



HOW ORGANIZATIONS CONTRIBUTE TO ADDICTIONS TO INFORMATION/COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

*... in the late 1980s – networked PCs and workstations, client-server architectures, and the like – was bringing within reach the organizational theorists' nirvana of information instantly available to everyone in the enterprise who needed to know. The old, hierarchical organization structures, with multiple layers of middle managers whose main function was to pass information up and down the chain of command, were rapidly becoming obsolete. Information technology, properly deployed, could help firms simultaneously become lean and flexible*¹ – Richard K. Lester

Knowledge workers take the data and add meaning to it, so that it becomes information that can be useful to themselves and other recipients. The problem today is that we are being inundated with a tremendous amount of information on almost every subject imaginable, hence the famous expression 'information overload'. The speed at which information flow is taking place is also of major concern. On top of which, we're expected to keep pace with it. Increasingly, via the Internet, smartphones, tablets, etc., employees are expected to be continuously 7/24 connected to their places of work.

A graduate student of Canadian Professor and writer Heather Menzies dubbed all new gadgets — laptops, smartphones, Blackberries, iPads, notebooks and other mobile handhelds — “**work extenders**”.² There is little doubt that organizations and individuals have become more reliant on and obsessed with new telecommunications technologies as part of daily work and personal lives. Of course, the emergence of extensive ‘[social networking](#)’, via avenues such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, has led to an even greater use of such devices at work and elsewhere. Social media is an important, unavoidable part of today's corporate cultures. “Social media offers the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with and among employees, former employees, customers (both new and former) and other key connecting points to the organization.”³

In addition, in their book about the 'digital frontier', entitled *Race Against the Machine*, Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee concluded that:

*... increasingly powerful digital technologies affect skills, jobs, and the demand for human labor. We've stressed that computers are rapidly encroaching into areas that used to be the domain of people only, like complex communication and advanced pattern recognition. And we've shown how this encroachment can cause companies to use more computers and fewer people in a growing set of tasks.*⁴

There is also little doubt that we will have to better manage technological change within the workplace, attempting to minimize the stressors associated with constant and rapid developments. User-friendly ways of coping with the digital information/communications explosion will have to be found in order to avoid the negative impacts of technological changes on not only our workplaces and daily lives, but

¹ *The Productive Edge*: Richard K. Lester (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), p. 210

² *No Time- Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*: Heather Menzies (Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., Vancouver, British Columbia, 2005) p. 62

³ *Social media and the workforce - Can you hear me now?*: HR Zone, Posted by Ron Thomas in [Managing people, Technology, Business lifestyle](#), 19/01/2012

⁴ *Race Against the Machine (How the Digital Revolution is Accelerating Innovation, Driving Productivity, and Irreversibly Transforming Employment and the Economy*: Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee (Digital Frontier Press, Lexington, Mass., 2011)

also on our health. Technology management will have to take into greater consideration the human factor, especially in dealing with information overload and what I call '*instant communicationitis*'. One is often reminded of the story about a frustrated office worker who complained about his newly automated work station by uttering: "I hate this darn machine. It never does what I want it to do, only what I tell it."

Among youth and adults there is the broader concern over what is known as 'virtual addiction'. This refers to net browsers who spend hours and hours on the Web, in chat rooms, playing games, and viewing endless hours of streaming video footage. For some, their compulsive behaviour in cyberspace escalates to cause them problems at work or school or leads them to neglect their real relationships.⁵ Of course, virtual addictions represent a much broader societal concern and tend to go beyond the influences of organizations such as employers, schools and other institutions. For example, a 2010 study by Cleveland's [Case Western Reserve University](#) suggested that American high school students who spend the most time texting or on social network sites (or both) are at risk for a host of worrisome behaviours, including smoking, depression, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and absenteeism.⁶ The same can be said about adults in similar situations.

Increasingly, it is becoming that much harder to live and work without our information and communication technologies. Some like the writer Nicole Radziwill, a self-professed technology addict who recognized a problem, have attempted briefly and with great difficulty to experiment by disconnecting for a time from their virtual life by undergoing a period of "technology detox".⁷

'Instant communicationitis' and addictions to communication technologies

There are those that define [addiction](#) as repeated harm from acts. For example, for smartphone usage, that would mean things like losing jobs or ruining a serious relationship stemming from the need to constant check or use the phone. However, others would define such behaviour more as a compulsion. Whether defined as an addiction or a compulsion, people still need to seek professional help for if they find that their behaviour is impacting their daily lives to the point where it impairs normal functions.

