"I'd Sit at Home and Do Work Emails": How Tablets Affect the Work-Life Balance of Office Workers

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Abstract

Advances in technology, in particular the widespread use of mobile devices, have changed work practices and transformed our everyday lives. However, as well as facilitating new ways for combining work and personal life, these new technologies can also blur the boundary between the two domains. In recent years tablets have become popular, first as leisure devices, and lately as business tools helping people to stay connected with work anywhere, anytime. Through an online questionnaire supported by a qualitative study, we investigated why, how, and where office workers use tablets and what impact those devices may have on work-life balance. The results show that, while useful for both home and work tasks, tablets have the potential to blur the boundary between work and personal life by encouraging and enabling people to complete work tasks during home time and vice versa. This could have negative impacts on work-life balance.

Author Keywords

Work-life balance; touch-screen tablets; mobile technology

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 User Interfaces (D.2.2, H.1.2, I.3.6): User-centered design. H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The ubiquity of mobile devices, combined with technological innovations, has resulted in major shifts in working and living practices. While enabling people to better combine work and non-work responsibilities, mobile technologies also have the potential to produce a more demanding workplace that threatens workers' work-life balance (WLB). We define WLB as a healthy separation of work and home time, where the boundary between these two contexts is not blurred [3, 4, 16] and where the 'extensification' [10] of work into non-work times and spaces [1, 2] does not take place. And conversely, where leisure activities are not carried out during work time.

Mobile devices like smartphones or laptops can potentially disturb WLB by providing constant connectivity (an 'always online' culture), and therefore encouraging working outside work hours. Tablets also support this culture, mainly due to their portability and easy access to the Internet. Despite being initially advertised as leisure and entertainment devices [6], tablets have entered the business world, and their popularity is on the rise: in 2012 there were estimated 74 million tablet users in the USA alone [15]. The recent purchase of 8,500 iPads by Barclays Bank for their staff [11] suggests that the trend may not change anytime soon.

While several articles have been published describing tablets as office work tools (e.g. [14]), and market research focusing on business use is available (e.g. [5]), academic research is scarce. Although Geyer & Felske [6] focused on the introduction of tablets as business tools, only Hess & Jung [7] evaluated them as office devices, focusing primarily on their suitability for office work. To the best of our knowledge, no research on the impact of tablets on WLB is currently available.

To better understand why and how office workers use tablets, to what extent their leisure use influences their work use, and what is the impact of tablets on WLB, we conducted two studies: an online questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews. While the studies described in this paper investigate the ways in which tablets could affect WLB and highlight avenues for further research, our broader research project focuses on the impact of mobile devices in general on families and their work-life challenges, ways to support reflection on technology use, and the facilitation of behavior change to restore WLB.

Study 1: Online questionnaire

To understand how, when, and for how long office workers use tablets, an online questionnaire was designed and distributed on social networks, mainly Twitter [17] and LinkedIn [12]. "To what extent do you use your tablet for work purposes?" was used as a qualifying question and people using their tablets mainly or only for entertainment or leisure were excluded.

The survey resulted in 82 complete responses. 76% of respondents were male and the average age was 30.5 years old (SD=8.6). 38% respondents held managerial or business support positions, 27% had technical and 23% creative roles. 79% of respondents used Apple products. Over a third (39%) used tablets constantly connected to the Internet over mobile networks. The findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide a general overview of the main trends.
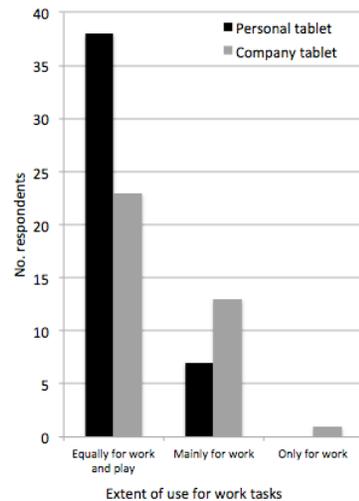
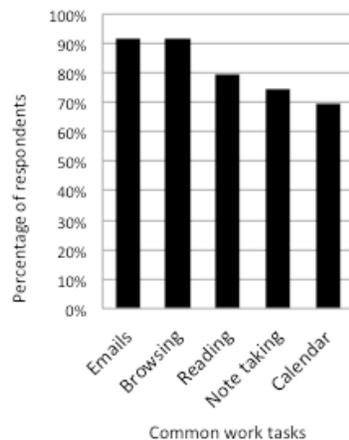**Figure 1.** Extent of use for work purposes by tablet ownership

