

UBIQUITOUS EMAIL: INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF BLACKBERRY USE

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ABSTRACT

This study outlines the experiences and ramifications of the use of wireless email devices within a small private equity firm. We find that the opportunity to frequently monitor and respond to email enables a sense of control over the pace and substance of information flow while the specific properties of wireless email devices provide an opportunity to control potential interruptions. This encourages a compulsive checking of email and an inability to disengage from work that is common to all users but framed as a matter of individual choice. Emerging norms reveal implicit expectations of availability and responsiveness that are in direct contrast to espoused firm values. Thus, members of an entire firm carrying a device that facilitates ‘unobtrusive’ access to email may unwittingly generate shared patterns of use that encourage a self-reinforcing cycle of constant communication.

INTRODUCTION

“It’s on all the time and you’re totally mobile with it. It’s personal and it’s professional. It’s a communication tool of total flexibility.” – Gary, Partner, Plymouth Investments

Announcing three million BlackBerry users in March, 2005, Research in Motion (RIM) currently enjoys the largest market share of wireless email devices. News stories quote CEOs and industry leaders praising their BlackBerries, while journalists describe ‘crackberry’ addiction as a cultural phenomenon among professionals. Such tools reflect a push toward an increasingly information rich environment anticipated by numerous social theorists (Castells, 1996; Hassan, 2003). While such meta-level conjecture about the ‘information age’ sheds light on the evolving relationship between technology, society and economy, it does not illuminate how individuals experience the possibilities and challenges of new communication technologies and create shared understandings regarding use.

This research investigates the conditions that shape assumptions about BlackBerry use and email connectivity and the unintended consequences arising from these expectations. After examining individual experiences of use, we show how individual actions within a social context interact to generate a continuous cycle of availability. This study highlights how such a cycle can create a dynamic that belies individual intentions and espoused organizational values.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

In order to assess the relationship between individual experience and shared understandings of a device, this study focuses on the experience of users within one organization which has achieved a temporary stability concerning BlackBerry use. The organization enjoys full adoption of the device by all but a few administrative assistants and operates within an industry where such devices are prevalent. Moreover, it is small enough to allow us to study use of the technology by almost all members of an entire firm.

Plymouth Investments is a small, prestigious and personable firm in the Northeast. Operating since the mid 1980s, the firm has raised over three billion dollars in private equity and is currently investing its sixth investment fund of almost two billion dollars. Their funds repeatedly produce favorable results, consistently above the industry's top quartile. Employing 33 people at the time of this study, the firm consists of 22 investment staff, 5 senior support staff, 5 assistants, and one receptionist. Each potential deal is assigned to a 'deal team' of four to six people. Communication amongst the deal team is intense, with the Principal acting as a point-person for junior and senior colleagues. The size of the firm and continuous shuffling between teams creates a tight communication network.

The investment staff is expected to be highly mobile and flexible; schedules often include 2-4 days a week on the road. The job is demanding and autonomous; the norm for a successful firm in this elite and resource-rich industry. Generally, Plymouth is able to set the timeline of deals and is not slave to rapidly changing information. Plymouth has a strong sense of collegiality and respect, though individuals do not actively segment time and space for work and life (Nippert-Eng, 1995). Employees easily discuss work/life balance. However, firm policy and culture reveal that such 'balance' is to be achieved through integration of work and home.

As a firm of highly autonomous, mobile and "email-driven" employees, Plymouth was a prime candidate for the introduction of wireless email devices. Plymouth partners decided to provide its entire investment staff and senior support staff with BlackBerry devices in 1999, approximately four years prior to our study. While upgrading of devices is done on a case-by-case basis, there is little competition for new devices or prestige attached to owning a particular model. The understanding that each member of the investment staff is given a BlackBerry mitigates any internal symbolic status attached to the device.

Conducted during 8 months in 2004, this field study consists of 44 interviews. Phase I consists of 28 semi-structured interviews, 19 of 22 investment staff and 4 of 5 senior support staff¹ In addition, 5 of 17 spouses were interviewed. Phase II includes follow up interviews with 16 of the original interviewees (excluding spouses). These interviews involved a structured protocol to review 24 – 72 hours of BlackBerry email activity.

Using the technique of exploratory inductive analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we conducted an iterative textual analysis of interview transcripts focusing on the interplay between individual action and social context. Coding and the relationship between concepts were not preconceived; they emerged from the meanings and experiences of the informants. Our analysis identified active use of BlackBerries and strong attachment to the device. We further found that users frame BlackBerry use as an individual decision yet are influenced by shared assumptions regarding availability and responsiveness. We explore these social dynamics below.

