

## Straight Talking – The Work/Life Balancing Act

By Rob Bamforth, Principal Analyst, Quocirca Ltd

The pervasive nature of much of the technology from the last decade is blurring the line between work and home.

Much of this is seen as a benefit. Taking work home need no longer involve boxes full of papers to refer to, just a virtual private link, secured from the broadband-equipped home to the internet-accessible office.

Communication while out of the office, once requiring a stop at a payphone, is now fully mobile (where legal and safe to do so), and includes all forms of messages from SMS through email and instant messaging as well as good old trusty voice.

Recent Quocirca research targeted at UK business and IT managers shows that both employer and employee often find this to be positive. As well as directly measurable benefits such as improved productivity, employers are looking to mobile technology to simplify processes for employees and make them more responsive to the changing needs of customers.

This might be of some benefit to the employees themselves, giving them control of their time and reducing the volume of paperwork. However the underlying benefits expected by the business are reduced costs and reduced staff turnover.

But it can go too far, and both employer and employee have to recognise the larger implications of the intertwining of business and personal life - not so much work/life balance as work/life management. For a large percentage of managers, loss of management control is the main inhibitor to allowing more people to work from home and is even more of a concern than security or confidentiality. Surprisingly, home/work conflicts or interruptions are not viewed as a major problem but many of those who work from home have to be careful to try to minimise distractions as they know it will affect their concentration.

On the move, almost one in five managers feels a great deal could be gained from wider deployment of mobile access to office IT services but they recognise that employees might resent the extension of the working day into their travel and home life, causing employees to believe they are working longer hours.

Mobile phones, as well as home and mobile access to email, make it much harder to remain legitimately out of contact or unaware of problems at the office. The staff management issues are less of a concern for

managers looking to deploy mobile technologies, where the main worries are about device and communications costs, and of course, security.

This may be missing a vital issue. Not only is work spreading into our home lives but personal usage of mobile devices and the internet are bleeding into the working day due to changing lifestyles.

However, this is not simply the personal phone call or email to friends for a chat or a bit of casual surfing but increasingly the need to conduct personal or domestic activities online or using the mobile phone, as retailers and domestic service suppliers shift from high street locations to telephone and web-based contact centres. 24/7 access to internet banking might make it possible to do all those previously lunch hour tasks at evenings and weekends but in reality most people would prefer to, or even have to, get it out of the way during the working day.

Just how far this has gone struck me as I recently went through the process of selling and moving house. Viewing potential properties online is something that can be done anytime and comfortably outside work hours in the evening but the rest of the process happens during the day - and anything to reduce the stress of the process is a boon.

Enter the trusty mobile gadget. I negotiated the final sales price with the agent (and indirectly purchaser) via text message while travelling on the train; the contracts exchange was orchestrated by mobile phone from a hotel lounge during a meeting; and the agent and I later traded emails to request a 'Sold' sign, which was there before I arrived home.

Decisions, responsiveness and timely access to information are not solely the preserve of business processes. In a time-pressured and online world, they are requirements for effectively managing our personal lives.

Companies have to recognise this quid pro quo as increased employee flexibility and productivity - facilitated by staff allowing the spread of work beyond the working day - is offset by the need to perform some domestic tasks during work. The key is to manage this carefully to ensure both organisation and individual gain benefit from the technology - that's the real work/life balancing act.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is one of Europe's leading independent industry analyst firms. One of its biggest assets is the core team of highly experienced analysts drawn from both the corporate and the vendor communities. This team prides itself on maintaining a bigger picture view of what's going on in the IT and communications marketplaces. This allows all of Quocirca's activities to be carried out in the context of the real world and avoids distractions with fads, fashions and the nuts and bolts of specific technologies. Quocirca's focus has always been the point of intersection at which IT meets "the business".

## Quocirca Services

The insight and experience that comes from working as an industry analyst as well as a practitioner allows the Quocirca team to contribute significantly to IT Vendors, Service Providers and Corporate clients. To this end, it provides a range of consulting and advisory services. Details of these, along with some of Quocirca's latest analysis, may be obtained by visiting <http://www.quocirca.com>

Quocirca also provides bespoke primary research services through its daughter company QNB Intelligence. This involves interviewing thousands of senior decision makers on a quarterly basis.