

Stephen BEVAN: Working Anywhere? – The Impact of Mobile Technology on Jobs, Performance & the Nature of Work

Background

The widespread adoption of mobile technology by individual citizens in every developed western economy has brought about a fundamental – and probably irreversible – change in the way people consume digital content and interact with each other. It has also had a major impact on the way that many of us conduct business and do our jobs. When, where and how we work is now far less constrained or prescribed than even a decade ago, raising the prospect that the very nature of work itself, and the concept of ‘the workplace’ as a meaningful entity may be in need of a rethink. But are we ready for such a fundamental ‘disruption’ to our conventional conceptions of work? Are these changes, in reality, technology-driven rather than a rational response to the way work gets done and how communication, collaboration and transactions actually work most of the time? How much will we need to adapt our thinking about job design, working time, performance management, labour productivity and trust?

Liberation Technology – A Broken Promise?

In most European cities the commuter train carriages on wet winter mornings are often full of people who look bleary-eyed, haunted and silently resigned to the ordeal of delays, overcrowding and the effort of avoiding eye-contact. And all this is before they get into the office. With a recent report showing a 72 per cent increase in number of people spending more than 2 hours travelling to work each day, it looks like many more people are opting – willingly or not – for working days book-ended with the joy of rush hour travel. Most strikingly, there has been a 130 percent increase in the number of women commuting for more than 3 hours a day since 2004. It can hardly be said that this part of the average working day enhances our quality of life, and yet for many it seems an increasing necessity.

In the South-East of the UK, for example, there is clearly a ‘London’ effect with house prices and rents still growing at a faster rate than elsewhere, forcing more people who need to retain their London salaries to find homes further out of the city. This effect is visible too in many other large cities around Europe, and it means that a higher proportion of our working days is being spent just getting to work and home again.

As might be expected, longer commutes can have all sorts of negative side effects. A 2011 Swedish study looking at the health consequences of longer commuting found a negative impact on sleep quality, stress, self-reported health and exhaustion among those commuting for more than an hour to work by car, bus or train compared with those walking or cycling to work (Hansson et al, 2011). Other studies have highlighted that work-life balance can be affected too, and with the high cost of childcare, longer commutes can be both costly and disruptive to family life.

So what of the promise of technology-enabled remote working? Wasn't that supposed to be weaning us off the idea that 'work is a place'? If anything, technology has played a part in intensifying rather than alleviating work pressure with large numbers of us checking emails at home and even on holiday. It wasn't so long ago that we were being told that the high cost of office accommodation was encouraging more employers to allow more people to work at home and attend meetings via Skype to reduce office occupancy. And what of the idea that remote working is a 'greener' alternative to having huge armies of commuters in CO₂-emitting transit day after day? Or the idea of 'staggering' start and finish times to smooth out the congestion of the rush 'hour' and allow people more time 'sovereignty'? If only a small proportion of the breathy journalistic commentary and the transformative impact of mobile technology on work comes true we can be assured that the way we conduct business, work in teams and conduct our lives outside work will continue to change unrecognisably.

Perhaps part of the answer lies in the fact that the prevailing culture of most modern workplaces is still not ready to trust people to work remotely and out of sight. Maybe we still value 'inputs' more than 'outputs' or that many managers can't cope well with the idea of managing people they don't see every day, or that remote working is regarded as no more than an indulgence for those 'knowledge workers' (unlike their support worker colleagues) whose work is not location-dependent. In what may be a sign of the times, in 2013 the CEO of technology company Yahoo!, Marissa Mayer, made headlines by discouraging homeworking in her workforce to improve collaboration and because '*speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home*'.