RESULTS

A majority of users across the hierarchy emphasize that Plymouth does not explicitly require constant connectivity to email. For these users, the BlackBerry is not experienced as an electronic leash or panopticon. Pat, a Senior Associate, maintains that use of the BlackBerry is “me watching work. I don’t really feel like it’s a big brother or anything.” Users assert that they *choose* to integrate the BlackBerry into the micro-moments of everyday life. While emphasizing the importance of staying in the loop while away from the office during business hours, members’ desire for connection is not restricted to time on the road. Interview data on use patterns gathered from Phase II reveals that most members of the firm carry their BlackBerry close to their person throughout evenings and weekends and check it regularly. On average they view incoming messages less than an hour after they are received during ‘off hours.’ They report checking emails from such diverse locations as church pews, the bleachers at a basketball game, with friends at a bar, the gym, the doctor’s office and every room of their homes.

Individual opportunities afforded by BlackBerries

Interviewees describe BlackBerries as engendering two interrelated yet distinct opportunities, that when acted upon, define their use and its consequences. All users report that carrying a BlackBerry offers the *opportunity to monitor information flow* while providing the *opportunity to control the form of information delivery and receipt*. However, in acting upon these opportunities individuals also experience a *compulsion to check* incoming messages that leads to *difficulty in disengaging*.

Monitoring communication flow. Like many mobile professionals, Plymouth employees manage the demands of a job that expects them to be highly mobile while keeping track of many different deals. All users report that the ability to watch the flow of email in a manner that is fast and convenient is a quintessential benefit of carrying a wireless email device.

The project-group environment of Plymouth encourages copying numerous people on every message. This practice, along with numerous news updates and business related spam, creates a perception that email is often an exogenous stream of messages that users simply need to ‘keep an eye on.’ Being exposed to the flow of ongoing messages does not necessarily mean interacting with email. Asked whether or not it is common to respond to incoming messages, James, a Senior Associate is vehement, “No. No. I just, it’s a matter of, if it’s something that needs a response or is important, I’ll respond. But it’s more a matter of just knowing what I have in front of me that I need to handle.”

Controlling message receipt. The BlackBerry is palm-sized, silent, text-based and asynchronous. It allows users to monitor information while maintaining a sense of control over message delivery and reception. If communication involves receiving and replying to a query, then email provides a buffer of control bracketing both acts. Individuals can glance at the sender and subject line and, based upon this information, decide whether they want to proceed to reading the message. Unlike voicemail, email includes a screening mechanism that provides control over information processing.

The control over communication enabled by email is intensified by the experienced ‘seamlessness’ of wireless handheld devices. Frequently checking a BlackBerry allows individuals to infiltrate email into micro-moments of every day. As email knits deeper into life, individuals experience interruption as individually negotiated rather than coercive. Although

users may interrupt their unrelated activities to check incoming messages, the interruption is experienced as a choice under their personal control.

Because emails are pushed to the pocket-able device, BlackBerry users are confronted with an array of recurring micro-decisions. Each moment of the day (and some in darkest night) holds an opportunity for users to wonder, 'Should I check my BlackBerry?' If the answer is yes, the user can scan a list of messages with only the crucial variables of sender and subject. For each message, the next decision is whether to open and read it at this time and in this space. When the user reads a message, there is the decision whether to reply immediately, reply later, or take no action. The array of such micro-decisions, coupled with the buffer zones of asynchronicity, provide a sense of control that users in this study valued. The answer to each of their decisions is shaped by social context and their perceptions of the norms of use within their communication network.

Compulsion to check. Almost all (90%) of individuals report some degree of compulsion when describing their own behavior with the device. Such compulsion is characterized by a difficulty in refraining from checking the device at regular intervals. No user offers substantive reasons, such as time-sensitive information or symbolic motivation, to explain their actions. Most are unable to describe why they feel compelled to check this device and more than half of these compulsive users attribute their behavior to an aspect of their personality. Interviewees assert that organizational expectations do not influence their individual behavior. "I'm checking more frequently than I think I would be expected to," admits James, a Senior Associate.

Unable to disengage. Without a clear marker to signal a shift from 'work mode' to 'home mode' and thus designate the end of the day, individuals must negotiate their own time segmentation. In jobs characterized by autonomy, a tool such as the BlackBerry affords a renegotiation of time/space segmentation. When is it work-time? When is it not? Provisional answers to such questions emerge from the play between individual desires, group expectations, job demands and the properties of the new communication medium. Robert, a partner, grasps this tension: "in terms of the duration, yeah, I think it extends your being on [the job]. And there I think it's an issue."

For those whose BlackBerry use delays or inhibits disengagement from work, stress can be the result. While short term stress reduction is a theme in many interviews, nearly half of the users report some long term negative consequences associated with using a BlackBerry. It is interesting that in their descriptions of BlackBerries and stress, no interviewee mentions shared assumptions or how these might develop when everyone in their communication network uses a BlackBerry. These data suggest that when everyone knows that everyone else has a BlackBerry, a norm develops whereby all begin to stay almost continuously connected. And such a norm begins to frame opportunities for use.

Social Implications of Individual Use

Increasing expectations. Employees know that everyone at Plymouth has a BlackBerry. They tend to view email communication as 'seamless' and 'ubiquitous.' While the firm does not mandate email monitoring, the norm is for all members to check their BlackBerries frequently (therefore facilitating communication and increasing predictability). This produces an environment where monitoring messages over the weekend becomes the rule, not the exception. Even at Plymouth where there is no explicit directive to be 'on call,' many take others' use of the device for granted. Eleanor, a senior support staff member says, "One thing about Plymouth

is...I think we've all got used to answering each other instantly because of the BlackBerry, but it's not expected."

