

BlackBerrys



FRIEND OR FOE?

Dr Kristine Dery from the Faculty's Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies is conducting research into the use of the BlackBerry and how this latest technology is blurring the lines between our work and personal lives

IT'S HARD TO remember a time before mobile phones dominated our lives and, for some people, it's difficult to recall when hand-held smart phones called BlackBerrys didn't connect us to the world 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"The growth in BlackBerry use has been exponential," explains Dr Kristine Dery from the Faculty's Discipline of Work and Organisational Studies, "And, that means there is now less distinction for employees between work and non-work time.

"Mobile phone use in general has grown organically but there has been little strategic attention given to managing new technology usage in the work place. We need to find out if mobile phone use is impacting the nature of work in a positive or negative way and how productivity is affected as a result."

Kristine became interested in convergent media, and in particular the emergence of BlackBerrys, in 2005 when it was becoming apparent the rapid growth of this technology – especially evident in the financial services sector – was

having a significant impact on the nature of work. Her earlier PhD on the alignment between HR and IT strategies, and research with a team at the University of Sydney on the impact of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) on the nature of work, meant she was well positioned to pursue research in this area. While there had been significant work on the impact of email in the work place, the increased mobility of smart phones such as BlackBerrys was clearly generating a series of very different management issues which Kristine believed to be worthy of attention.

"The major challenge that Australian workers face in terms of connectivity is the time zone we're in. We're getting ready to clock off just as the US and European markets are warming up so, particularly in the financial industry, there is a perceived necessity by some people to check the BlackBerry throughout the night. As a result, we have much less down time than many other countries."

And it is this constant contact which is beginning to be a big problem for

over-worked employees, Kristine says. "Our preliminary research has shown that at a certain point we begin to resent the amount of connectivity we have and people develop a level of resistance to the very thing that is meant to be freeing up their time.

"What we are actually seeing is a new type of 'absenteeism'. There is increasing anecdotal evidence of people deliberately letting their phone batteries run out, 'accidentally' leaving the handset at work over the weekend or choosing a holiday destination where there is no phone or internet connection available just to get a break from the constant contact that is now expected of them."

Kristine says this also comes from the assumption people now have that the more connected you are, the more engaged you are and the better you are at your job.

Working with major Australian companies to develop a comprehensive global survey about BlackBerry use will be the next phase of Kristine and her team's current research which is being carried out in conjunction with Judi



MacCormick from UNSW and Charles-Henri Besseyre-des-Horts from HEC Paris (a CEMS partner – see page 7).

“HR managers in particular are keen to understand the impact of BlackBerry use on work-life balance and how they can help their employees manage perceived expectations on constant connectivity. This is such a huge area for further research and we are just uncovering the tip of the iceberg.”

There is no doubt that many people see their BlackBerry as a necessary evil but one thing's for sure, they are not going anywhere and will only increase in numbers over the coming years. The trick now is to understand how to manage this “love-hate” relationship and ensure they don't become all consuming.



Dr Kristine Dery

BLACKBERRY STATISTICS

- There are an estimated 14 million BlackBerry users worldwide with exponential growth forecast
- 56% of people surveyed by ClearContext (July 2006) spend more than 2 hours a day in their inbox
- 38% of people received more than 100 emails per day
- 64% of respondents to a University of Glasgow survey checked their email at least once per hour, 35% every 15 minutes
- Dr Thomas Jackson of Loughborough University, England found that it takes at least 64 seconds to recover your train of thought after interruption by email thus those who check email every 5 minutes waste 8.5 hours per week as they regain their thought pattern. He also found that people check email as it arrives (exacerbated by smart-phones) taking an average of 1min 44secs to respond with 70% of emails getting a response within 6 seconds i.e. faster than letting a phone ring 3 times.