

Viewpoint

Is Mobile Email Addiction Overlooked?

Studying the prevalence of mobile email addiction and the associated possible implications for organizations.

HE REACTS PROMPTLY to every sound from his BlackBerry. He checks his BlackBerry continuously, can't even think of missing a single message, and responds aggressively if you distract him. Once he tried to get rid of his BlackBerry but could not because he became depressed. His family, friends, and the entire world cease to exist when an email message arrives. It looks like he lives only in order to check and respond to his email. Sounds familiar? We know a person like this. Do you?

Over the past several years, tens of millions of users have acquired BlackBerry, iPhone, or other devices supporting email applications. In many cases, users received these devices from their organizations. A major driver of the spread of mobile email is its ubiquity and convenience—people may check their email and respond from anywhere anytime. On the one hand, mobile email helps employees connect with their organizations and increase productivity. Employees can become more aware of and responsive to organizational, customer, and peer needs. Indeed, organizational benefits resulting from mobile email usage are unarguable. On the other hand, some individuals may become addicted to mobile email. Certainly, anecdotal evidence supports the existence of mobile email addiction; for example, the term “crackberry” was coined for describing the addictive nature of such technologies.



Mobile email addiction is a form of non-substance addiction that involves excessive interaction with both a mobile technology (mobile device) and the content (electronic communication) under conditions of psychological dependency. It can be viewed as a special type of a broader Internet addiction, as the latter concept involves excessive email messaging (but also other behaviors such as excessive gaming and sexual preoccupation).² The ubiquitous nature of mobile email technologies can facilitate and augment excessive email

preoccupation, which is no longer restricted to one's office but rather could be done anytime and from anywhere.

Symptoms

Mobile email addiction may be manifested through many symptoms. When using mobile email, an addicted person may notice the activity dominates his or her thoughts and behaviors, offers a thrill or relief, and it is difficult to control or quit this behavior. It conflicts with other people or tasks, and causes negative emotions when interrupted.

The symptoms of this addiction may dramatically affect an addict's well-being.⁵ First, social quality of life may be compromised as people may complain about one's preoccupation with mobile email. Some users may react negatively when others interrupt their email tasks but later feel ashamed about their overuse of mobile email. Some prefer working with their mobile email rather than interacting with family and friends, even in intimate situations. Second, the addicts' family relationships may be affected when they neglect family and home duties. Third, mobile email can become a "mental safe haven" for escaping from daily realities. Individuals may keep themselves busy with mobile email to avoid doing other more mundane tasks.

Perspectives

There are two conflicting points of view on the addictive nature of contemporary technologies. The proponents of this so-called addiction suggest that some users could demonstrate problematic usage behaviors that may be considered pathological and require treatment—hence technology addiction is a psychiatric disorder that merits research, legislation, and formalization. Over the past decade, a number of terms, such as Internet addiction disorder, computer addiction, technology addiction, virtual society addiction, pathological use, and problematic use were coined.¹¹ In support of this argument, it has been shown that technology addiction goes beyond the notion of mere overuse⁴ or high engagement.³ It has also been demonstrated that these problematic usage behaviors may lead to a range of negative consequences including depression, mood alteration, loneliness, isolation, and reduced impulse control; many experience work, family, social, interpersonal, health, and financial problems.

The opponents of the technology addiction concept argue that the aforementioned claims are unwarranted, that problematic use of technology exists only in very narrow contexts, such as gambling and emailing, and that technology overuse is a result of other preexisting mental disorders (such as reduced impulse control).¹⁰ As it stands, this is the prevalent medical view in

North America. It is argued that the border between technology addiction and other mental issues is blurred because 86% of identified Internet addiction cases have some other mental disorders present.² As a result, the current version of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)*, which includes the formal list of mental disorders that is used by American psychologists and psychiatrists, does not recognize any types of technology addictions. Despite being lobbied by doctors, academics, and research centers, the American Medical Association chose not to consider video game addiction and Internet addiction serious medical disorders.⁷ First, many believe the term addiction may be used with respect to chemical substances only. Second, an established definition, set of symptoms, and diagnosis criteria are missing. For example, the description of the Internet addiction disorder was based on pathological gambling documented in DSM, and critics say most of the technology overuse criteria may be found under the existing DSM categories, such as obsession, compulsion, impulse control, depression, or anxiety. Thus, it is unlikely that such addictions will appear in DSM-V that is tentatively scheduled for publication in 2012.

