

## **Get Smart: Effective Organizational Use of Smartphones**

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### Abstract

We report on our research into the use of smartphones by leaders, managers and employees within a large UK engineering organization. We explore a range of issues and opportunities arising from this interview-based case study, offering practical suggestions for those experiencing similar issues in their own organizations under the following headings:

- Knowing how to use your smartphone
- Communicating and sharing knowledge
- Enabling more flexible work
- Responsiveness and out-of-work use
- Relationships with others

Smartphones were originally seen as the preserve of senior executives but in recent years their use has spread across organizations and beyond, with brands such as BlackBerry becoming as popular in the classroom as the boardroom.

While there is much debate about broader societal and health implications of Smartphone use, we have been actively researching their use at work. Particular aspects of use at work do already receive attention: such as OfCom's finding that people report themselves as 'addicted' to their devices and the CMI's own analysis (One Poll survey) that smartphone use has the potential to impact work-life balance.

Academic research has similarly focused on issues of workload management (Allen and Shoard, 2005, Wajcman and Rose, 2011) and work-life balance (Middleton, 2008, Fenner and Renn, 2010). In general, the conclusion of the research literature is that the technology does not dictate its own use – rather particular patterns of use tend to emerge amongst particular workgroups and within particular organizations. So, while within one occupational group Smartphone use might be endemic and constant, within another it might be confined to working hours (Mazmanian, 2009).

Our research has taken a somewhat different tack and looked more closely at how leaders, managers and other employees use smartphones at work to communicate, to liaise with others, and to share information. Interestingly, in discussions with several major organizations we found little evidence that companies devote much time to considering the implications of smartphone use when they are introduced, beyond fairly limited technical training and a concern with data security (Symon, 2008). There appears to be an implicit assumption that we instinctively know how to use them and how to use them efficiently.

To further explore Smartphone use at work, we conducted in-depth interviews with over forty-five employees at a variety of levels within one engineering organization (anonymously presented here for reasons of confidentiality). The sample were evenly distributed across four role categories representative of the general work structure in the organization: three levels of operational staff and a group of technical support staff. We asked all employees about how the technology had been implemented in their organization, how they used this technology and what impact it had had on working practices. Using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo and based on the tenets of grounded theory, we conducted a rigorous thematic analysis of the transcripts (Richards, 2009) to ascertain what impacts Smartphones were seen to have across the sample on a range of organizational practices. While this is only one organization, our knowledge of other organizational practices from both our own experiences and other research literature suggests that our data reveal some common challenges concerning smartphone use that warrant serious attention by managers and leaders in other organizations.

In the remainder of this article we explore five key issues and opportunities arising from our empirical research and offer some initial suggestions for organizations:

- Knowing how to use your smartphone
- Communicating and sharing knowledge
- Enabling more flexible work
- Responsiveness and out of work use
- Relationships with others

### **Knowing how to use your smartphone:**

Given the cost of providing smartphones, it appears somewhat surprising that few users in our case organization were given any training. Instead they acquired skills through trial and error, peer instruction or in some cases, struggled to use the smartphone at all. Acquiring skills through trial and error can work well as a strategy as it encourages familiarity but it is also time consuming and risks ignoring potentially useful functions or making costly errors. It is really only effective for those who are already technologically competent and confident, and even for this group some directed training would be important for those who need to hit the ground running.

We found that employees regularly exchange information about shortcuts and specific functions amongst themselves. This strategy leads to rather adhoc learning specific to particular areas or roles, but can help teams to develop their own best practices for communication. In such cases, informal experts were particularly in demand as teams got to grips with new models or functions.

Amongst some employees, we found uncertainty about the functions available on the smartphone and how they could use them. This means that some staff are not able to take full advantage of the technology provided to them.

#### *Get smart:*

- *Integrate training on smartphones within other regular management development training such as time management.*
- *Provide appropriate support to new users.*
- *Encourage sharing of hints and tips within team meetings and other fora.*
- *Encourage 'super users' who are linked into suppliers' own discussion boards and can tailor hints and tips appropriate to your organization.*

### **Communicating and sharing knowledge:**

This is the area in which we would expect smartphones to come in their own – this is after all why most organizations use them. Our research suggests that, particularly for users who are regularly out of the office, the ability to send and forward information quickly and easily was a key advantage. Users stressed the benefits of 'keeping in touch' and the potential to do this unobtrusively through the smartphone particularly). The sender no longer has to consider where the recipient is or what they might be doing – the message can be sent, and usually received and responded to, even if they are 'busy' (more on this later).

However, despite the obvious advantages we also found some key areas of concern:

- Emails sent via smart phones can be misinterpreted or the message lost when they are part of a long chain of emails and this issue is accentuated by the small size of text on most smartphones.
- Responses may be composed without due care and attention, especially when dealt with 'on the run'.
- Responses may be partial and incomplete as the respondents don't have access to all the information they need.

We found that these issues often lead to generating many emails to resolve an issue satisfactorily, adding to the volume of communication. As a result many individuals reported being over-whelmed with emails which effectively follow them around.

