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## *Always Available, 24/7 Connectivity*

**Do smartphones, laptops, and other wireless devices really increase productivity?**

Many executives believe that the 24/7 connectivity and accessibility that comes with their smartphones, PDAs, laptops, tablet computers, and other wireless technology increases productivity. Increased responsiveness and availability and the ability to work effectively when outside of the office are benefits that these modern devices afford. However, recently, there have been a growing number of articles, blogs, and studies in which the authors question whether the 24/7 connectivity and increased work hours that frequently accompany wireless devices actually decrease the productivity and negatively affect the overall performance of the employees using the devices.

### **More Freedom and Flexibility**

There is no doubt that smartphones, laptops, and other wireless devices give employees the tools needed to effectively perform their jobs from almost anywhere. This has allowed many companies to implement telecommuting and more flexible work policies. Employees have the ability to work from anywhere – at home, at a café or coffee shop, or out of town. Many employees believe that wireless and other remote internet access technology improves work-life balance and increases productivity. Time that would have been spent in a long commute to and from the office or “around the office water cooler” can be spent working.

It is not just those employees with telecommuting or flexible work schedule options who see the potential to improve work-life balance through wireless technology. Employees can remain connected or available while attending to more personal matters outside of the office. In particular, employees with school-aged children can attend to their parental obligations (e.g. school carpools, extra-curricular activities, etc.) without feeling that they are completely neglecting their workplace obligations. The technology affords Baby Boomers who care for

aging parents with a similar ability to balance competing demands.

### **Globalization**

The globalization of business has also contributed to the need for wireless technology. The ability to connect with corporate headquarters from remote locations around the world is vital to the success of international operations. Smartphones, PDAs, and laptops are often necessities for successfully conducting business with international clients and customers. Executives with international responsibilities must have the ability to effectively communicate with their home offices when traveling and with international clients and direct reports when in their home offices.

### **Doing More with Less**

As we have noted in prior editions of the *SRA Update*, the workload of managers and executives increased as a result of the downsizing that occurred at many companies during the recent economic downturn. The ability to effectively conduct business outside of the office with wireless devices allows those employees to meet the increased demands and expectations of their positions. However, recent studies have questioned whether the benefits of 24/7 connectivity are outweighed by the potential negative effects on employees’ personal lives, health, and even productivity.

### **Work-Life Imbalance**

The 24/7 connectivity that comes with smartphones, PDAs, laptops, and other wireless technology has blurred the lines between employees’ working and personal lives. There are countless stories about executives working while on vacation or during other family events. Every day one sees business people obsessively checking and responding to email on their wireless devices while at restaurants, stores, doctors’ offices, gyms, their children’s schools, and everywhere in between.

Last April, BlueSteps.com, the career management service provided by the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC), conducted a survey of 800 senior executives worldwide regarding work-life balance issues. Seventy percent (70%) of the executives who participated in the *BlueSteps 2010 Executive Work-Life Balance Survey* felt that modern wireless devices have decreased their leisure time, and 55% did not believe that they had a satisfactory work-life balance. According to the survey, 73% of senior executives are frequently required to work between 6:00 and 9:00pm (35% beyond 9:00pm), and 63% of senior executives must often work on the weekend. The longer work hours of senior executives facilitated by 24/7 connectivity can lead to increased stress, burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and disengagement.

#### **Information Overload – Loss of Focus**

One of the oft cited benefits of wireless technology is the access to more information which allows more informed decisions. The constant barrage of texts, emails, instant messages, and phone calls divert an executive's attention and focus from more important or critical issues. Many executives would argue that that the multi-tasking that results makes them more productive. The authors of an article in the January 2011 *McKinsey Quarterly* entitled "Recovering from Information Overload" cited studies which suggest exactly the opposite – those who multi-task versus focusing on one task at a time made more errors and took longer to complete tasks.

The increase in responsiveness and 24/7 availability that mobile devices promote is sometimes valued too highly. Business people feel the need to respond quickly to issues at all hours. Rather than taking the time to properly evaluate and consider sensitive or complex matters, an executive may instead respond with her first impulse or reaction. Instead of reflecting or carefully deliberating, business people often just react via their wireless devices. Also, in the haste to respond quickly, less time is taken to review messages for errors which can reflect poorly on the company and executive.

Many executive coaches and other commentators stress the importance of "down time" and "unplugging from the office". Longer work hours do not always result in an increase in

productivity. A human being can only stay "on task" for so long before the law of diminishing returns takes over. After a certain point, one begins to lose concentration and focus and ultimately becomes less productive despite spending more time on work. Taking breaks and allowing oneself to disengage from work issues promotes more creative thinking and problem solving. Also, sleep deprivation resulting from longer work hours can significantly impair performance. In an article in the October 2006 online version of the *Harvard Business Review* by Charles A. Czeisler and Bronwyn Fryer entitled "Sleep Deficit: The Performance Killer", Dr. Czeisler, a Professor of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School, warns that staying up for 24 hours or sleeping an average of four hours per night for four or five consecutive days both result in the same level of mental impairment as legal intoxication.

#### **Maximizing Productivity and Performance**

Smartphones, PDAs, laptops, and other wireless devices have become an integral part of the modern global workplace. Employees have the ability to respond to matters more quickly from anywhere and at anytime. However, recent studies and research suggest that companies which promote a culture in which 24/7 connectivity and availability are expected may find that their employees are not as productive or effective despite working longer hours. Also, although many talented executives and managers were willing to work longer hours during the economic downturn, that may not remain true as conditions improve. Eighty percent (80%) of the senior executives who participated in the above referenced BlueSteps.com survey cited work-life balance as a critical factor in deciding whether to remain with or join an employer. To truly increase productivity and improve results, companies will need to "fill in" and strengthen their management teams. Sanford Rose Associates® search consultants take the time to understand the needs of their clients and the cultures of the organizations to find the top talent to fill their clients' critical positions.

—Rick Carter

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