Unable to unplug, tech addicts may sue: academic

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TORONTO (Reuters) - Keeping employees on electronic leashes such as laptops, BlackBerries and other devices that keep them constantly connected to the office could soon lead to lawsuits by those who grow addicted to the technology, a U.S. academic warns.

In a follow-up to an earlier paper on employees' tech addictions, Gayle Porter, associate professor of management at the Rutgers University School of Business in Camden, New Jersey, has written a paper that states workers whose personal lives suffer as a result of tech addictions could turn their sights on their employers.

"These people that can't keep it within any reasonable parameters and have these problems in their lives, at some point may say: 'My life is not all that great. How did this happen? Who can I blame for this?','" Porter, who co-authored the study with two other academics, said in an interview on Thursday. "And they're going to say, 'The company.'"

The paper, which is still under review and expected to be published in an academic journal in the near future, highlights the potential for fallout resulting from technologies initially aimed at boosting a company's productivity.

But instead of increased efficiency, lawsuits against employers who supply workers with gadgets are "very possible," she says.

Research In Motion Ltd.'s BlackBerry wireless device -- jokingly dubbed the "CrackBerry" by some -- is well known for what some describe as its addictive properties.

In most major North American and European cities, businesspeople can be seen gazing nose-down into their BlackBerry screens, tapping out terse e-mails.
Porter says she isn't picking on RIM or the BlackBerry in particular, but notes that terms like "CrackBerry" show that "there is, however lightheartedly, some acknowledgment that many people have kind of gotten out of control with using these devices."

Others complain of simply being unable to unplug at home, with laptops, e-mails or conference calls keeping them working into the wee hours.

Addiction to technology -- blamed by critics on the seeming ubiquity of portable e-mail devices, smartphones, cellphones and laptops, coupled with long working hours -- is hardly a new phenomenon.

But Porter argues litigation could be the next step, as employees seek redress for technology dependence. She predicts companies could use a free-will argument in defending themselves: "They're going to, I would suspect, say that this was an individual choice."

A RIM spokeswoman was not immediately available for comment.