Figure 2. The most common office work tasks done on a tablet

Results

The questionnaire analysis provided information on tablet use. We present here findings related to the most common tablet tasks and the general patterns of tablet use, for both work and personal tasks.

WORK AND PERSONAL USE

Nearly half of respondents (45%) had their tablets provided by their employer. However, regardless of whether tablets were paid for by the company or bought by employees, the devices were seen as necessary for work (35%) or at least considered useful (59%). 74% of respondents with personal or company tablets reported using them for both work and entertainment equally and only 24% used them mainly for work (see Figure 1 for the extent of use for work tasks, split by tablet ownership). In addition, two thirds of participants (63%) shared the tablet with their partner or spouse, children, other family members, or friends and colleagues, which suggests leisure use.

COMMON TASKS

Almost all participants used tablets for checking work emails and web browsing (92% each); other uses included taking notes at meetings, reading work documents, and managing appointments (see Figure 2). All these tasks, with the exception of note taking, can be easily done outside the work environment.

PATTERNS OF USE

Over half of participants (59%) admitted using a tablet for work every day. 50% used it for 1-2 hours on a single day and an additional 20% for 3-5 hours.

Tablets were used in a number of environments, with home use being the most popular (87%), followed by meeting rooms, commuting and the office (see Figure 3). In addition, 40% of respondents who used tablets for more than 6 months (N=47) admitted that they were using them more at home now than immediately after the purchase. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the questionnaire, it was not possible to confirm what tasks were the most common in these locations.

Discussion

Tablets are frequently used for work and personal purposes in both home and work settings. The most popular work tasks (e.g. email, web browsing) are similar to personal tasks (e.g. email, online shopping, social networks) [15]. In addition, even though most tablet owners reported having Wi-Fi only devices, the popularity and availability of Wi-Fi networks makes it easy to be connected most of the time. This suggests that tablets may be encouraging or, at the very least, supporting the 'work anywhere' attitude, especially as the reported most common tasks do not require specialist software nor physical presence in an office.

Easy access to the Internet and work information, coupled with the portability of tablets and combined leisure and work use, may lead to a blurring of the boundary between work and leisure time, causing work activities to 'extensify' into non-work time and locations [10]. A series of interviews further explored the context and patterns of use, motivations for using tablets for office work and their impact on everyday life.

Study 2: Interviews

Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants' offices or in meeting rooms to better understand motivations for purchasing a tablet and its impact on WLB.
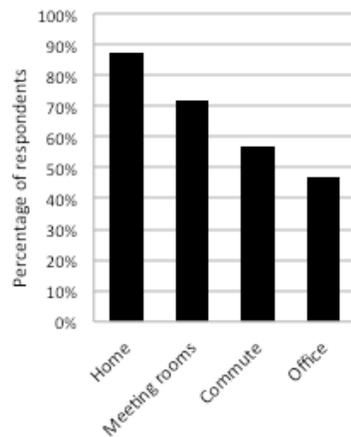
Figure 3. Locations where participants used tablets 'often' and 'very often'

Eight men and three women aged 25-50 years old were recruited. All were office workers and six of them held managerial positions. They all had been using Apple iPads for 3-12 months prior to the study, and all were using them mainly, though not exclusively, for work. Seven participants had tablets supplied by their company and four used their personal devices for work.

Results
Thematic analysis and affinity mapping were used to analyze interview transcripts, categorize main themes and build an understanding of the data. Findings relating to personal and work use and motivations for purchase are presented below.

PERSONAL USE
All participants used their tablets for leisure and the fact that they were often provided by the company did not matter: many saw the tablet as a personal device.

