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Put down that phone! Smart use of Smartphones for Work and Beyond

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Put Down That Phone!
Smart Use of Smartphones for Work and Beyond

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Editor's Introduction

I spent a lifetime in Bologna one spring 5 years ago, an absolutely marvelous city in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. My gracious host was Gabriele Morandin, a man of infinite goodwill, who led me around by the nose to show me Bologna's many delights. In this ancient city is an ancient university, the oldest in Europe, which, perhaps ironically, is among the most technically advanced in the new world. As you might know, Italians are among the most socially connected people on the planet, so you would not be surprised to learn that they were among the first to embrace cell phones and their successors, smartphones, because these devices so enhanced social connectivity. Yet the Italian character harbors an interesting paradox—an exuberant joy for life, combined with a certain cynicism about living that life. Therefore, you should also not be surprised to learn that Italians simultaneously celebrate the benefits of smartphones, while being suspicious about their dark sides—dark sides that hold an unfortunate potential for undermining their cherished social life. In the following provocative essay, Gabriele Morandin, Marcello Russo, and Ariane Ollier-Malaterre (two Italians and a woman who understands Italians) note the benefits of smartphones, but focus on the less obvious downsides of our burgeoning overdependence on these seductive devices.

Denny Gioia, Provocations and Provocateurs Editor

Put Down That Phone! Smart Use of Smartphones for Work and Beyond

Abstract

Although we use our smartphone for many important daily activities, over-reliance on them can have some unintended and unfortunate consequences. Unlike the devices used by prior generations, smartphones are more than mere inanimate objects, but instead have become personally involved “subjects.” All of us – including individuals, organizations, families, and even societies – need to become more aware of the risks associated with such powerful communication devices. We acknowledge the myriad benefits and promises of smartphones, but also highlight their downsides. We identify a series of initiatives that could foster a greater awareness on the costs and benefits of such devices for the sake of employees, their employers and many stakeholders outside of work.

Keywords

Smartphone effects, connectivity, awareness, control, sustainability

Put Down That Phone! Smart Use of Smartphones for Work and Beyond

“Intelligence everywhere” was the main claim made by Motorola when it launched its first phones in the 1980s. This claim suggested that these new technologies would change our lives, bringing intelligence into places, and especially into activities, where it had never been before. About ten years later, Nokia’s slogan, “Connecting People,” illustrated the main benefits of mobile phones, which could enable all of us to be more connected and thereby feel closer to each other anywhere in the world. Far from being just a simple corporate commercial, this claim was, for many of us, a new and desirable future for all humanity.

So, where are we now? Did mobile technologies fulfill their initial promises and make our workplaces, families and societies more intelligent and connected? Did they help corporations and their stakeholders move toward a more intelligent and sustainable way of functioning? Answers to these simple questions are not simple, but they are crucial for the sake of future generations and for our own well-being.

To some extent, the future dreamed by telecommunications corporations is now a reality, as we live in an era in which we no longer have spatial or temporal barriers that limit our egos, creativity, or relationships. We can now live in one country and work in another, running our businesses from the couch, developing business ideas with people we have met online, cultivating daily relationships with friends and relatives in different locales, working by day and taking an online degree to pursue our dream career by night, etc. People at work are thus more connected and can easily collaborate with friends in different locations. For example, engineers from the Italian race car manufacturer Dallara work on the development and testing of components for their IndyCar Series vehicles in Parma, Italy, helping their colleagues in Indianapolis, USA, to assemble the whole chassis the night before a race. Information at work has become much more intelligent and

accessible. Companies' financial performance that had usually been communicated through endless complicated reports can be now communicated with tweets or short messages, as demonstrated by Vittorio Colao, Vodafone's CEO who communicates the quarterly results of the company and highlights its strategic initiatives to 200 executive managers just before the opening of the stock exchange using a self-recorded WhatsApp message. Smartphone technologies, therefore, have many wondrous benefits.

But... there is a dark side

It is apparent that we now have the power in our hands to live dream lives, fulfilling our goals and staying connected to our loved ones. All these things are good things. But are we really living such dream lives? Are we really using mobile communication technologies to boost our work performances, enrich our lives, and feel happier? Of some significant concern, we are rapidly discovering that mobile phones can be addictive (Ong, *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2018). They have a dark side that can inhabit and inhibit, rather than enable and empower our ideal lives – something unsaid and probably unconsidered in the 1980s. Many observers now argue that because they are ubiquitous and often in more-or-less continuous use, mobile communication technologies can result in a state of “constant connectivity” that actually diminishes individual performance and effectiveness. For example, while being able to respond to work messages at any time can be good for one's career, as it signals full commitment to work, communication technologies tend to intensify work, creating distractions and making people at work even “less connected” – a new manifestation of the “loneliness-in-the-crowd” phenomenon. The mere presence of one's muted smartphone on the desk can impair cognitive functioning and cause impolite behaviors that endanger social interactions, such as neurotically picking up the devices when there is no real need to do so, constantly focusing on the phone screen, and suddenly interrupting communication just to rummage on the phone.