We are all familiar with addictions to substances such as alcohol and drugs and such behavioural patterns related to gambling and pornography. However, studies are now illustrating how we have become increasingly addicted to new communication technologies such as the internet, smartphones and various handheld devices. Indeed, "[Internet addiction disorder](#)" — which is poised to enter the official lexicon of psychiatric illnesses found in the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) — is becoming a serious emerging mental health issue around the world. One recent study by the [Chinese Academy of Sciences](#) suggested that people who cannot control, cut back or stop their use of the Internet have abnormal white matter structure in the brain similar to what is seen in cocaine and crystal-meth addicts.⁸ While addiction to apps or texting is not yet a recognized medical condition, according to a study by the [Helsinki Institute for Information Technology](#) and [Intel Labs](#), smartphones can be extremely habit-forming. Researchers found that smartphone users in the U.S. and in Finland checked their phone repeatedly throughout the day, usually for less than 30 seconds.⁹ According to the technology industry analyst firm [comScore, Inc.](#), dependence on smartphones is not just a distraction but can become an addiction for many of the approximately 72.5 million Americans who owned smartphones in 2011.¹⁰

⁵ *Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyber Freaks and Those Who Love Them*: Dr. David Greenfield (New Harbinger Publications, January 1999)

⁶ *Too Much Texting Is Linked to Other Problems*: Roni Caryn Rabin, New York Times, November 9, 2010

⁷ *Disconnected: Technology Addiction & the Search for Authenticity in Virtual Life*: Nicole Radziwill (Amazon.com, August 29, 2010)

⁸ *Internet addiction becomes more than a buzzword*: Sharon Kirkey, Postmedia News, January 12, 2012

⁹ *Studies reveal addictive nature of smartphone use*: Sara Pauff, McClatchy Newspapers, January 4, 2012.

¹⁰ *Are smartphones creating tech addicts?*: Laura Casey, Contra Costa Times, June 23, 2011

"Healthier organizations mean more productive employees."

Compulsive e-mailing and text messaging could soon become classified as an official brain illness. An editorial in this month's (March 2008) issue of the [American Journal of Psychiatry](#) says Internet addiction -- including "excessive gaming, sexual pre-occupations and e-mail/text messaging" -- is a common compulsive-impulsive disorder that should be added to psychiatry's official guidebook of mental disorders. ... But some say the research into Internet addiction is in its infancy and they wonder how doctors decide when computer use crosses the line from the normal to the pathological.¹¹

How long can you go without looking at your phone? A flurry of new studies have just been released and – based on the data – the answer is probably not that long. One study found the average smartphone user checks his or her device 34 times a day, even when they know there are no new messages. The authors call this “checking habits,” and said that checks typically last fewer than 30 seconds and are frequently done within 10 minutes of each other.¹²

One can argue that organizations are contributing to such heavy and abnormal use of such technologies within the workplace and during what would normally be non-working hours. Employees frequently feel obligated to remain in constant 7/24 touch with their offices and workplaces, perpetuating the notion of “instant communicationitis”. The availability of these technologies also encourages people to attempt to multitask both at work and at home with additional consequences.

‘Multitasking’

In the cyberspace world, people are increasingly expected to be able to multitask — i.e. undertake several tasks at the same time using so-called **work extenders**. Moreover, all of this multitasking may not be producing people who are actually better able to multitask. People who spend their lives doing two or three things at once tend to genuinely believe they're adept at this juggling and can stay focused on each task at hand. However, research proves that this is not necessarily true. People are not as good at multitasking as they think. In fact, persons who consistently multitask are found to lose focus with straightforward tasks because they get bored or distracted. Take the example of driving whereby the driver attempts to talk or text on a smartphone while moving through traffic or while travelling along a highway. We now know that studies have shown that this form of multitasking can actually be dangerous and even fatal by reverting the focus of someone from their driving, traffic and road conditions. Indeed, the issue of multitasking is even more relevant for today's younger workers given that they are the first generation to have been raised and schooled in an era of rapidly changing communication technologies.

