To Have and to Hold: A study of the impact of BlackBerrys on the nature of work

Kristine Dery

Universty of Sydney

Judith MacCormick

University of New South Wales

BlackBerrys and other similar devices engender emotive responses. Responses run the gamut from glowing testimonials to outright anger at the intrusiveness of BlackBerry use. For users, acceptance of these devices enabling anytime, anywhere internet, intranet, email and phone connectivity has led to expectations of immediate response from customers, work colleagues and others. Additional functionality making it possible to forward voicemail to email, send faxes to mobile devices as well as manage calendars, address books and connect to the internet, makes the BlackBerry a truly mobile office. While this enables new temporal and spatial flexibility, such freedoms also come with pressure. Often referred to by users as a Faustian pact, the increased mobility is matched with an escalating flow of information and communication that is able to be sent and accessed 24/7. Jarvenpaa and Lang's (2005) extensive cross national study of experiences of mobile technology users identified conflicts such as these as a series of paradoxes shaping user experience and behavior. What is missing is an understanding of the contextual factors that support, or otherwise impact, BlackBerry use leading to these conflicts if we are to garner the benefits of the technology without laying victim to detrimental secondary effects.

While this acceleration of business activity has engendered a range of individual responses, more recently we have there has been evidence of a collective voice with unions calling for compensation for the increase in after-hours worked (Roth, 2008). The Public Service Alliance of Canada (2008) has called for updates in their collective agreement to compensate workers for the increased expectations that they will be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week as a result of the allocation of BlackBerrys in the public service (Globe and Mail, 2008). However, critics have warned that formalising the extended hours though compensation may further encourage the erosion of the boundaries between work and family life. While the perspectives may be divided the one thing that remains clear is that Blackberry use is extending the working day with increasing amounts of work being done outside of working hours. Fenner and Renn (2004) refer to this as technology assisted supplemental work (TASW) suggesting the organisations support the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work by providing the technological tools to facilitate the extended working day. With 14 million Blackberry users and an estimated additional 2.2 million by the end of this year[1] we

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[1] As estimated by Research in Motion (RIM) in 2008

clearly need to understand more about the use and impacts of Blackberry on the nature of work.

As the Economist (April 10, 2008) noted in an article entitled "Our nomadic future", *"A century ago, some people saw the car merely as a faster horse, yet it led to entirely new cities, with suburbs and sprawl, to new retail cultures (megastores, drive-throughs), new dependencies (oil) and new health threats (sloth, obesity). By the same token, wireless technology is surely not just an easier-to-use phone. The car divided cities into work and home areas; wireless technology may mix them up again, with more people working in suburbs or living in city centres. Traffic patterns are beginning to change again: the rush hours at 9am and 5pm are giving way to more varied "daisy-chain" patterns, throughout the day. Already, architects are redesigning offices and universities: more flexible spaces for meeting people, few private enclosures for sedentary work."* These new devices are thus fundamentally changing the way we work by enabling greater mobility and a blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work both spatially and temporally. Thus it is important for us to understand the parameters of use to optimize outcomes for both individuals and organizations.

In this study we analyse and measure how BlackBerry use may be accelerating some fundamental changes in the way work is defined, executed and supported. We explore this phenomenon by extending the job demand/control framework originally developed by Karasek (1979), and extended by Johnson and Hall (1988). In particular, we intend to explore the interactions amongst job control, job demand and support for BlackBerry use from both the work and non-work spheres as a way of unravelling the paradoxes underlying use of this technology.

Results from a survey distributed to BlackBerry users in three major Australian firms together with qualitative interviews suggests that rather than being a technologically deterministic argument that holds the Blackberry responsible for longer working hours, there are many factors that determine the use of the technology and the blurring of boundaries between work and non-work spaces. These findings have significant implications for the management of BlackBerrys in the organisation and also for the development of further theoretical insights that further enhance the Karasek/Johnson and Hall control, demand and support framework.

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