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Work and technology

I like to think of myself as a supporter of technologies that are aimed at improving the way we work. It explains why I found myself addressing a seminar in London last week on technology and its influence on the workplace.

But the more I listened to other speakers at the event, organised by CriticalEYE, a membership organisation that specialises in disseminating ideas in business, the more worried I became about the implications of a widespread use of portable communications such as mobile phones, wireless headsets and e-mail messaging systems. The more this technology progresses, the fewer excuses we shall have for being beyond the reach of our colleagues.

Philip Ross, chief executive of the Cordless Group, a consultancy that specialises in technology and the workplace, was extolling the productivity benefits of wireless headsets which, he says, are creating the "nomadic office", enabling people to work anywhere.

We are fast approaching the day, he said, when all our incoming messages, whether they are e-mails, voicemail or faxes, will be delivered to a single "in box", described as a "unified messaging platform", that can be accessed from anywhere in the world.

While some may enthuse about this kind of unifying technology, there is less to celebrate in the development of so-called "corporate presence" systems. These will allow your colleagues or your boss to detect whether you are logged in to the corporate network, whether at home, in the office or on the move.

"Whereas with e-mail, people can ignore a message for a few hours, in this world of corporate presence and instant messaging you can never switch off. This has huge implications for work-life balance, privacy and stress," said Mr Ross.

The "corporate presence" philosophy is not so very different from telephone paging systems that are commonly used to keep track of employees who are out of the office.

The difference is that employees who become accustomed to wearing wireless headsets could find their privacy invaded at all hours of the day and night with less scope for ignoring the message. Talking recently with a group of senior executives working in the UK for US-based multinational companies, I found one of their biggest complaints was about the way that their US head offices were routinely calling them late at night or in the early hours to attend conference call meetings. These new technologies have yet to breed a sense of management responsibility.

At least the wireless headset allows you to do other things while attending to such a call.

"I managed to go into my home, get changed and leave again while I was involved in one conference call the other day," said Neil Salton, senior marketing manager for Europe, the Middle East and Asia, at Plantronics, the communications headset business that sponsored last week's seminar. "You can be doing these things and no-one is any the wiser," he said.

Not long ago such technologies were almost the exclusive preserve of television presenters with discreetly-fitted earpieces allowing them to take studio instructions from their producers. Now their use is spreading across the broader business community. Plantronics research points to a productivity increase of 21 per cent among employees using headsets in the information sector.

Many call-centre workers, however, would view the wired headset as an electronic chain that ties them to their desks. In the same way, maybe we should view the wireless headset as an invisible chain.

Most companies, I am sure, will welcome the opportunity to reconnect with their increasingly mobile executives. According to Mr Ross, executives are becoming so remote from their desks these days that just over 70 per cent of all inbound telephone calls fail to reach the people they are seeking. The only reason I find that statistic worrying is that it means nearly 30 per cent of calls are getting through.

My biggest challenge is to find enough time away from the telephone to get on with things. Unfortunately, my cordless telephone does not have a "silent" switch so I have taken to muffling it when I want to ignore my calls. Otherwise it is difficult to resist a Pavlovian reaction to answer the phone.

It is probably a heresy in the information business to question the growth of communications technology, but businesses appeared to function well enough before the advent of e-mails and voicemail. Some companies such as Nestle and Camelot, the UK National Lottery operator, have experimented with e-mail-free Fridays and John Caudwell, the founder of Phones 4U, the mobile phone retailer, has banned e-mails among his staff.

Mr Caudwell, who has described e-mails as the "cancer of modern business", claimed an "instant, dramatic and positive effect" after restricting their use earlier this year. Before the ban, people had been reluctant to pull themselves away from their computer screens. After its introduction, he said, there was an immediate improvement in the quality and efficiency of communications.

There is a tendency to welcome every advance in technology as an improvement but I worry that too many communications technologies are adopted simply because they are new and exciting, without sufficient consideration of their social impact.

Why bother having people attending your meeting, for example, if all they are doing is working their way silently through their e-mails on the portable device that is nestled in their laps?

While almost every new gizmo is greeted with interest, we tend to take for granted older but durable technologies. Not for the first time, Mr Ross was predicting the "slow death of paper". I cannot see this happening, for the simple reason that paper is so versatile. It is as much a technology as the video screen. Had paper been invented yesterday, we would be hailing it as a cheap, efficient and disposable medium instead of an obsolete one.

In the same way, there is a tendency to ignore the writing speeds attainable with mastery of the QWERTY keyboard. Why do schools not teach typing skills? An intensive typing course could instil the layout of the keyboard in days. Some believe tablet computers will re-introduce an emphasis on handwriting. But can we not make room in our working lives for both handwriting and typing?

The perennial issue for employers surrounding skills such as typing and shorthand is that their acquisition involves some training investment. An electronic aid is cheap by comparison.

There can be little doubt that technology is changing the way we work. But there may be a case for questioning whether such change is always for the better.

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