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More than you bargained for: The effects of mandatory mobile email usage on workers
Research in Progress

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E-mail has been used as a communications tool in organizations since the 1970s. Many papers have been written on the study of email in organizations (e.g., Markus 1994; Fallows 2002), and even more on mobile commerce and communications (e.g., Urbaczewski et al. 2003; Sarker and Wells 2003). The convergence of reduced device size and increased wireless network coverage and throughput in the 2000s has created the phenomenon of mobile email. A majority of new mobile phones sold today allow for individuals to check their consumer-based email. This functionality was first made prevalent in a class of devices called “smartphones” and popularized by Research In Motion’s (RIM) Blackberry device.

The Blackberry was unique when it was first created in that it allowed for two-way text paging, and then fully supported “push” e-mail. This device became so prevalent in business and government that a patent infringement verdict against RIM was set aside in 2005 to allow the US Government to continue to operate while parties were pushed to negotiate for a settlement. Moreover, RIM network outages of a few hours in 2007 and 2008 caused near panic for some device owners. Indeed it has become so popular that is often referred to by names like “CrackBerry” and “handheld heroin” as users often cannot seem to break away from their devices.

Middleton and Cukier (2006) examined the usage of mobile email, and classified behaviors with mobile email as either functional or dysfunctional. Functional behaviors included efficiency, immediacy, freedom, and minimal disruption. Dysfunctional behaviors listed were distraction, infringement, anti-social behavior, and danger. While organizations, when empowering their employees with these devices, wish to promote the functional behaviors, mass-media and initial research efforts seem to indicate that the dysfunctional behaviors are real and exist.

So the paradox then is evident: managers wish to have their employees reachable at all times, and more and more employees wish to live a lifestyle free from the chains of a desk (Lyytinen and Yoo 2002; Yoo and Lyytinen 2005). Yet, at the same time, there are often side effects to the implementation of technology (Urbaczewski and Jessup 2002). Employees do not wish to always be working, and managers do not want to deal with burned-out employees. While much MIS research in the 1970s and 1980s dealt with the problem of getting people to accept and use technology, a new breed of research now deals with the addictive problems of technology (Quinn 2007; Kakabadse 2008).

The goal of this research effort is to answer the following questions:

- 1) Are functional or dysfunctional aspects of mobile email usage more salient for workers?;
- 2) What behaviors (functional and/or dysfunctional) do workers notice in their colleagues?;
- 3) What behaviors (functional and/or dysfunctional) do workers notice in themselves?;
- 4) What strategies have workers developed to manage the internal paradox?;
- 5) How can mobile email devices be deployed in a way to maximize the functional behaviors while minimizing the dysfunctional behaviors?; and
- 6) What role does the organization have in ensuring the well-being of its employees who use mobile email devices?

This research is currently in the nascent stages. The authors are preparing to work with one large and one mid-sized corporation in the Midwestern US in a study of mobile email usage in their organizations. A questionnaire adapted from Egger and Rauterberg (1996) will be administered to employees in the organization, and semi-structured interviews will then be conducted to identify further avenues for study of the many issues surrounding mobile email usage and employees.

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