What are some of the negative effects of addictions to communication technologies?

There are several negative effects of the non-stop use of communication technologies utilizing **work extenders**, either at work or at home. Among these are the following:

- ☞ In the workplace, the constant barrage of e-mails can lead to information overload and serious distractions, causing employees to revert to excessive multitasking and lack of focus.
- ☞ Research has shown that the over reliance on communication technologies (incl. that contributing to [obsessive compulsive disorders](#)) can create a great deal of stress for individuals, often resulting in negative impacts on the user's physical and/or mental health.
- ☞ Utilizing work extenders prior to going to bed can often lead to various forms of sleep deprivation, which in turn can lead to health and productivity deterioration.
- ☞ At home, parents will use communication technologies to communicate with each other and their children rather than in a face-to-face fashion. This can have a negative impact on relationships within the family.
- ☞ Work-life balance is negatively affected by having to remain in constant contact with the workplace, particularly during non-working and vacation time, thereby not having adequate family or leisure time.

¹¹ *Recognize Internet addiction as a mental illness, MD urges:* Sharon Kirkey, The Ottawa Citizen, March 17, 2008

¹² *New Research Asks: Are We Addicted to Our Devices?:* Steve Bottari, NCC News, August 6, 2011

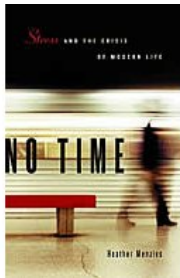
- ☞ The constant use of handheld devices and computers has contributed to a growing number of physical health concerns, including upper body [repetitive strain injuries](#)¹³ — most often involving thumbs, fingers, wrists, necks and shoulders — and [computer vision syndrome](#)¹⁴.

What can organizations do to help prevent technologically-induced disorders?

There are a number of policies or practices that organizations can implement to help prevent technologically-induced disorders. For example, organizations can:

- ☞ Discourage the use of e-mailing and texting when face-to-face meetings would better serve the purpose for interaction among the parties.
- ☞ Limit the amount of after-work use of smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc. For example, in certain cases employees are instructed not to communicate with their workplaces after 6:00 P.M. weekly and during weekends, unless the employee is in paid 'on-call' status or involving a real event of pre-defined 'emergencies' requiring the employee's expertise.
- ☞ Where it is apparent that an employee has obsessions or compulsions that cause major distress or interfere with everyday life, such as those related to the constant use of one or more communication technologies, encourage individuals to participate in an employee assistance program aimed at dealing with related obsessive compulsive disorders.
- ☞ Introduce policies aimed at preventing employees from using communication technologies while driving vehicles or operating potentially hazardous machinery while working.
- ☞ Implement and enforce policies and technical capacities to forbid and prevent the use of the organization's equipment and services for video gaming, internet gambling or other addictive past-times while at work or during working hours.

Recommended Reading:



“No Time”

(*Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life.*)

by Heather Menzies

(Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., Vancouver, British Columbia, 2005)

- ◆ *Disconnected: Technology Addiction & the Search for Authenticity in Virtual Life*: Nicole Radziwill (Amazon.com, August 29, 2010)
- ◆ *Race Against the Machine (How the Digital Revolution is Accelerating Innovation, Driving Productivity, and Irreversibly Transforming Employment and the Economy)*: Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee (Digital Frontier Press, Lexington, Mass., 2011)

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ What Are the Symptoms of Internet Addiction? – HEALTHYPLACE (America's Mental Health Channel): <http://www.healthyplace.com/addictions/internet/symptoms-internet-addiction/menu-id-54/>
- ◆ Partnership for Workplace Mental Health (U.S.): <http://www.workplacementalhealth.org/>
- ◆ The Global Business and Economic Roundtable for Addiction and Mental Health (Canada): <http://www.mentalhealthroundtable.ca/>
- ◆ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Canada): <http://camh.net/>

¹³ *So Many Gadgets, So Many Aches*: Phyllis Korkki, New York Times, September 10, 2011

¹⁴ *Computer vision syndrome: What you need to know*. Elizabeth Rogers, 50Plus.com, May 27, 2008

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”