

## **The technology-productivity equation**

KIRA VERMOND

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Maybe you wake up at 5:30 a.m. so you can cram in a couple of hours of work before dropping the kids at school. Then, after they go to bed, out comes the BlackBerry. Today's technology, including fixed wireless, Bluetooth, wireless broadband, NextG cellular networks and the like, help employees become productive even when they're not in the office.

But is this progress, or simply the death of the 9-to-5 workday?

### **Get more done**

If the results of a study by Cisco Systems Inc. and OMNI Consulting Group LLP are to be believed, the use of mobile data services increases productivity by an average of 13.4 per cent a week for a full-time worker. In other words, employees get more done each week because they have the iPhone and laptop handy. Insurance adjusters can handle more claims while on the road, for example, and pharmaceutical sales reps can conduct more physician briefings because they don't have to run back to the office for that missing file.

The technology, which becomes cheaper every nanosecond (remember when laptops cost upward of \$4,000?), allows for a kind of flex time that goes beyond working from 9:30 a.m. until 3 p.m. to be around for school drop-offs and pick-ups. The new flex time for a mobile worker is less about anywhere and more about any time.

Brantz Myers, director for industry marketing for Cisco Systems Canada Co. in Toronto, thinks of his workday as a series of "working moments," a term also used by the company. If he has 20 minutes before his plane takes off, that's a chunk of work time. Once his two children go to bed, there's another chunk. He says it works for him because much of his job - crafting business plans, budgeting and other strategic functions - isn't driven by the time of day it gets completed.

"Yeah, I don't think I've lived 9 to 5 in years," he says.

### **Location, location, location**

Staying industrious on the road at any time of the day is certainly helped by finding a comfortable workspace, according to Derek Kerton, principal analyst with The Kerton Group, a wireless consulting firm with offices in San Jose, Calif., and Waterloo, Ont. When he's mobile, Mr. Kerton likes to rate how productive he feels compared with sitting at his large office desk with its 23-inch computer screen, ergonomic keyboard and laser mouse.

"I can't beat that. It's 100-per-cent productivity," he says.

A hotel room's productivity rate ranks at about 70 per cent because he doesn't have all his files or a full-sized keyboard. It also takes about 10 minutes to sign up for the hotel's broadband service. Sitting in a

parked car rates a "pretty dismal" 40 per cent, while a coffee shop - with its hubbub and tiny tables - comes in at about 50 per cent. Airline business lounges, which usually cost about \$400 annually to join, get a thumbs up.

"Are they worth the comfort and the free orange juice? Absolutely not. But what if the flight is delayed by about an hour?" Mr. Kerton asks, noting that the lounges offer quality work desks, comfortable chairs, good lighting and an outlet. "I get at least hotel-grade productivity, if not better."

### **Goodbye SUV**

About 1½ million Canadian employees work away from the office an average of two days a week - and more are asking for the privilege. Apparently, people really, really hate sitting in their cars.

A recent 2007 survey by Microsoft Corp. and Kelton Research showed 55 per cent of workers interested in working away from the office were most excited about ditching their commute. Comparatively, 12 per cent liked the idea of making their own work hours and a measly 9 per cent looked forward to spending more time with their families.

Only 7 per cent said they wanted to have flexibility to be more productive.

### **Keeping it at work**

But why are employees working morning, noon and night whether they have a flex time deal or not? Perhaps because it's so darn easy, writes Gil Gordon in *Turn It Off: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office Without Disconnecting Your Career*.

Before the early 1990s, if you wanted to work from home, it was tough. "Briefcases weren't big enough to contain a file drawer's worth of information, and there was no easy way to look at a set of engineering drawings or a year's worth of monthly budget printouts on the kitchen table," Mr. Gordon writes. As technology made it simple to download two years' worth of numbers from home, people hailed the technology as a godsend.

Then, the ability to work anywhere at any time slowly turned into an expectation to work everywhere, all the time. If Mary down the hall could crank out 12 e-mail messages at 3 a.m., why couldn't the rest of the team? And as more work landed with a weighty, if virtual, thud on the home office desk each evening, personal tasks - from making doctor's appointments and scheduling car maintenance to, what the hey, a little rest and relaxation - weren't necessarily ignored, but reassigned to the hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

"Because we can work any time, anywhere, we have a tendency to also take more personal time within the workday," says Kerul Kassel, author of *Stop Procrastinating Now: Five Radical Procrastination Strategies to Set You Free*.

In fact, according to some time-management experts, because we've become so dependent on working outside 9 to 5, many employees are actually less productive during regular business hours. If you know you can finish the report at 10 p.m., why not do a little Christmas shopping online right now? Not surprisingly, the shopper gets behind at work and has to catch up at night.

And the cycle continues.

### **Time's a wastin'**

Xerox Canada Ltd., decided to tackle another productivity problem - too much useless office e-mail - so employees could be more industrious during business hours and not feel pressured to take work home. Sasha Fraser, senior counsel for the company, spearheaded the project and helped employees learn to use online bulletin boards rather than sending out the same e-mails every few weeks.

And don't get her started on the problem of copying e-mail to everyone. Over-inclusiveness is a big no-no now. Research shows that it takes an employee one minute to read and process a new e-mail. Send one e-mail out to 300 to 500 people and you've just lost the equivalent of one employee's entire working day, Ms. Fraser says.

The message caught on. A couple of months after employees received a training module on proper e-mail use, one employee sent out a mass e-mail to alert everyone he'd found a lost Starbucks card.

"I took a walk around the floor to cool off and I heard at least two cubicle conversations along the lines of, 'Can you believe the e-mail [he] just sent?' " she says.

### **In a crisis**

This isn't to say that technology does more harm than good when it comes to working agreeable hours. Before computerization, employees often simply stayed at the office rather than coming home for dinner and working later.

And when it comes to handling emergencies, some technology can't be beat. Take Rove Mobile, a software company in Ottawa that provides software for handhelds such as the BlackBerry. The products allow users to manage networks remotely. Rob Woodbridge, president and CEO, says business is booming as handheld screen resolution gets better and wireless connections pick up speed.

"I would say we've been in hibernation for the last six years waiting for this market to arrive," he says of the seven-year-old company.

A company client, Billy Zhao, manager for client connectivity at Deutsche Bank in New York has been using the software for about five months. It gives him peace of mind that if there's a system outage and there's no one close to a computer to handle the emergency, he can log on using his handheld and fix the problem.

"It could mean the difference between an extended outage with a potential for a lot of lost revenue, and being able to get back up on our feet," he says.