

DOES MOBILE TECHNOLOGY HELP OR HINDER MEETING PRODUCTIVITY?

Kristen M. Dietel, Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Rd., Bristol, RI 02809, (401)254-3175, kdietel311@g.rwu.edu

Scott P. McMann, Roger Williams University, Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Rd., Bristol, RI 02809, (401)254-3175, spmcmann@gmail.com

Susan M. Bosco, Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Rd., Bristol, RI 02809, (401)254-3175, sbosco@rwu.edu

Diane M. Harvey, Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Rd., Bristol, RI 02809, (401)254-3018, dharvey@rwu.edu

ABSTRACT

The preponderance of web-based communication technologies in the workplace has changed behaviors of meeting participants. Specifically, individuals move between face-to-face and person-to-device interactions. Some claim that the use of technology during meetings improves information-gathering and schedule coordination. Others, however, view the use of communication devices as delaying meeting progress. There were 215 respondents to this survey of technology use in the workplace. Initial results indicate that 62 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that personal technology use in a meeting is offensive. According to 58 percent of respondents, the use of mobile devices results in less productive meetings.

Key Words: Generational differences, technology, meetings

INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of mobile technology by individuals in a variety of workplace situations and interactions necessitates a better understanding of the impact of such use on individual productivity, organizational productivity, and the quality of human interactions. The goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of employees' personal opinions of the use of mobile technology in the workplace. We focused on three aspects of technology use: Personal Productivity, Effect on Organizational Productivity, and Social Acceptance.

In addition to these areas, we also found through our literature review that there appear to be generational differences in the use and perception of use by others of mobile devices. Therefore, we attempted to determine where some of those differences might lie. The terminology used for these personal technology devices varies; there appears to be no standard for the decision to use mobile device versus personal technology, for example. In this paper, these terms refer to the use of cell phones, Blackberrys (and similar items such as iPhones), and laptop computers.

PERSONAL PRODUCTIVITY

Personal preference has much to do with the way mobile technology use during meetings is regarded. Some may feel that is entirely appropriate to use a cell phone in the presence of others, while others may deem it unacceptable. Much of their opinion has its source in generational standards, societal expectations and organizational cultures. For example, research shows that 69 percent of Baby Boomers who took part in a survey agreed that PDAs and mobile phones contribute to the decline of proper workplace etiquette [9]. Some individuals make the decision regarding mobile device use based on the size of the meeting. In large meetings, for example, some find it is more productive to engage in electronic work than to listen to presentations that are only tangentially related to their jobs [10].

While this may be true for some, in other situations, individuals found it less productive because they became distracted by their own or others' usage. Laptops, for example, can be helpful to take notes and multitask. However, for some, it can become overwhelmingly distracting. People may have difficulty balancing between listening and becoming lost in the work on their laptops. Others reported finding it off-putting when those around them are typing loudly or looking at irrelevant websites [4].

The use of mobile technology may have less to do with personal preference, however, and more to do with company's culture. At some organizations, such as Microsoft, it would be peculiar to *not* bring a laptop to meetings [4]. The company will have expectations or cultural standards that can help dictate whether or not it is appropriate to use such devices during a meeting. Often these practices will reflect the kind of industry the company is in, or the products they sell. Certain departments may find the use of technology takes away from their practices. Human resources, for example, may require more face-to-face interaction. The use of mobile technology can slow the development of workplace relationships that are necessary to effectiveness. By using technology when one is face-to-face with others, it sends a message that these individuals are not important. It will take time to rebuild that connection once it is damaged by the interruption of

technology [13]. These kinds of relationships cannot afford to be severed in a business world that is becoming more dependent on team-based activities.

Because of the importance of mobile device use as it relates to individual productivity in the workplace, we asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How does my personal use of technology affect my productivity?

Research Question 1A: Does the view of personal use of technology differ by generational membership?

Research Question 2: Does the use of personal technology by a person in a face-to-face meeting negatively impact that relationship?

Research Question 2A: Does the use of personal technology by a person in a face-to-face meeting negatively impact that relationship regardless of generational membership?

ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

The use of communication technologies seem to provide connectivity among workers, however, in reality, this may only be an illusion. The use of technologies complicates the communication process, as it removes many of the cues we use in face-to-face encounters [2]. Because of the distance created among employees, the efficiency of the technology is lost as email becomes more about documenting that work was done, rather than doing it better. Duffy [2] proposes that more face-to-face communication is needed to ensure that electronic exchanges result in productive outcomes.

