

Workplace web use is a minefield

May 9 2014, by Mark Griffiths



Some are working but some have other business. Credit: Michiel2005, CC BY

[Market research reports](#) have indicated that many office employees in the UK spend at least one hour of their day at work on non-work activities. They are booking holidays, shopping online, posting messages on social networking sites and playing online games. This, we are told, costs businesses millions of pounds a year.

These findings highlight that internet abuse is a serious cause for concern, particularly to employers.

A few years ago I developed a [brief typology](#) of internet abusers. This

included criminal internet abuse. While some non-work-related internet activity is relatively harmless, others can cause real problems for employee, employer and colleagues.

Internet activity abuse

This involves the use of the internet during work hours in which other non-work related activities are done. This could be online gambling, shopping, holiday booking, taking part in massively multiplayer [online games](#), casual gaming via Facebook or other networks or constantly checking Twitter accounts. Based on research, this appears to be one of the most common forms of internet abuse in the workplace.

Online information abuse

This involves the abuse of [internet search engines](#) and databases, such as Googling non-work related terms. Typically, this involves individuals who search for work-related information on databases and search engines but who end up wasting hours of time with little relevant information gathered.

This may be deliberate work-avoidance but may also be unintentional. It may also involve people who seek out general educational information or information for self-help.

Criminal internet abuse

This involves seeking out individuals and potentially sending written abuse to them. Trolling, flaming, sexual harassment, cyberstalking and grooming can all fall under this category. The fact that these types of abuse involve criminal acts may have severe implications for employers.

Cybersexual internet abuse

This involves the abuse of adult websites for cybersex and porn during work hours. That spans the full spectrum, from accessing pornographic images to participating in online sexual discussion groups or even online sexual activity.

Online relationship abuse

This involves conducting an online relationship during [work hours](#). That might be emailing friends, posting messages to friends on [social networking sites](#) or engaging in discussion groups, as well as maintaining online emotional relationships.

At the extreme end of the scale, this could even include engaging in cybersex.

Time to act

Misusing the internet at work is seductive for many reasons. It is clear from [research](#) that virtual environments have the potential to provide short-term comfort, excitement, escape or distraction.

Employees might also find it easy and more affordable to use the internet at work than at home or they may just be working longer hours. There could also be the lure of being more anonymous at work than at home since the IP address you use is not directly tied to you.

Some forms of internet abuse are serious and damaging for both the employer and employee though. Beyond a quick look at Facebook, online gambling among people who work in finance departments, for example, could have serious consequences.

Being able to spot someone who is an internet abuser can be very difficult but there are some practical steps that employers can take to help minimise the problem.

Managers and human resource departments should, for a start, take the issue of internet abuse seriously. They should raise awareness through email. Some countries have national or local agencies, such as health and safety organisations that can help.

Raising awareness is not just about finding the abusers. Their colleagues should be helped to learn the signs and symptoms that might indicate abuse. Continual use of the internet for non-work reasons are indicative of an internet abuse problem.

If a manager or an employer thinks a member of staff might have a problem, they should get the IT department to monitor their internet use, such as by tracking back through their browser history or by looking at their bookmarks. If they are spending a lot of employment time engaged in non-work activities, many bookmarks will be completely non-work related.

It might also be worth developing a policy on internet abuse at work. Many organisations have policies for behaviours such as smoking or drinking alcohol and the same might be useful for IT rules.

However, it is also important to offer support to problem users. In some situations, problems associated with internet abuse need to be treated sympathetically, as you would treat alcohol abuse.

Internet abuse can clearly be a hidden activity and the growing availability of internet facilities in the workplace is making it easier for abuse to occur in lots of different forms.

Thankfully, it would appear that for most people internet abuse is not a serious individual problem but for large companies, small levels of abuse multiplied across the workforce could be a problem. Employers need to let employees know exactly which behaviour is reasonable. The occasional email to a friend might be fine but it is pretty clear that online gaming oversteps the mark and cybersex is absolutely unacceptable. Internet abuse has the potential to be a social issue, a health issue and an occupational issue and needs to be taken seriously by employers.

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