

Internet Use and the Medical Office

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Over the past decade we have learned, as a society and as a profession, to embrace the Internet as a tool to manage our patients as well as a tool for advertising and communication. As we have integrated the Internet into our practices and our lives, we have seen unauthorized use of the Internet in our office as an increasing problem. According to the American Management Association and The ePolicy Institute, 26% of employers have fired workers for Internet-related issues and 25% of employers have terminated employees for inappropriate e-mail use.¹ For this reason, it is important not only to have a policy but to enforce that policy in the office. This article describes our process and suggested methods for other offices.

Policy

Since my practice began 17 years ago a policy and procedures manual has been in place. Initially, it mentioned the use of office phone lines and specifically asked employees not to tie-up the lines lest important calls not be received. Now, all employees have cell phones and tying up the phone lines is no longer the problem it was in the 1990s. Instead, we have a new policy regarding the use of cell phones and texting during work hours. My personal challenge has been to avoid any disturbances during my day from calls and/or texts to my cell phone. The same is true for my employees and it seems that most of them are very good about avoiding unreasonable use of cell phones during work hours. Ordinarily, if they must take a call, they will duck into an examination room or the break room and discretely and quickly handle the call. However, lately Internet use has been a problem on several occasions. In each of these instances, the common factor has been the ability to use the Internet for personal browsing sessions during the day or after hours. The attendant risks include contamination from viruses as well as loss of

work time and productivity. There is no perfect system at present that effortlessly balances the need for employees to connect to numerous Web sites they must use to efficiently check insurance benefits, advertising promotions, rewards systems, and a myriad of other issues, but denying access to obvious Web sites that are not appropriate during work hours has become necessary. We have found some broad general rules that are reasonable to institute.

First, we have initiated a policy that under no circumstances will we allow unauthorized use of the Internet during work hours. Second, we have announced by written and electronic communication that if employees are caught using the Internet inappropriately they are subject to immediate termination. Lastly, our employee handbook has been updated to reflect these policies and we have held meetings to discuss the issue with our employees.

While it is easy to state a policy, it is harder to implement one that is fair, equitable, and enforceable. Consequently, we have continued to refine the parameters of what is acceptable, and the methods for determination regarding the reasons our employees are accessing the Internet during work hours.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents in a survey from the American Management Association stated they use software to block connections to inappropriate Web sites, which is an increase of over 27% from the previous survey in 2001, falling in line with our policy.¹

Methods of Determination of Internet Use

It is easy to know that a particular site is inappropriate during work hours—or is it? For example, is Facebook entirely off limits or does your practice have its own Facebook page that employees visit to answer questions? Our practice has a Facebook account, so it cannot be entirely off limits during work hours. We ask our employees to limit their time to those duties that we would embrace and not to engage in unending conversations with their Facebook friends.

How about message boards? We have seen some that are appropriate and some that are not. For example, our billing department has interactions with a practice

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management group via message boards and it is quite helpful. On the other hand, we have seen inappropriate use of this medium, and the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate is hard to draw at times.

Countless other opportunities exist to confuse what is and what is not acceptable. For example, use of online newspapers is common to check for news regarding our practice as well as issues regarding Medicare, but Internet browsing histories do not give enough detail to ascertain which page was being accessed and whether the access was job related.

As far as what programs are available to help in this concern, simply go to the computer in question and access the history section in the toolbar. The computer will display extended summaries of Web sites that have been visited. While this is the easiest approach, it also is possible for employees to carefully erase the documentation, especially if they suspect they are being monitored.

There are other programs available, including NirSoft's IEHistoryView, which track the Web sites visited on an ongoing basis. However, these are paid programs, whereas checking the computer's internal history is free of charge.

It should be noted that there are many shared computers in companies, which may make it impossible to track who is using the computer for personal reasons and who for business reasons. In recognition of this, it may be necessary to do some further refinement of computer assignments and sign-in obligations.

Another option simply may be to block specific Web sites for specific computers, though we have found this approach to be extremely cumbersome, especially since many of the Web sites blocked were found to be necessary to access on occasion.

Lastly, though this discussion assumes that employees will use the Internet only from their desktop computers, it is quite possible that in this age of iPhones and BlackBerries they can and will use other tools to satisfy their surfing habits. Tracking use from other tools is challenging, but somewhat negated by the less optimal speed and accessibility, making it much less of a problem (for now) than desktop use; however, this will probably be more of a problem in the near future. Furthermore, Wi-Fi may provide just the tool for employees to surf the Internet from their desks without accessing it on their computer stations if it is operative in the office for patients.

Outside Management

We also utilize an outside provider to keep all our computers updated and virus free, which at the same time allows the installation of systems that check the ongoing use of computers for personal tasks. This helps greatly because it relieves us of the necessity to spend our hours checking whether employees are on TMZ.com or not.

Summary

Our office has gone from a hands-off approach to an interventional approach in regard to the problem of inappropriate Internet use while working, and it appears to be warranted in certain cases. This issue only is going to increase in the future, and it pays to have a strict and clear policy that is effectively communicated in an employee handbook and in personal communications to staff.

Reference

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