Indeed, it is no longer rare to observe people before business meetings not talking to each other at all or, even worse, participating in meetings, lectures, boards, and other social gatherings only physically, as they are mentally connected to what occurs on their phone screens.

Long ago, Durkheim (1893/1984) warned about the adverse consequences of the division of labor on workers' social interactions, arguing that "the individual, bent low over his task, will isolate himself in his own special activity. He will no longer be aware of the collaborators who work at his side on the same task; he has even no longer any idea at all of what that common task consists" (1984: 294). Similar consequences occur in the presence of indiscriminate and excessive use of modern communication technologies, because individuals are bent over their smartphones, isolated and less aware of who is working at their side, no longer feeling a part of a common opera. Smartphones can generate an "*autonomy paradox*" (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013), whereby people, believing that the use of mobile devices enhances their freedom, actually escalate forms of compulsory engagement that unduly limit their autonomy and force them to be constantly present.

This scenario even extends to the family domain. Although we have been promised that smartphones could help us experience greater work-life balance, as we could handle work-related issues while being at our child's soccer game, dance or play, research indicates that mobile phones represent a looming threat to the development of high-quality relationships in the family, diminishing rather than enhancing people's participation and engagement in family activities. Checking the phone for incoming emails on the couch, in the bathroom (a book has even been published explaining how to make more money by using one's smartphone while sitting on the toilet), or even in the bed before sleeping, has become a must for many of us. Only hard-core *segmenters* (i.e., those who prefer to keep their work and home domains separate) seem to be able to

resist this impulse and keep the phone out of sight and out of sound during evening hours spent with the family. In support of such compulsive connectivity, a recent study by McDaniel and Coyne (2016) found that 75% of women felt that the biggest challenge in their marriages was remaining or becoming more interesting to their partners than their partner's smartphones. Think about that.

The risks of excessive use of communication technologies are even evident (and worrying) among teenagers. According to numerous studies conducted by psychologist Jean Twenge, teenagers are developing the tendency to spend long hours at home, alone, just playing with their smartphones, without feeling any need to go out and engage in social relationships. They are experiencing less dating, less sex and fewer social gatherings than teenagers at the same age of the prior generations. Moreover, they tend to use their smartphones late at night, which may lead to serious sleep deprivation. Although this is arguably more of a sociological than organizational problem, we note with some alarm that these teenagers will enter the workforce in less than ten years with potentially detrimental consequences for their social skills, capacity to focus on work for extended periods, as well as their pro-social workplace behaviors. These findings are just the tip of the iceberg for a variety of adverse consequences generated by this new form of "intelligence." Few doubt that mobile technologies made our lives easier, gave us greater access to entertainment, and brought valuable advances to our societies, but there are also some nasty costs associated with "constant connectivity."

Is this trend really new?

We have heard people minimizing the downsides of smartphone use by arguing that nothing has really changed in the world. Today we have smartphones that capture our attention and cause us to adopt antisocial behaviors such as not talking at all with the person sitting next to us on a bus, but earlier we had newspapers, books and/or portable audio cassette players and boom boxes that

generated similar behaviors. Undoubtedly, smartphones have replaced newspapers in terms of entertainment possibilities and information gathering capacities, but media-as-enemy-of-social-interaction is not a new notion. The image shown in Figure 1, representing people circa 1975 commuting on a typical workday, absorbed in their newspapers with no social interaction, affirms this observation.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

It is true that newspapers, books and audio players *have* contributed to isolating people from their surroundings and other people. There are, however at least two main differences between modern communication technologies and older entertainment and information media that make mobile phones more worrisome. First, newspapers were mainly used to share information and were usually read at the start or end of the day. Today, smartphones are used for an infinite number of activities and are accessed many times a day. If we compare time spent on media, in 2017 Americans over 18 were likely to spend on average of 5 hours and 50 minutes per day on their smartphones, whereas printed media (newspapers, magazine, etc.) accounted only for 25 minutes. That's a huge difference with huge consequences.

Second, smartphones are not simply inanimate “objects” under our control, as newspapers, books or portable players are. Instead, they are equipped with artificial intelligence and “are productive of social practices” (Wajcman & Rose, 2011, p. 943). They send notifications, learn our daily habits, interact with us on the basis of our location and preferences, and even engage with us at a biometric level. Smartphones represent machine learnings that mean they are becoming “subjects,” in that they are establishing interactive behaviors with their owners and the environment. Such technological advances raise the question, “who controls whom?”; that is, are humans controlling technologies or are technologies (like smartphones) controlling us? Addiction comes in many forms.

