

# 'Techno Addicts' pose employer liability, says Rutgers researcher

August 18 2006

---

Taking your Blackberry on vacation with you? Or to the kids' soccer game? How about the business cell phone? Technology keeps workers connected 24/7. If that sounds like an employer's dream come true, think again: according to a Rutgers University--Camden researcher, employers who encourage non-stop work connections via technology may wind up with liability for encouraging addiction among their staff.

According to Gayle Porter, an associate professor of management at the Rutgers University School of Business at Camden, the fast and relentless pace of technology-enhanced work environments creates a source of stimulation that may become addictive. While addiction to work has been a widespread phenomenon for some time, the Rutgers-Camden scholar suggests that employers may face legal liability for these addictions.

"There are costs attached to excessive work due to technology," says Porter. "Information and communication technology (ICT) addiction has been treated by policy makers as a kind of elephant in the room -- everyone sees it, but no one wants to acknowledge it directly. Owing to vested interests of the employers and the ICT industry, signs of possible addiction -- excess use of ICT and related stress illnesses -- are often ignored."

The results can be devastating for both the individual worker and the entire employing organization. "Employers rightfully provide programs to help workers with chemical or substance addictions," notes Porter.

"Addiction to technology can be equally damaging to the mental health of the worker."

In a forthcoming study, co-authored by David Vance, an assistant professor of accounting at Rutgers-Camden, and Nada Kakabadse, a professor of management and business research at the University of Northampton in the United Kingdom, Porter offers some crucial perspective for employers and workers alike.

Courts have long recognized the special duty of employers to protect their employees. That's why employers will warn workers of dangers that they might not foresee, and enforce rules for employee conduct that promote a safe workplace. Porter suggests that the law may evolve to incorporate ICT into that mix.

"It may be unfeasible to regulate how much people use technology," says Porter. "However, it is reasonable to imagine a time when policy-makers recognize the powerful influence of employers that sometimes results in harmful excess among the workforce. The pressure for using technology to stay connected 24/7 may carry employer responsibility for detrimental outcomes to the employees."

The Rutgers-Camden researcher cites tobacco litigation in the United States as a model of how the law and legal strategies evolve over time to find harm. "Legal scholars describe tobacco litigation occurring in three waves, each of which moved plaintiffs closer to success," says Porter. "In the 1950s, the theories put forth laid the groundwork for the legal decisions in the 1990s onward."

The element of employer manipulation is important to determining liability. "If people work longer hours for personal enrichment, they assume the risk," says Porter. "However, if an employer manipulates an individual's propensity toward workaholism or technology addiction for

the employer's benefit, the legal perspective shifts. When professional advancement (or even survival) seems to depend on 24/7 connectivity, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between choice and manipulation."

While Porter is not aware of any current court cases examining the subject, she submits that employers concerned for the health of their workers and their bottom lines may wish to keep an eye on the matter... and encourage employees to walk away from their Blackberries, email, and cell phones while on vacation.

Source: Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

Citation: 'Techno Addicts' pose employer liability, says Rutgers researcher (2006, August 18)  
retrieved 24 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2006-08-techno-addicts-pose-employer-liability.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--