Invasion of the Droids and Pads



By Paula Santonocito

As mobile devices continue to change the way people interact, employers have difficulty keeping up with the impact the technology has on the workplace.

Part of the challenge has to do with the numbers: the number of people who have already gone mobile and the increasing rate of adoption. Indeed, the Canadian population is nearing the tipping point of becoming a smartphone majority, according to a recent study of the mobile market in Canada by Ispos Reid, a leading provider of market research.

The firm's study shows that 47 percent of Canadians now report using a smartphone, a substantial increase over last year when 34 percent of Canadians reported using such a device. It's worth noting that tablet usage has also increased significantly. Twenty-one (21) percent of Canadians report using these devices, compared to only 10 percent in 2012.

So, what do ubiquitous handheld devices mean to an organization from a people management standpoint?

On the Plus Side

Mobile connectivity allows for ongoing contact with employees, whether they are traveling for business, working remotely or taking time off.

Thanks to technology, there's no need to wait for an answer to a pressing question. Everyone is available all the time, or so it seems.

At its best, such connectivity leads to expediency and increases productivity. Because it facilitates interaction, it also furthers innovation.

Meanwhile, mobile devices allow employees to take care of family and personal business while at work, giving them the opportunity to address issues that may have previously required time off.

On the Minus Side

Ironically, the very same benefits of technology have the potential to become hindrances.

Ongoing contact can lead to unrealistic expectations regarding employee availability, cause stress for employees and management, and ultimately result in employee burnout.

Personal phone calls and text messages throughout the day have the potential to distract from the work at hand and impact productivity – and that's just within an employee's work area. Ringtones and text alerts in meetings affect everyone.

In addition, there are potential legal liabilities associated with the use of mobile devices. If a motor vehicle operator is involved in an accident attributed to a mobile device, and that person is on company business, his or her employer may be liable. There are numerous lawsuits where employers have been sued for accidents caused by workers who were talking on cell phones or texting while driving.

Then there's the issue of information sharing. When employees access email, work-related documents, and supposedly secure corporate websites via mobile devices, there is increased likelihood that proprietary information and company data will be comprised.

Finding a Balance

While there is no single solution that addresses all the challenges mobile devices present, there are steps that can be taken to minimize the negative aspects of mobile and build on the positive.

With regard to employee availability, it is essential to recognize that employees have the right to boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Expecting an employee who is on vacation to constantly check email defeats the purpose of time intended for relaxation and rejuvenation. Fostering a culture that encourages and supports unplugging is a best practice.

On the other hand, when employees are on the clock, it is realistic to expect them to focus on the job. In days of old, when the only contact with family and friends was via the office landline phone, employers established guidelines for personal use of company telephones. Similarly, guidelines that address the use of personal phones in the workplace are appropriate.

Use of mobile devices while driving, however, requires more than guidelines. Although prohibited by law to varying degrees, mobile usage while driving must also be reinforced by company policy – with strict consequences for failing to comply, like termination.

Information sharing, likewise, must be taken very seriously. Each organization must weigh the consequences of allowing access to important company documents from mobile devices or employees' personal computers and take the steps necessary to minimize risk. Policies and ongoing reinforcement of these policies should focus on confidentiality and employee responsibility as a condition of continued employment. Here, HR plays a pivotal role.

If your organization is lagging when it comes to mobile policies and best practices, you're not alone. Mobile's rapid growth has caught even some of the most proactive organizations off guard. However, with attention to the pros and cons of the technology, and a little common sense, HR and other management professionals can address necessary concerns, while allowing everyone to stay connected—at least most of the time.

Additional Resources
Cell Phones & Driving: Part 1, How to Make the Legal Case for Banning Employee Cell

Phone Use