the Internet. But he now speaks only in Os and Is!

ONE JOKE THAT'S BEEN going around on the Net is a list of the top ten signs of Net Addiction. It lists such activities as waking up at 3 a.m. to go to the bathroom and checking your e-mail on the way back to bed, using 'emoticons' in your snail mail, and laughing at people with low baud rates.

Although most of the discussion of Internet Addiction is humorous in nature, for many people, this is a reality, not a joke. Internet Addiction disorder seems to be a real syndrome that has emerged in the last few years as the Internet's popularity has exploded. The disorder doesn't appear to be confined to any particular country, except in the sense that certain areas have more online activity than others. Reports of Internet Addiction have been turning up from all over Europe, North America, Asia, and even Africa and Australia. No panic over this has yet started in the UAE, Sri Lanka and India, but many parents do wonder whether their kids will spend just too much time online if they are let loose in Cyberspace.

Signs And Symptoms

Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), rather than a physical Addiction, is an out-of-control behavior that can overwhelm an addict's normal life, somewhat like pathological gambling. It doesn't appear to be confined to any age group or race, but can occur in lonely people who are looking for something to keep them busy. IAD is characterized by compulsive checking of e-mail, always anticipating your next Internet session and others complaining that you spend too much time online. Behavioral studies have indicated heavy Internet use has drastically affected the lives of some users, e.g falling out of school, splitting up relationships, and even receiving hospital treatment! Other symptoms include

depriving oneself of sleep or neglecting important activities to spend more time online, or frequently telling yourself you will just spend a small amount of time online, only to discover later that several hours have gone by.

IAD can create serious physical problems, because sufferers of IAD often remain stationary for extended periods of time. Glare from the monitor and improper lighting can cause eye strain, and the poor posture in which many addicts sit creates back, wrist, and neck pain. Repetitive stress injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome can also result.

The Internet can also change a person's life. 26% of respondents to a survey said that the Internet 'often' replaces watching TV,

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and 13% said that it often replaces reading the newspaper. Nearly half of the respondents to another sur



vey have gotten fewer than four hours of sleep because they were using the Internet for a non- school/work-related activity, and over a third routinely cut back on sleep in order to use the Net. Half had not voluntarily gone without the Internet for three days in the past three months. A third had tried to spend less time on the Net but had been unable to do so, and given a choice between living where they do now and not having modem access and living someplace strange and far away but having modem access, 49% would choose to move. Three-fifths often spend more time online than they originally planned.

Another survey reported that many Internet users say the Net helps them relax and some experience a cocaine- like rush when they log on and yet another reports that 10% of respondents consider themselves addicted. But does any of this really bear up under serious research?

Some research has been conducted about IAD, but not tremendous amount. Until we know more about this problem, it's best to be careful how we interpret reports or writeups. The center for online Addiction, and several other resources, operate

surveys. You can see these online. Findings have shown surprising results, such as the ones noted above. IAD has not received much attention so far because many deny that it is a real syndrome. Those who do believe it is real are hesitant about how to go about conducting research.

Since IAD is not physical Addiction, it is very difficult to treat. Support groups, both online and off, help users cope with their addictions. One of the most interesting ways to treat IAD is a program called Addiction Manager. (<http://www.quadratic.com/Addman/>). Available for the Mac, it allows the user to limit the amount of time he or she can spend using certain programs. It can be customized for weekdays, weekends and different hours of the day and night and can speak a customized 'restriction message' when it is time for you to stop using your program. Support groups such as the Internet Addiction Support Group (e-mail to listserv@netcom.com with the words 'subscribe i-a-s-g' in the body of the message) allow you to talk to others about your Addiction. You can also visit the Center for On-Line Addiction at <http://www.pitt.edu/~ksy>. Other web sites of interest are: Internet Behavior and Addiction at <http://www.ifap.bepr.ethz.ch/egger/idq/res.htm>, Assessment of Internet Addiction at <http://www.cesnet.com/prep/pap/pap8b/638b012p.txt> and Internet Addiction at <http://www.geocities.cimAthens/Acropolis/2500/>.

If you've been worrying whether your children will get holled to BBSing and being on the Internet, hold on before you ban them from Cyberspace altogether. While nipping it in the bud is certainly a good idea, there's also the danger that you may over-react and deprive them of the wonderful benefits of access to the Internet and indeed being able to communicate with people. Talk with your children about the priorities and reasons for giving them access to the Internet. Make sure too, that they have a healthy balance of online time and other activities and encourage good ergonomics, exercise and sensible timings.

If you think managers can't get IAD, you must have been joking with yourself. The same advice as outlined above is applicable to them as well. Caution to borderline cases: Do not depend too much on the Internet, use it conservatively and intelligently to stay ahead. What I mean to say is that, read articles about useful sites, such as the ones discussed in this column and others, before venturing out on your own. That way you will save resources as well as serve your employer better. You will also do your family a favor!