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viewpoint

Technology at work: friend or foe?

How to ensure your company's technology approach is a help and not a hindrance.

Mobile technology enables us, as employees to work anytime, anyplace, anywhere. But is the same technology that sets employees free to work outside the office, also in danger of encroaching on their personal time and potentially risking their health?

And, as with so many modern innovations, now that the genie of mobile and wearable technology is out of the bottle, it cannot be ignored and now, more significantly perhaps, needs to be carefully managed.

Microsoft 365, cloud technology, apps, Wi-Fi, tablets and smartphones collectively enable remote, and flexible working. This is especially convenient for those who work in global teams and may need to make international calls outside of working hours, collaborate with colleagues during national holidays, or simply catch up on the to-do list at weekends or in the evenings. The question is, should we really be doing any of these things?

There will always be times, especially in industries such as investment banking, law, accountancy or PR, when there is no alternative but to put in some hours, out of hours. And, having the ability to work from home or another remote location on these occasions is hugely convenient.

Also, there are no longer technical and data security challenges associated with employees using mobile devices provided by

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their employer – these have long since been addressed with corporate policies and tools such as enterprise mobility management platforms. But is this always a good thing?

The consequences

Maybe not. A by-product of our being so very mobile is a definite blurring of the dividing line between work and home life. In many countries, it is now almost expected that staff are always available, even when it's contracted working hours are over, it is a public holiday or they are on paid leave.

This can only have a detrimental effect on an employees' personal time. In a survey¹ commissioned by the Chartered Management Institute, managers in the UK were found to be working an extra hour every day, effectively cancelling out all of their annual paid leave.

The result was:



Should someone be taking action?

Given that technology with the capability to extend employees' availability is already here, the question remains as to how much guidance should be given about where and when it is deployed.

And who can make change happen?

Governments	Employers	Employees
The governments of countries where concerns about stress and its impact on people and productivity have reached a critical level.	Employers working in the absence of guidance from government bodies.	Employees themselves, particularly senior management can have an impact on how technology is used outside work hours.
Example	Example	Example
<p>A good example is France, which introduced laws to curtail the use of work email after hours. This so-called 'Right to Disconnect' means employees have the legal right to avoid answering emails when their working day is done. From 1 January 2017, companies with 50 or more employees have been obliged to negotiate an employees' rights to ignore their phones after official working hours.</p> <p>The Philippines government introduced an act granting employees the right to disconnect from work-related electronic communications after work hours to its House of Representatives, also in January 2017. This states that an employee 'shall not be reprimanded, punished or otherwise subjected to disciplinary action if he or she disregards a work-related communication sent after work hours'.</p>	<p>German companies appear to have taken a lead in this area, with Volkswagen introducing a policy in 2011 to ensure that no emails could be sent to employees' mobile phones between 6pm and 7am.</p> <p>Some employers have also taken steps to protect their staff from 'burn out' by blocking emails to work phones or even ensuring that all emails received by employees on holiday are automatically deleted. Famously, car manufacturer Daimler introduced a 'Mail on Holiday' function that if turned on will automatically delete any incoming emails when an employee is officially on leave.</p>	<p>As the Philippines example above demonstrates, employees need to feel confident that they will not risk censure if they fail to read and act upon emails or calls that arrive out of hours.</p> <p>When employees see senior managers working in the evenings, at weekends and while on holiday, they may feel that they have no option but to follow suit. The same will apply when managers lead from the front by not acknowledging emails outside working hours or when on leave. Employees then feel they have been given the same permission to switch off their phone or computer for the evening.</p>

Can action really help?

Some employers believe that it is not enough to simply ban email out of hours but that it could be eradicated altogether. *Atos Origin*, the French IT services firm, surprised many people when it announced, in 2011, that it would ban email and replace it with an internal social network. By 2014, the company had already reduced email by 60% and its staff reported feeling far more productive and collaborative.

Their response is endorsed by an experiment undertaken by researchers at the University of California, which measured the effects of email traffic on stress levels. Participants without access to email experienced less stress than when measured against a 'normal' baseline work pattern. Those without access also used face-to-face and phone communications more regularly and found this made them more productive.

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Big data: the way ahead?

Emails and phone calls out of hours may well turn out to be just the tip of the iceberg. As well as ensuring employees are always 'on' if required, technology can also be used to monitor both their location and their engagement with corporate systems.

One example is *Sapience Analytics*, which has developed software that helps managers automatically track work patterns by monitoring laptops, phones and PCs. While many employees have punched in and out of their workplace and completed timesheets, today's technology can also track where they are, when they are available at their workstation and what they are looking at online.

This sounds sinister but there can be very positive uses for such software. In a bid to help employees lead healthier (and therefore more productive) lives, employers are

moving into previously unknown territory by providing employees with wearable technology. In 2015, *BP America* gave Fitbit trackers to 24,500 employees as part of an incentive programme to keep workers healthy and reduce healthcare costs.

More recently, a Boston-based company called *Humanalyze* developed a badge which incorporates a wide range of biometric measures that can track everything from tone of voice to how often employees' work patterns are disrupted.

In a report² about the adoption of wearable technologies, Jonathan Collins, Research Director at *ABI Research* said: "Corporate wellness is a vanguard market for the integration of health wearables and healthcare management. The integrated system that delivers effective, secure and efficient data collection, analysis, and

'evidence exists that shows modern working patterns... are already hazardous to health and productivity.'

integration for wellness programmes has the potential to be leveraged in a new generation of healthcare-centric patient management offerings."

The big question here is who owns this data, especially if employees are tracked or measured outside work hours and premises. What right does an employee have over their data, especially once they leave an organisation? Firms following this path will need to institute clear guidelines about the use of data, its storage and destruction if they wish to get their employees on board.

Getting the balance right

Mobile and wearable technology is the classic example of a double-edged sword. It gives employees the freedom to work from remote locations, be more flexible and understand more about their own health and fitness. It also provides employers with the metrics they need to identify productivity gaps and encourage more healthy behaviours, whether that's taking more exercise or securing better sleep patterns.

However, evidence exists that shows modern working patterns, with their intrusion into employees' personal lives, are already hazardous to health and productivity.

Striking a balance between equipping employees with the tools they need to do their jobs effectively, gathering data to inform wellness programmes and stopping short of acting like a modern day Big Brother will be a key challenge for organisations over the next few years, and indeed for governments too.

¹ Chartered Management Institute, The Quality of Working Life, January 2016 <https://www.managers.org.uk/-/media/Files/Quality%20of%20working%20life/CoWL%20-%20Executive%20Summary%20-%20January%202016.pdf>
² ABI Research, The Role of Wearable Wireless Devices in Corporate Wellness Programs <https://www.abiresearch.com/press/mhealth-wearables-help-employers-achieve-higher-co/>

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