

THE HUMAN FACTOR: PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF M-WORK

**Dr. John Gundry
Knowledge Ability Ltd
Malmesbury UK**

June 2001

Published at www.knowab.co.uk/wbwmwork.html

Author's note

This is the original text of an article published on the M-Commerce World website in February 2001. M-Commerce World focuses on the mobile telephone industry and especially the new generation of internet-enabled, wireless-messaging, devices. In this context, "m-work" means "mobile work".

Introduction

What's it going to be like working in an ever-more mobile world? This could be Heaven, or this could be Hell. Let's make some predictions. I see four key changes to work resulting from powerful anytime, anyplace communications.

- **Goodbye office**

The current move away from the traditional face to face office will speed up. The network will become the workplace, and physical proximity will continue to be less important than connectivity. Gathering employees together in one place (the office) will increasingly be seen as an overhead, especially as most of the time they won't be there. One of the consequences of this will be . . .

- **Goodbye friends**

It will be usual for us to work closely, and for long periods, with managers, reports, peers, colleagues and clients that we don't ever get to meet face to face. The opportunities for relationships in work will diminish.

- **Goodbye relaxation**

We'll be available 24x7 (or if not actually available, expected to be available, and worried when we're are not). This will be merciless. Traditional boundaries around the working day will evaporate. Whenever, wherever, work will get to us. And if work doesn't get to us, it may be getting to our rivals. The attention economy will become a day and night competitive reality.

- **Hello overload**

Fuelled by increasingly complex and numerous responsibilities, and wider scope of operations in 'leaner' organisations, we'll be confronted with an undreamt-of messaging vortex, bearing down on us every time we turn on our mobile devices.

We're on the road already

Am I a doomsayer? Well, much of this has already started, in the context of virtual, remote work. Through the last decade, organisations' response to the needs for speed, flexibility, globalisation and change is for people to work remotely, in distributed, virtual teams. Although they work someplace - indeed often in an office building - team members work at a distance from their managers, reports and colleagues. Work is fragmented, frenetic, electronic, and anonymous. It's reasonable to predict that mobile communications will accelerate this move, from someplace to anyplace.

There are customer-facing folks, and many professionals, for whom mobile communications will be a great source of effectiveness. However, I predict that anytime, anywhere, instant mobile communication will spread to people who've up to now had more 'stationary', office-based roles. A new driver for this will be fashion, as the old office will look increasingly, er, old.

Help

M-work will increase the problems we already see in virtual work - expansion of the working day, loss of relationships, and message overload. Unrestrained, this'll floor people. You think you're stressed now? Just wait. We could be entering a time when sheer mental stamina is a major factor in performance and career advancement.

Are there solutions - ways of equipping people for m-work? Yes, and the most important step is to recognise that we're human beings, not 24-hour, seven day a week, message processors. The key people to recognise this are senior management, because they create the culture that defines the working and messaging environment. If they can recognise the problem, what to do about it? People who want to survive and prosper with m-work will need help and empowerment in at least three areas.

- **Valuing relationships**

It's easy to forget the importance of relationships at work, because everything round us defines a hard landscape of goals, responsibilities, plans, and budgets. Rarely (in the West) do we legitimise the value of relationships. Yet we all know that our best work and our best times are in the company of people with whom we've got quality relationships. And relationships are not just a matter of personal comfort. Every good salesman and every good team leader knows their value. So surviving the m-world is going to be a case of giving time to relationships, and realising that face to face contact will always be vital for this very human aspect of work.

- **Taking control of time**

We all know the pattern. Too much to do means no time to take control means too much to do means no time to take control. Survival in m-work is going to depend on courage. Courage to not answer the office mobile in the evening. Courage to not 'just check voicemail' on Saturday mornings. Courage to feel good about the effort we put in and the value we provide. Courage to recognise the value of R&R. Courage not to work to a standstill. Courage to talk openly with our manager and our peers about the decisions we want to make about our working lives. If we can do this, we make it more likely we can to sustain our working life at peak performance.

- **Managing messages**

What do we do with 200 email and voicemail messages a day? And we've just picked up another hundred in the car park before our important client meeting. Is one of them relevant to what we're going say? We'll never know. That's the frightening thing - the sheer volume of messages will block communication. This is one area where we can't do much on our own (like pollution). We have to ask our departments, or organisations, to start setting a different context. To use more sophisticated tools (email and voicemail aren't the answer for everything), to move from push to pull messaging strategies, and to think hard about who needs to know what.

The smart way forward

Significant technologies always have significant effects on our working lives. Powerful mobile communications will, like the telephone, the typewriter, the computer and the Internet, change our working environment. The easy option is to deny the need to adapt, or believe one can tough it out. The smart way forward is to recognise the need to balance the capabilities of the technology and the operating characteristics of human beings. Then m-work can enrich our lives while making us more effective performers in an ever more competitive marketplace.

Please cite this paper as:

Gundry, John, "The Human Factor: Psychological Implications of M-Work". Article from Knowledge Ability Ltd, Malmesbury UK. Published at www.knowab.co.uk/wbwmwork.html. June 2001.

Comments on this paper are invited. Please contact the author.

About the author

Dr John Gundry is Director of Knowledge Ability Ltd, a UK-based company that provides education and consulting services on virtual teaming and remote working. Co-ordinates are email: gundry@knowab.co.uk phone: +44 1666 826654. See more about Knowledge Ability at www.knowab.co.uk.

This article pulls together concepts from

- our courses in *Virtual Teaming and Remote Working* (see www.knowab.co.uk/wbw2c.html)
- our consulting service *Beating Email Stress* (see www.knowab.co.uk/wbw2a.html).

Notices

This paper is copyright © Knowledge Ability Limited 2001. All Rights Reserved. Permission is granted to copy and distribute this paper provided that it is copied and distributed unaltered and entire, including this entire Section 'Notices'. No permission is granted to exploit this paper or the information in it for any commercial purpose whatsoever.

Disclaimer: The information in this paper may contain errors. This paper does not constitute an offer or sample. This paper is provided "as is" without express or implied warranty.

Version 1.2 PDF Version September 2003 Minor non-content revisions to PDF December 2004