Disrupter Turned Destroyer: How Mobility is Killing Corporate Productivity

By Patti Putnicki, Business Writer

Please silence your smartphone and give this article your full attention. For most people these days, that's easier said than done.

Although the proliferation of mobility has untethered global employees from their desks, provided anytime access to the information they need to do their jobs, and given workforces newfound agility, there is a dark side. When overused and abused, mobility and connectivity tools can transform an organization of brilliant individuals into a mass of whirling dervishes who are unproductive, uninventive and beyond burned out.

"In many cases, the tool becomes the task. Technology grows so big that it becomes an entity unto itself, not an enabler that enhances what you're already doing well," explained Evan Hanover, director of research for Conifer Research. "That's when things start breaking down."

Think back before phones were all that smart. Time management gurus (remember them?) instructed us to set aside an hour a day to respond to emails and spend the rest of our time focused on the tasks at hand. No problem.

Then came texts for short messages and IMs for quick conversations that required immediacy. So, we had different communication vehicles for different types of requests and levels of urgency. Even better.

It all worked pretty well for a while until everyone got smartphones. Then, somehow, some way, every need became immediate and every correspondence became urgent.

As time went on, we all got so used to the pings and dings that smartphones (and the multitude of messages on them) became our master. It was like driving by a car wreck. No matter how hard we tried to ignore it, we had to look—again and again and again.

Michael Marzullo, portfolio offering manager for HP's Worldwide Applications Management Services, remembers the day when he first noticed the potential impact of mobility gone wrong.

"Back when the BlackBerry® was the device-of-choice, I was calling on a good client, making a presentation that he actually requested. But, something was different. I couldn't get his full attention; and he couldn't fully grasp the information I was trying to convey," Marzullo said. "Although we were face-to-face, he couldn't keep his eyes off of what was coming through on that device."

Now, fast forward to today. We're not only bringing our devices to work but to bed at night—out of fear, out of habit or because we simply need our fix. We think we have it under control. In fact, we think we're getting a whole lot more done.

In most cases, that's as big of a lie as, "I can quit any time that I want to."

The Adrenaline Rush of Connectivity—The Corporate Drug of Choice

The root cause of this disturbing behavior varies from company to company, and department to department. In some cases, it starts at the top, with a boss known for sending urgent emails at 1 a.m., berating any employee who doesn't respond on the spot.

It's important to note that we're not talking about urgent emails or texts for things like critical systems going down, floods, fires or threat of lawsuit. It's the midnight, "We need a white paper," or "We need to be doing this," that's wearing everybody down.

Now, in many or most cases, these department heads are burning the midnight oil because it is when they work best, when they have the most time to think. Mobility tools provide that option.

The problem (and subsequent burn out) comes when there is a real or perceived expectation of an immediate response.

"I thought text messaging was the greatest invention in the world when it came out. It was perfect—you don't pick up the phone, you don't disturb someone in a meeting; you send a quick text, ask for what you need and get a quick reply. Easy," explained Scott Schlesinger, senior vice president and head of Business Information Management for Capgemini. "Now, when I'm reviewing a contract or doing a performance review or anything else that requires my full attention, my phone is going crazy with text messages. Without saying a word, I set an expectation of immediate response, and in turn, my colleagues expect the same."

All of a sudden, that innate human filtering device that distinguishes between what is urgent and what is not goes flying out the window.

"If someone doesn't respond to us immediately, we create the sense that they artificially let us down," Schlesinger said. "It's artificial because the expectations are not realistic when you're dealing with human beings. Yet, we want an answer and we want an answer now. We're used to a world where we get information in real time, all the time. The thing is, human beings don't work that way."

Without question, the resulting work-life imbalance has the potential to burn out the most committed employees. But, what most leaders don't see is the way this mode of operation can derail a successful business.

