

Bursting the mobile productivity bubble

By Rob Bamforth, Principal Analyst, Quocirca Ltd

We often take for granted the way office work or the clerical activities many face during the working day have evolved with the growing use of technology. From using pen and paper then typewriters, the default administrative tool of the office worker is now computers and laptops or smart mobile devices.

Working locations have shifted from the relative controlled privacy of the closed office to 'cubes', open plan, and now the much marketed ability to 'work anywhere' with remote or mobile connections to anyone anywhere at anytime on anything. Great for providing maximum flexibility, but often poor at delivering the personal privacy and control bubble that many still need in order to be productive.

Not everyone is able or wants to be trying to concentrate on accessing and digesting difficult material in their nearest Starbucks, and despite some appearances to the contrary, I'm sure few really want their own sensitive or secret information bellowed across phone calls in a train carriage.

While the technology is providing more opportunities to do something in the 'standby' time between regular working locations, and home, it is not always something more productive. A quick glance around laptop and mobile phone users on a railway carriage might suggest that everyone is contemplating working documents, checking voice messages or responding to mobile emails. However a closer look will see that many are playing games, texting friends, listening to music or watching films – this is especially obvious on the journey home, but also apparent throughout the day.

Of course everyone needs time for some diversion and relaxation, but outside the office, the environment is distracting enough, and the technology only offers the opportunity for further distraction.

Breaking down the human working process is often like looking at the processes going on inside the technology itself – internal processing with some input/output at either end. However,

while computers are getting pretty efficient at fine-grained multi-tasking – context switching from one job to another and handling input/output in tiny incomplete and out of order chunks, we humans are pretty lousy at it.

We work best and most efficiently in discrete, complete and self contained pieces of work. The old adage of only touch each piece of paper once is sound – read it, process it and pass it on, file or bin it. Input, process and output.

The blurring of IT and communications technologies is supposed to help us in our endeavours, but it often creates new problems that we have not developed the external managerial or internal time management mechanisms to tame. We let the technology take control – interrupted by the phone, hanging on every incoming email and distracted by the "hello, I'm on the train" hubbub around us.

The effects of this can be seen in many working environments. Incoming emails at the hip seem to over-ride and interrupt any face to face discussion, even more than the phone ever did. The chirp of the widely inflicted individual music (or favourite line from a movie) taste of a mobile phone ringing is more annoying in an open office than the predictable 'bring-bring' that all phones once shared. And just how often do you truly believe that all your colleagues' laptops are open so that they can take notes to demonstrate just how attentive they have been to what's being said in a meeting?

There are many productivity pitfalls for those engaged in mobile working emanating from the technologies themselves – wireless communications, security, application availability or performance - and although these are generally tackled by applying some form of security or networking product, the management of the personal privacy and control bubble is often forgotten.

Some of the privacy is necessary for reasons of security – guarding PINs, passwords and corporate secrets against prying eyes – but often it's a matter of needing to put control back into

the hands of the individual so they can make productive use of their time.

Too often it's a matter of give the employee the mobile tool and as if by magic, they should become more productive. When the reality then turns out to be somewhat different, what gets blamed? Answer: the technology, when what have really failed are the organisation's and individuals' abilities to effectively manage and prioritise time.

For many, work may now have evolved from being 9-5 in a fixed location to a fragmented collection of activities performed anywhere, but these each need to be efficient and productive. This is not only for the benefit of the employer, but also the employee. Life's too short to waste by idling it away handling continual interruptions from less than useful technology, whether balanced with work or not.

Employers have to wake up to the fact that managing and motivating mobile personnel requires a different approach. They also need to recognise that they have a responsibility to equip their staff with skills to cope with the demands of mobile workplaces – not the instruction manual for the technology, but a guide to help them manage distractions and make their time effective. To do this they must start from basic principles:

- Involve employees early so that technology won't get in the way of established good practice.
- Education for personal time management and best practice for the new working methods.
- Deploy tools that are well integrated and easy to use in what might be distracting locations.
- Educate managers in the methods of remote and virtual team management
- Make sure everyone's personal goals fit with those of the organisation
- Measure the effects

To paraphrase an old adage - take control of your minutes and the hours will look after themselves.

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, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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