Effects

From a *Communications* reader perspective, however, the mobile email (so-called) addiction phenomenon deserves special attention, because it may have negative consequences for users, their families, and their organizations. Moreover, mobile email addiction is distinct from most other types of technology addictions. For example, Inter-

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net or video game addicts have made a personal decision to repeatedly engage in a potentially dangerous pathological behavior. In contrast, it is an organization that in most cases provides mobile email technology, pays for it, and requires its usage even beyond regular business hours. Therefore, the behavior in question in organizational settings can be facilitated and encouraged by an authoritative third party rather than by the users. As a result, addicts may hold organizations legally responsible, and companies may face potential liability issues.⁹ For a court to recognize damages resulting from an excessive use of mobile email, five categories must be established:

- ▶ *Duty*—whether an organization owes a duty to a person who became addicted. On the one hand, the addiction may be self-inflicted when the individual voluntarily engaged in technology overuse. On the other hand, the addict may argue that the organization owed the addict a duty to prevent the addictive nature that was facilitated, required, and encouraged by the organization. The standard of duty the organization owes the employees must also be determined.

- ▶ *Breach of Duty*—whether an organization deviates from the standard of care that a responsible employer would follow. For example, if the usage of mobile email beyond regular working hours has become an irrevocable part of organizational culture, the employer had encouraged this practice, and did nothing to prevent potential addiction; a reasonable argument can be made in the courtroom.

- ▶ *Proximate Cause*—whether mobile email addiction and its symptoms resulted from system overuse for work-related purposes. In other words, a clear causal link between mobile email usage and negative consequences must be established.

- ▶ *Actual Cause*—the employee must establish that but for the organization requiring the use of mobile email, the employee would not be addicted.

- ▶ *Damages*—whether the mobile email addict suffered from substantial physical or psychological damages. For instance, an employee may claim that his or her addiction behavior caused serious marital problems such as divorce. In fact, it is the family members

of mobile email users who mostly complain about the issue.

There is no clear evidence to conclude whether organizations should be liable when their employees develop mobile email addiction and suffer from related symptoms. As the society and social norms change, so do the laws. Currently, a number of BlackBerry addicts have already filed lawsuits against their employers; in some cases, organizations decided to settle out of court to avoid negative publicity.⁶ Employers, therefore, should be prepared for various scenarios.

In addition to legal issues, mobile email addiction may potentially have other negative consequences for organizations. It is reasonable to assume that employees who are addicted to their mobile email suffer from mood alterations, feelings of work overload, and negative effects on their familial lives. Thus, they may be likely to feel less satisfied with their jobs, and ultimately voluntarily leave their organizations. But how prevalent is the mobile email addiction phenomenon? To what extent is this addiction associated with voluntary turnover intentions (intentions to look for a job at a different company)?

To explore these issues, we surveyed 241 current mobile email users from three North American organizations. The questionnaire asked users 19 questions about the frequency in which they incur six technology addiction symptoms (based on the Internet Addiction Disorder Scale^{5,11}), and four questions that measured turnover intentions. The included symptoms were: compromised social quality of life due to overuse of mobile email, compromised individual quality of life, compensatory usage (using mobile email instead of doing other things that need to be done), compromised career, compromised time control (using mobile email longer than intended), and excitatory usage of mobile email (such as blocking disturbing thoughts with thoughts about mobile email). Reported frequencies ranged from once a year or less to every day.

In order to assess the levels of addiction, two scenarios were developed. Under the conservative scenario, it was assumed that at least four out of the six symptoms should be reported with a high frequency of at least sev-

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eral times a month. In this case, only 6.2% of the sample may be classified as pathologically addicted. Under a more liberal scenario, in which at least three symptoms are needed with a moderate frequency of at least once a month, 17.4% of the sample may be considered addicted. These results demonstrate that some individuals, between 6% and 17%, may meet mobile email addiction criteria. Furthermore, a correlation of 0.15 (significant at $p < 0.05$) between the addiction scores and turnover intentions was observed.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that mobile email addiction may be a fairly common phenomenon, and that it can be associated with negative organizational consequences such as turnover. Should we be concerned? These percentages can translate into millions of users who present worrisome levels of mobile email addiction disorder, or for those who oppose the technology addiction concept, high levels of mere technology overuse.

It is interesting to see how mobile email addiction compares to other technology addictions. Particularly, does the ubiquity of mobile email make it more addictive? While there are no known comparable samples for which we have technology addiction scores, it has been reported that 13.7% of Chinese adolescent Internet users meet addiction criteria,² and that 7.5% of a sample of teenagers has been diagnosed with severe psychological dependency on the Internet.⁸ The percentage of mobile email addicts in our sample is in line with technology addiction levels reported in the studies mentioned here. In fact, mobile email addiction

may be considered more prevalent than other technology addictions if we follow the liberal criteria scenario. Nevertheless, because different measures were used with different populations and with different addiction-cutoff values, we cannot firmly conclude whether the ubiquity of mobile email increases its addictiveness compared to that of other technologies, such as the Internet. This important distinction warrants future studies.

Given the empirically demonstrated potential pervasiveness of mobile email addiction, and extrapolating from existing frameworks for preventing Internet abuse and overuse¹—it is suggested that organizations employing mobile email monitor the extent to which their employees utilize this technology for early detection of addiction, control the usage as necessary (limit usage hours), educate employees and managers about addiction risks when distributing mobile email devices, and develop appropriate policies for mitigating future legal risks. **C**

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