The Perils of Working in the Reactionary Mode

"If people spend the entire day flipping the phone over, responding to emails and texts, they cannot focus their brainpower on a single train of thought, much less a complex project," Marzullo of HP said. "As a result, entire companies begin operating in 'reactive mode,' which means they can never fully execute to plan."

While no one is arguing that agility is critical, any company operating on knee-jerk reactions is sure to kick itself in the proverbial butt.

"Business is about priorities and planning and executing strategy," Marzullo said. "Yes, you have to be flexible, but you have to execute based on a well-thought-out plan. You have to look at cause and effect. If you add a new product or need a white paper, what's the impact? Where does it fit in the priority list? Most important, how does it fit in the overall strategic plan?"

Of course, you can always have a virtual meeting to discuss.

The Scourge of the Centralized Digital Scheduling

For many, transparent centralized scheduling seems like a dream come true. But, by opening the kimono on individual work schedules, we've also created a new, dangerous corporate paradigm.

"A booked schedule has become the new corporate measure of productivity. Having full employee calendars should not be mistaken for a hard-working, effective team," Hanover of Conifer Research said. "The fact is, if your calendar is always full, you have very little time to focus your thoughts, to concentrate without interruption and to come up with ideas. When it spirals out of control, the misuse of centralized scheduling becomes a huge barrier to innovation."

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The problem is rampant and often unrecognized as a problem.

"We worked with a company where some employees had 120 percent booked calendars. So, they were spending 120 percent of their time attending meetings to talk about things. That left negative-20 percent of time for them to do things," Hanover said. "Nature abhors a vacuum and so do corporations."

The same critiques of modern-day parenting, in which the kids are so overbook that they have to schedule time for play, can be applied to many organizations worldwide.

"Rigidly scheduled innovation is as counterintuitive as children only playing on playdates," Hanover said. "Play should be free and spontaneous; innovation works the same way. Creating habits is great, but over-control it and you won't get the results you want, even from the brightest people."

Don't Turn the Tools Off—Just Put Them in Their Place

So, what's a company to do? Well, that depends.

Volkswagen recently made headlines for turning off access to company email after employees finish their shifts, with a handful of other corporations following suit.

For most, this isn't really practical.

"Solving the misuse of the mobile problem takes a combination of corporate policy and individual discussion. People have to understand expectations and set boundaries," Schlesinger of Capgemini said. "It's like analyzing data. Analyzing more is not going to get you better outcomes. Analyzing the right data is going to get you the best results. Spend time determining how your company can use the mobility tools it has to get the best results, not how to increase the use of these tools."

HP has a policy that promotes a balanced workplace, in which both salaried and unsalaried employees keep up with the actual number of hours they work.

"If you are paid to think, inspiration can hit at any time of the day or night. You can't really regulate that," Marzullo of HP said. "So, we track that time—those bursts of creativity in the middle of the night, those email responses after hours—it's all logged. If that time exceeds a certain threshold, your manager helps you get your life back by reviewing your workload or helping you access the resources you need for a better work-life balance. The goal is to keep good employees from being 'always on,' and eventually burning out."

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Most importantly, remember that a system is not just technology, but a combination of technology and people.

"Companies implement these tools and expect all of these wonderful things to magically happen. So, the tools get elevated above the people who have made the company work so well up to that point," Hanover of Conifer Research explained. "Instead of mandating how people work with new technology, go on the ground and truly understand how the business operates; the informal things that people do, day-to-day, that makes the company work. Then, identify how technology can support these things."

While the vision for technology comes from the top down, the best way to use this technology has to come from the bottom up.

"People are adaptable when they have the choice of how to use technology and make it their own," Hanover said. "If you give them that opportunity, they'll find a way to make the technology work best for them. After all, hashtags weren't invented by Twitter, but by a Twitter user as a means to reach communities of people with common interests."

The best advice? Don't mandate how and when people use the mobility tools. Instead, let them figure out how to use mobility to increase their own productivity. And recognize that may mean not using it when it makes more sense to walk down the hall and ask someone a question.

A face-to-face meeting. What a radical idea.

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