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FT.com Personal view – Device suitability

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Device suitability – just how much of your body does your mobile device demand?

Despite the future simplicity of interacting with technology demonstrated in sci-fi such as Star Trek – pocket-able communicators, talking to computers, and getting medical information from a handheld scanner – the reality of mobile technology in the workplace can still be a huge let down. The IT and telecoms industries have delivered on the flip phone visual promise and computer portability of Star Trek, but the wealth of features found on a mobile phone, laptop or handheld computer means they are often complicated to use and offer more features than the average worker needs.

Recent Quocirca research questioned employees in healthcare and financial services about how well mobile technology fitted their working needs, and found that most just wanted it to be as simple as possible, or believed IT complexity was an issue.

Mobile devices have advanced and now come equipped with brighter screens, better connectivity and more storage capacity. “Smaller, faster, cheaper” or just “more” is an oft-chimed mantra of those selling new hardware, but all too often “more” means an excess of features bringing more complexity, more training. There is too much emphasis on technology functionality, rather than its useful value, or the user.

Business use of IT on the move has long since moved away from being the preserve of elite “road warriors” or those with a geeky interest in the technology, and is now fundamental for many job roles. In the past this has been while travelling outside the workplace, or when working from home, but increasingly it is the need for flexibility within the working environment that requires mobile access to IT.

The problem is, most IT products require a lot of attention and demand some physical commitment – one or both hands – especially if

used away from a desk. Try using anything more complicated than simple calling on a mobile phone with only one hand and it’s a struggle.

The use of a laptop, despite its longer battery life and wireless network connection, will still require the user to sit, typically with the screen separating them visually from other elements of the workplace. These distractions do not fit well in working environments where lives and lifetime savings are at risk, and concentration and actions need to be applied to more important tasks.

Healthcare and finance in particular require rapid access to large volumes of data, open discussion with colleagues, and appropriate checks and balances. They are also heavily process driven, with all the paperwork that this entails – around a quarter of those interviewed described their working environment as “a pen pusher’s paradise”. Those working directly with patients and customers in these sectors have more than enough to occupy their hands and minds and the last thing they should have to commit time and attention to is bureaucracy and IT complexity.

These two industries should benefit hugely from the automation, information flow, collaboration and compliance of mobile IT. But to be fully effective, it should directly support the working process of those in front line roles while they work, rather than be something remote that they have to catch up on afterwards, or as often noticed in the research, only deployed into the hands of managers or IT experts.

There may be many valid reasons for this reluctance to push technology widely into front line roles. While the cost of the devices themselves has been reduced, the peripheral and ongoing expenses are often large or unpredictable. This leads to concerns about the cost of connectivity, training, and repair or replacement caused by users breaking or mislaying hardware, as well as the fear of theft and loss of data.

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Many of these issues can be addressed by layering more technology on top; to encrypt, track, protect and apply usage limits. However, if done without understanding the working processes of the individuals concerned, this can add more complexity when really a simpler approach is required. The key is to avoid distracting the user from their primary task, and this means:

- Tailor to specific needs – giving everyone the same technology irrespective of the needs of their role might keep matters simpler for the IT department, but is rarely the best fit for the users.

- Get early employee involvement – user buy-in is critical to productivity, aids security and reduces ongoing maintenance costs. Their understanding of the environmental challenges, limitations and realities of the working process is invaluable.

- Don't skimp on training – not just the functionality of the tools, but guidance and coaching on how to get the best from them.

Employees that have comprehensive understanding of the limitations and potential of the technology will benefit the most, and ensure its intrusion on their primary tasks is minimised. While the needs in healthcare are very challenging, and financial services is also heavily scrutinised, most employees have primary tasks to perform that now rely heavily on technology that has to accompany them as they work.

Whether this is mobile phones, handheld computers, laptops or smart connectivity in other devices like digital pens and electronic tags, it should always be remembered that these tools are only there to support another task. It should not be a burden or require an onerous commitment from the user, whether they need to save lives, to sell policies or "to boldly go" with mobile technology.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at
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