Ubiquity & Pervasiveness

The data on the ubiquity of mobile technology does, of course, show that the only choice left is not whether we adopt it but how (and to what ends) we harness it. Here are some examples of the picture in the UK:

- A 2015 survey found that 80% of UK adults have either fixed or mobile broadband and 86% of adults (and over 96% of 16-44 year olds) now go online using any type of device in any location;
- By the end of 2016 it is expected that the number of mobile broadband users will exceed the number of PC broadband users;
- It is estimated that 73% of 'millennials' expect to be able to modify & customize their work device and that a third of them would choose social media freedom over a higher salary;
- Over 60% of workers report that their employer has no 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) policy, however;
- Over 80% of workers who do not currently have the option to work remotely would do so if they were given the opportunity;
- Those who do work remotely are tending to work longer hours, with 45% of mobile workers reporting an increase in their working time. Recent research has shown that individuals who work 55 hours or more per week have a 33% increased risk of stroke

compared to those who work between 35-40 hours and a 13% increased risk of coronary heart disease.

Managers are one group of employees who seemed to have embraced mobile technology. In a recent survey (Garner et al, 2016), management-level employees were asked to report their responses to mobile working. The results appear in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1



Source: Garner, Forbes & Sheldon, 2016

Here, 54% reported that they got more work done, 46% reported that their work-life balance had improved and 41% said they felt empowered. However, only 49% felt trusted, 45% said they worked longer hours and only 37% reported that it had reduced their travel time.

Technology, Liberty & Surveillance

So the results are mixed, and the extent to which mobile technology is a force for freedom or increased work intensity goes on. However, even with a substantial body of research (van Mierlo et al, 2006) which shows that giving employees more autonomy and control leads to productivity growth, the UK trend in the last decade has been moving in the opposite direction. Duncan Gallie and his colleagues (Gallie, 2004) find strong evidence of declining ‘task discretion’ and a significant reduction in autonomy. Michael White, Stephen Hill and colleagues (White et al, 2006) suggest that while employees may have more freedom to decide how they deliver their targets, employers now operate more rigorous regimes of accountability through sophisticated performance management systems and extensive surveillance. Both studies show that some workers have less control in their jobs than was the case a decade ago.

The use of information technology in the workplace is one of the most important areas where autonomy been eroded. Some workers express concern that technology is used as a performance

tool which undermines trust. In the UK, service engineers in both BT and British Gas, for example, have been concerned that tracking devices in their vehicles allow their movements to be continuously monitored, and the amount of time they take to travel to and complete customer visits to be measured. As one BT employee says:

“Our cabs are fitted with a 'tracker' device. It's a spy in the cab to see where we are, when we're on the move, and when we're not. They won't trust us to get on and do a job we've done well for years.”

In sharp contrast, there are examples where employees have been spectacularly liberated through the introduction of new technology. The Work Foundation tracked hundreds of workers at Microsoft in the UK as they were first given access to Smart Phones and to broadband at home. Aside from their general – and not unexpected – excitement about getting access to new ‘kit’, and the impact it had on their ability to check e-mails on the move and work more flexibly, about half of those involved reported that their work productivity had increased by between 50 and 100 per cent. Many also reported that access to this technology enhanced their perception of Microsoft as a ‘cool’ place to work.

So new technology pulls in two directions; sometimes constraining and reducing autonomy, sometimes empowering and creative. The key for employers is to consider what the impact is likely to be for employees in practice. And, again, where there exists already a climate of distrust or cynicism, it is reasonable to assume that the technology will be received with distrust by the workforce. Research examining how ICT is introduced and used in all too frequently finds that, in some organisations there is typically very little consultation with staff. Yet, going back to the example of the tracking devices in vans, when there is a dialogue about the commercial rationale of a new system – such as, the need for full utilisation of the fleet, speedier customer service and competitive advantage – it is possible to introduce the new technologies into the organisation much more smoothly.

It is worth thinking about the number of increasingly lengthy, costly and stressful commuter journeys which might be avoided in the future if we could get our cultural and technological ‘act’ together and to trust people to do a good job even if we can’t scrutinise their every move. But it could be that, like so many others who have pondered this question, I’m being naively unrealistic. Perhaps work is a place after all.

References

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