"If you're on a business trip it's nice to be able to take your music with you or video or podcast, because you'll be on a plane, or stuck on the airport (...) *so it's very useful to be able to take your life with you*." – P1

Tablets, even those supplied by the employer, were often shared with family members of all ages:

"My daughter tends to use it more than I do." – P9

"If I want to use it, I [have] *to tell my mum 'stop playing games, I need to do some work'."* – P11

A couple of participants mentioned that the playful nature of a tablet and its interface encouraged exploration and interleaving of tasks by making apps highly visible and easy to access.

"I kind of look at it and think, 'what could I do?' It kind of prompts me to all those things I could do on it." – P6

WORK USE
Out of eleven participants, five admitted using tablets for work at home and six used them to respond to emails or read during their commute. Some suggested that tablets increased productivity by allowing them to work on simple tasks while away from the desk:

"I use it for email [when] *not at work. So I'd sit at home and do work emails."* – P1

"I just find it's a good way of making a train journey useful if I can keep in touch with the email." – P2

"In the evenings I can do more ad-hoc work, because I don't have to go and switch my laptop or a computer on." – P8

MOTIVATIONS / REASONS TO BUY
Most participants bought or were given tablets by their employers despite having no prior plan as to how they were going to use them. To some extent, they knew what the device was capable of and expected it to be useful, but did not have any specific use in mind:

"I generally bought it to understand how it will fit in my life rather than because I had a need to." – P4

"I was trying to shoehorn it into everything. I was desperate to always check emails on it, to always do work on it whenever I could." – P7

While a few people mentioned fascination with new technology and sympathy towards Apple as additional motivation, four participants admitted getting a tablet

through work simply because they thought their role required them to have one.

"I thought that I should. I'm a cool digital technology director, so see, I should have an iPad." – P8

Discussion
Tablets are used for both work and play, by office workers and their family members, and are often bought without any prior consideration as to how they will be used. The lack of clear understanding of their purpose encourages users to try and fit the devices into their lives, and may lead to increased work use.

In line with [2], this can be seen as a curse and a blessing, as the boundary between work and non-work can become blurred. While the use of work devices for entertainment at home is not an issue, the fact that eight participants admitted attending to work emails or documents during their rest time suggests that tablets do have the potential to negatively impact WLB.

Impact on work-life balance
The functionality of a tablet, combined with its portability, constant connectivity, the interface that encourages exploration, and the fact that users generally do not know in advance how they are going to use the device, appears to result in a temptation to use it for anything and anywhere, which could negatively impact WLB, especially when combined with the use of other devices.

It is nearly impossible to separate personal and work use of a tablet. Users often see their work tablets as personal devices and use them as such for watching videos or checking personal emails. Such use can,

however, also prompt work use during home time [9], e.g. checking work emails or reading work documents. Moreover, the way in which tablets' interface facilitates exploration of apps could encourage some users to think about their work when at home: the presence of familiar, work-related icons can invite users to interleave work and personal tasks. This may make it difficult to relax and recover after work at the end of the day [18].

Previous research suggests that workers tend not to see tasks like checking email or reading documents as 'real' work [13], and therefore they may not realize that the boundary between work and home time has become blurred. This could be an issue, as research has shown that a less distinct boundary between work and personal domains can lead to longer working hours and could make managing WLB challenging [8].

Conclusions and future research
Our two studies showed that tablets have the potential to disturb the WLB and the results raise a number of questions: How does a purchase of tablet change the owner's daily routine? What are the positive aspects of blurring the boundary between work and home time? Why and how do some people manage to keep these domains separated? Are tablets changing the behavior of well-balanced users or do existing workaholics use them as yet another tool that enables working from home?

Through a mix of interviews, observations, shadowing, digital diaries and the use of productivity logging software we are planning to explore these questions and gain a better understanding of how mobile technologies impact WLB, how specific devices are used

and when, how users experience their usage, and how these devices are shaping families' work-life challenges, values and practices. In addition, our research aims to identify whether distinct groups exist who differ in terms of their level of reflexivity around digital practices and WLB issues, and how technology could be used to facilitate behavior change amongst those seeking to restore work-life balance equilibrium.

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