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*This article discusses the issue of staff misusing the Internet at work for personal use.
Is it a problem in the NHS?*

The problem

Over the years, we have all heard about the virtues and advantages of the online world and how Internet access can provide a commercial or productivity advantage to a user in the business world. Certainly, within a health-based enterprise such as a general practice, hospital or community unit, online access potentially offers huge gains in efficiency and ease of communication as well as rapid access to a world of data and information. However, the appearance of computer terminals which are Internet enabled also have a downside; after all this allows staff the ability to use the Net for personal use.

Now of course this is no bad thing, because as staff use the Net more and more, even for personal use, their skill level improves. Of course there is a balance to be achieved between work-based use and personal use of online resources. The same principle applies to using the telephone at work for business-related use and for personal use. Many companies and organisations have written guidelines or well-advertised rules about the use of the telephone at work for personal use. However, how many health care organisations have written guidance or well-publicised rules about online use during working time?

Think about it: the Net has many attractive but seductive qualities, from simple online shopping, searching for a cheap holiday, pursuing a hobby or e-mailing a relative or friend. Possibly, many health care organisations may turn a blind eye to the occasional use – but what happens when staff spend hours and hours online? Especially when you look at their screens and see several windows open and it is not just the appointments or clinical modules!

Quantifying the problem

Now the Net abounds with surveys containing eye-popping facts and figures about Internet abuse or 'cyberslacking' (check out <http://www.internetaddiction.ca/cyberslacking.htm>). Some of these surveys are sponsored by companies that produce Internet monitoring software and, of course, they have a vested interest in promoting their own products. However, what they have to say makes interesting and thought-provoking reading. For example, on the Websense Web site <http://www.websense.com>, a company that makes so called 'cyber snooping' software, there is an interesting survey 'Cyber-addiction in the workplace' <http://www.websense.com/company/news/research/webatwork2002.pdf>. The survey reported that employees spent about one working day a week surfing through Web sites that were not related to work. A staggering 25% of employees thought that they had an Internet addiction. Indeed, if you want to check out someone's Internet addiction risk try this online questionnaire at http://www.netaddiction.com/resources/internet_addiction_test.htm

The loss of a day a week appears again in another survey quoted on the BBC News Web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/2381123.stm>. This survey claimed that nearly one in three companies were losing about a day every week due to e-mail and Web site activities which were not work related.

Even worse, some of these activities could be illegal, such as downloading porn or spreading viruses. Other 'vices' that staff could embark on are gambling or sending

sexually explicit or racially abusive e-mails. If a legal issue arises from such activities, this could generate a legal bill for the company as well as consuming valuable time in sorting out the problem.

Another article from the BBC News Web site <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2134443.stm> pointed out that job hunting was a common activity during non-work related surfing!

The solution?

Now of course a cynical explanation for the lack of policing of staff use of the Internet could lie in the fact that we all use the Net at work for non-work related activities. So it is difficult to criticise staff when all levels of management are involved. However, a balance has to be drawn between personal and work-related use, much in the same way as such a balance has seemingly been reached about the use of the telephone in the workplace. After all, that technology has been around for some time and generally speaking there does not seem to be a major issue of workers abusing its availability.

As the online explosion permeates most workplaces within the health service, these issues will rear their ugly heads. If there are any rules, or advice, I certainly have not seen them. After all, the NHSnet is a vast private network which allows staff to access the Internet freely and easily. Putting aside lost productivity, there is a potential risk for abuse of the Net that as far as I can see has not been truly and robustly addressed. If it has, it has not been well publicised. I expect that the inevitable day when Internet filtering and reporting software appears, either on the NHSnet or local networks, will arrive sooner than we think. If so, the results should make interesting reading.