Individual action continuously re-enacts the norms that frame and guide the action. Individuals at Plymouth recognize this cyclical process as reputations for communicative responsiveness are established and maintained. Matt, a principal, feels a pressure to be available according to expectations he helped to create. "The junior guys I was working with on the deal would email me and I think they probably would find it odd if I didn't get back to them very quickly. So I think people do begin to build expectations ...of what your response time is going to be." Providing BlackBerries to a group of people within the same communication network automatically places use in a social context. And when power dynamics encourage imitation, shared assumptions evolve into coercive norms. As senior employees establish patterns of use, subordinates make choices that take those patterns into account.

The very convenience of the BlackBerry enables a negotiated understanding that email messages received on the device are unobtrusive, and thus acceptable without boundaries. Users admit that the ease of sending and receiving messages through the BlackBerry, combined with an increase in their willingness to communicate, leads to an overall intensification in email activity during off hours. As the overall volume of email messages rises, so do expectations about response. According to Jeff, a Junior Associate, "It brings responsiveness on nights and weekends to the level of responsiveness generally during work time." The perceived difficulty in disconnecting from such group communication relates directly to the common knowledge of who uses a BlackBerry.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, BlackBerry use allows for increased mobility, communication during 'down time,' and reduction of moment-to-moment stress. On the other hand, expectations of responsiveness have intensified and become taken for granted. At Plymouth, users report an unrelenting desire for information and a drive to monitor incoming messages, which they explain as a need to reduce their anxiety of being disconnected. Ironically, such stress is amplified (and possibly created) because constant connection is possible.

Emailing is a group activity; the flow of messages would continue whether or not a single user stopped monitoring her BlackBerry. While interviewees describe a compulsion to check messages, which they insist is a matter of individual choice, their statements reveal underlying expectations of one another. For most interviewees, it is only after some probing that they recognize the relationship between shared expectations, unobtrusive email, and lack of temporal/physical boundaries on messages with stress, burnout, and difficulties in changing responsiveness. Such limited reflection on a reinforcing cycle of use is both important and revealing, particularly as the ramifications are in direct tension to the espoused values of a company so openly dedicated to individual freedom, autonomy and supporting work/life balance.

Even given these apparent tensions, this population perceives the benefits of using BlackBerries as far outweighing the costs. After four years of use, the overall positive reaction to the BlackBerry is striking. A significant majority of users emphasize that they love their BlackBerries. Many do not express any disadvantages to using one. Those that do, do so ambivalently. Linda, a senior support staff member and one of the most enthusiastic users, notes, "It's a double-edged sword, but the benefits for me, at any rate, far outweigh anything that I

might every once in a while think to myself. [LAUGHTER]. Just go away, just shush and go away.”

By taking advantage of the opportunities provided by BlackBerries, employees at Plymouth find themselves in a bind. The very tool that facilitates their individual interests in autonomy and flexibility can subvert these values when micro-actions develop into shared norms. Expectations shift and days lengthen. Nevertheless, employees at Plymouth still consider themselves lucky. They perceive that life with mobile devices at a different firm could be more difficult. And they believe they are exercising individual choice. Asked about his willingness to remain perpetually connected, Gary, a partner, rationalizes his behavior as keeping up with a world that is getting faster, “Because I signed up for that. That’s part of the world we’re in. We don’t have beginnings and ends to things we do, unfortunately. But that’s been true for me for a long, long time. It’s not anything new.”

It is likely that the world Gary describes will only intensify, given the resources dedicated to developing increasingly mobile and networked technologies such as the BlackBerry. Wireless email devices represent one tool in a trend toward increasingly ubiquitous communication media. Like all technologies, such media will be used by individuals within existing social contexts. Research on how users experience and interact with new technologies provides valuable insight into the implications of communication technologies for individual and group life. This study of BlackBerry use within one small firm reveals how the properties of a communication device interact with an organizational environment to provide opportunities for use; how individuals instantiate these opportunities in practice, using the device to further individual goals; how individual actions interact to create shared expectations; and how such norms frame further opportunities in a way that continued use of the technology may run counter to individual interests and espoused group values.

This complex relationship between individual actions, shared expectations, and BlackBerry communication has yet to be explored over time. Limitations of this study include static data and a focus on self-reported experience through interviews. Though this study is exploratory and limited to a single firm, Plymouth reveals patterns that are noteworthy and instructive. Even in an organization characterized by clear values of work/life balance, where individuals across the hierarchy experience considerable autonomy, a self-reinforcing cycle of BlackBerry use emerged, frustrating firm ideals and generating individual stress. For employees at Plymouth, the positive experience of staying connected mitigates the negative consequences of BlackBerry use. This may not be case in other social contexts, and awaits further research.

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