Smartphone addiction in effect turns control over to a machine in a way that undermines our ground assumption that human agency should always prevail, even in an age of intelligent machines – which is why major investors are now asking Apple to develop software to inhibit the development of smartphone addiction in young users (Benoit, *Wall Street Journal*, Jan 7, 2018).

Put that phone down!

As with every invention, after an initial surge of enthusiasm, during which the benefits of the invention are exalted, awareness of the unintended consequences of the invention begin to emerge. Recent academic work (e.g., Powers, 2010; Russo, Bergami, & Morandin, 2018) and popular press articles (Miller, 2013; Ong, 2018), indicate the rise of a sort of global movement promoting a more conscious and regulated use of mobile communication technologies. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management recently published an article inviting its affiliates to consider “technology-free days” in their companies to boost productivity (Wright, 2017). A similar initiative was launched online on LinkedIn in 2013 by Naomi Simson who invited all her followers to engage in a 21-day challenge of not using one’s mobile phone in the presence of others, as a sign of respect (her post received 168,864 views, 2,928 likes and 975 comments within a few months). Another initiative, this time involving students, has been organized in Italy and France with business school students who were asked to spend 24 hours without any communication technology and then to write a report documenting their feelings and what they learned (Russo et al., 2018).

These initiatives all have something in common: they are based on the assumption that people are not passive users of mobile communication technologies, but instead are active agents (Wajcam & Rose, 2011). When needed, they can engage in intentional acts of disconnection from technology (Kolb, Caza, & Collins, 2012) to recreate the boundaries between their professional and personal identities on social media (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013) with the ultimate goal

of crafting a technological life that corresponds more closely to their preferences, goals and needs. To this end, Powers (2010, p. 4) suggests the importance of establishing a personal digital philosophy consisting of “a way of thinking that takes into account the human need to connect outward, to answer the call of the crowd, as well as the opposite need for time and space apart.”

Organizations would benefit from developing their own digital philosophies. Such a philosophy could start by asking where and when technology is most appropriate and when it might instead isolate employees at a time that would be desirable for their brains (and maybe their hearts, so to speak) to be more deeply connected. Business firms and the upcoming generation of workers – the so-called Millennials, who are digital natives – could benefit from considering how to approach communication technologies in a way that can both enhance the benefits of intelligent technologies and minimize the costs associated with their uncontrolled use. Given the pervasiveness of digital devices in contemporary society, and given that business leaders are often the primary expressors of an organizational culture, it is imperative that companies and their leaders set a good example that favors a more conscientious use of mobile technologies at, and even away from work.

Organizing meetings to share personal best practices related to more socially beneficial uses of modern technologies could be of particular usefulness. Opening a frank dialogue with newcomers about the company’s expectations regarding connectivity practices at work – and even during non-working hours – can also be important in reducing ambivalence, aligning expectations, and promoting the welfare of all the visible and invisible stakeholders of organizations. This kind of attention creates a culture that encourages face-to-face communication and respectful interactions that go beyond modern media capabilities. This could also be the first step in implementing a company’s digital philosophy, which would cover topics such as digital etiquette, connectivity

behaviors and responsiveness expectations regarding work-related messages during non-working hours.

Finally, companies might want to invite their members to articulate their positive narratives concerning technology use, similar to what has been documented in prior research on professional identity, because writing one's positive narrative can help promote greater self-awareness, encourage positive changes and share best practices with colleagues. Spending a day (or just few hours) without using the phone, as done by students in Russo et al.'s (2018) experiment, could lead to a small epiphany, a turning point in life that can foster a behavioral change, help people recognize the relevance of the issue in their lives, and modify their daily habits. This process of reflecting on, and especially writing out one's personal approach toward modern technology can help develop the capacity to bring out the best in oneself and enable others to behave in a consistent, respectful way.

Conclusion

We challenge everyone to put down their phones for a while, even if only for a few hours per day. Doing so could be a helpful learning exercise through which we can discover much about our work and non-work habits and behaviors, some of which we may be unaware. Many students who completed the challenge of spending one day without technology discovered that they were addicted, even if they believed they were not before starting the challenge. It is important to realize that fostering a novel approach to using mobile technologies would also require greater attention and respect toward employees' time. For example, if managers want people to stop using their smartphones during business meetings and be more focused, they should also be sure that such meetings have interesting content and relevant information. Otherwise, using a smartphone to complete more interesting tasks or read more interesting information will continue to be a legitimate and socially accepted behavior on such occasions.

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Figure 1.

Business people immersed in their newspaper on a train