*Get smart:*

- *Use email subject headers wisely.*
- *Use the first few lines to be clear what you are asking for and when.*
- *Avoid over use of the 'cc' function.*
- *Save more complicated email responses for your office or other quiet place.*
- *Don't be afraid to say 'I can't answer this now and will get back to you' if something requires more thought.*

### **Enabling more flexible work**

Once again this is an expected area of organizational contribution for the smartphone, as it supports mobile work and allows users to make use of dead time such as commuting. Some users also reported that many of the additional functions available on smartphones also provided means for them to work smarter, with one interviewee referring to their BlackBerry as a "spare brain". In some respects, smartphones also encourage users to be proactive but this is not without drawbacks:

- Smartphones may encourage 'just-in-time thinking' as there is no longer a need to plan ahead
- Engaging with smartphone use may actually be distracting from other (potentially more important) tasks.
- Constant use of smartphones leads to a focus on immediate issues rather than long term planning because of the responsiveness engendered by using the devices

*Get Smart:*

- *Keep a diary of your smartphone usage over a typical day or even a week and then critically analyse your own use with a view to developing more effective use.*
- *Consider the recipients' point of view.*
- *Remove yourself from distribution lists that are not essential to your role.*
- *Turn the smartphone off (or place it out of sight) when you need to concentrate on an important task.*

### **Responsiveness and out of work use**

Because smartphones are portable devices, they encourage a view of employees as being generally accessible and an expectation that emails will be answered promptly. Employees thus feel an obligation to be contactable at all times and to be constantly checking and answering emails. Indeed we found that there is an extent to which being 'in demand' may be considered a matter of status. Thus a culture may evolve where having a smartphone, responding to emails quickly and being accessible after hours is seen to underline an individual employee's judgement of their own importance to the organization. In our study, use out of work was often represented as "individual choice" but management often both implicitly and explicitly encourage this sort of behaviour. Employees can feel worried that their commitment will be questioned if they do not keep on top of emails when at home and even on holiday. We also found that some employees found their manager's use out of work and on holiday frustrating as it appeared they were constantly "checking up" and not trusting those to which tasks had been delegated.

*Get Smart:*

- *Discuss expectations about smartphone use within teams.*
- *Delegation is an important aspect of management and is critical for staff development –*

*don't undermine delegation with constant checking.*

- *Use out of office features.*
- *Managers should role model appropriate smartphone use to their staff.*

### **Relationships with others**

Connectivity is a key aspect of smartphone use, indeed RIM's current marketing suggests that the BlackBerry enables users to 'carry your friends in your pocket' (source: <http://uk.blackberry.com/devices>). While many users may be attracted to this idea, it is perhaps time to ask what does it feel like to have your boss in there too? On the positive side we found that, particularly for staff that spend considerable periods of time away from the office, smartphones did enable a general sense of 'feeling connected' to the organization. Additionally, the informal social relations that were facilitated via smartphone use (often via texting or instant messaging) feed into better working relations. However, on the negative side interrupting conversations and meetings to answer the smartphone or attempts to simultaneously type a response (however discreetly) were considered impolite. Some staff justified this as using their time productively when agenda items were irrelevant to them. More junior staff commented that they felt frustrated that managers appeared not to listen in meetings and that much time was wasted as these managers were actually dealing with issues elsewhere. We found that behaviour in meetings tends to be influenced by the most senior member of staff attending. If this individual uses their smartphone during the meeting, then this is considered a signal for others to use their smartphones and those who object feel unable to intervene.

#### *Get Smart:*

- *Allow social use of smartphones to foster relationships between staff*
- *Avoid using smartphones when in face-to-face contact with others. If you are expecting an urgent call or message explain this up front.*
- *Agree ground rules for use in meetings OR reconsider if the meeting agenda and attendance needs to be reviewed. (If your smartphone use is to fill in 'dead' time in a meeting, perhaps ask why you are at the meeting?)*
- *In long meetings schedule short comfort/smartphone breaks rather than allow ongoing use to distract from the planned discussions.*

### Conclusion

Beyond these specific suggestions we found that smartphones were increasingly available to a wide range of employees. Perhaps a first question should therefore be: Do you know who has smartphones in your organization and how they are being used? If your organization does not have a distribution strategy for smartphones, this should be your first step. Then you can review what guidelines for use are needed and how these can best be developed. Here it is important to get specific feedback from employees on the benefits and drawbacks that they face in the specific context of your organization. At an organizational level this could be incorporated within annual employee surveys but should also be part of regular management meetings and team discussions. We believe that smartphone use may reflect and even exaggerate other issues within the organization and thus broader questions may also need to be asked: Is the technology driving organizational changes and employee behaviours? How can the organization take control of this process? As smartphone functionality continues to increase dramatically, such questions will become increasingly critical for organizations who hope to achieve productivity returns from their investment in these technologies.

For further information about our work see our blog at <http://gilliansymon.wordpress.com/>

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