Some individuals find that use of these devices has resulted in more productive meetings because the meeting leader feels more compelled to make the meeting content valuable to the attendees [10]. Others have a different view, however, contending that meetings last longer when people are using devices because information has to be repeated for those who were not paying attention. The rudeness of using these devices and absenting oneself mentally from the meeting can result in poor team relations as well, damaging future work products [7].

In some organizations, workers are required to leave their devices at the door of the meeting room, according to Silverman [10] and Weinstein [13]. These practices are indicative of the type of culture managers wish to establish for their company and within meetings. It is unclear whether many companies are incorporating these policies and what they entail.

The use of these policies may reflect the perception that managers have regarding the improvement in productivity that they expect from the multitasking behaviors they observe. Is the availability of technological capabilities contributing to more productive organizations? For example, one employee cites communication with another person who is engaging in five conversations at once – you know you are only getting 20% of the person's attention – is that productive [10]? One example of the negative result of this type of multitasking at one organization was the loss of a strong job candidate who was put off by the texting of one of the pair of an interview team [5].

Decision making can also be affected by the use of technology. In one survey, a respondent expressed the view that emails delay decision-making, stating “I find that many executives avoid conversation because they may be forced to make a decision or express an opinion. If they can keep communications within e-mail, they can continually pass the buck around or back without having to commit. Management by failure to act may be the new favored process” [6].

There may be a need to further examine the appropriateness of technology use “We’re beginning to learn that different methods of communication are more effective at certain tasks than others,” said another respondent. “E-mail is great for scheduling and confirming meetings, phone is good for quick conversations that require two-way communications and a memo is preferred for long background pieces. In-person and scheduled meetings are always the best for any discussion requiring true dialogue and consensus” [6]. In these cases, using technology can be effective. “Instant messages and e-mail are communication accelerators,” said one executive. “Discussion databases are more efficient for larger groups [6].

Research Question 3: How does mobile technology affect productivity?

Research Question 3A: Does the perception of how technology affects productivity vary by generational membership?

Research Question 4: What should organizations do about policies for mobile device use?

Research Question 5: Are organizations enacting policies for mobile device use?

Research Question 6: What organizational training policies should exist for mobile technology use?

Research Question 6A: Do beliefs regarding organizational training policies for mobile device use differ by generational membership?

SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE

The examination of the appropriateness of technology use extends to the perceptions this activity generates for employees when interacting with someone else who is using a mobile device(s). An additional consideration is whether this use is viewed differently depending on whether it occurs in meetings or during individual encounters in the workplace.

Meeting Behaviors/Multitasking

Expectations about the use of personal technology in meetings as well as during face-to-face communication can vary according to generational membership as well. The perception of whether such behavior is rude, tolerable, or efficient will affect the interactions of the individuals involved. For example, it appears that there is a generational gap regarding the manner in which the use of technology during meetings is viewed. Baby Boomers are much more likely to be annoyed by younger workers checking their mobile phones for email and texting during meetings [9]. Both Boomers and Veterans consider the use of mobile devices during meetings “as gauche as ordering out for pizza” [10]. There is not a clear consensus, however, among

younger workers. Some Gen Y workers surveyed also found the use of these devices during meetings to be “rude”. Other considered it risky not to respond to emails and texts promptly.

Some workers perceive those who email and text during meetings as trying to retreat from meeting-related obligations. One individual stated that “They (those using phones during meetings) are the first ones to ignore the same emails/texts when they’re on their own time” [10]. They are viewed as trying to avoid assignments that may arise from the meeting by not participating in it. Another person questioned whether a worker would be using the phone if he/she was seated next to the boss at the meeting. Some workers, however, are comfortable with their use of cell phones during meetings. Mike McAfee, executive director of the Monroe County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said he would pick up calls and answer messages from family members because one never knows if it's an emergency. He also would not think twice about using his iPhone to take notes and check his schedule in meetings [12].

Regardless of the potentially negative perception it generates, personal technology use during meetings seems to be increasing. A recent New York Times article reported that a third of more than 5,300 workers polled in May by Yahoo Hot Jobs said they often checked e-mails in business meetings. Nearly one-fifth of the respondents said they have been reprimanded by their employers or fellow workers for bad behavior with their wireless device [12].

One way to address meeting behavior with regard to personal technology use is to set ground rules at the beginning of the meeting. An executive interviewed by Pansch [8] stated that he set ground rules at the start of meetings. He allowed cell phone use when necessary to obtain answers to clients’ questions or check on information needed to proceed with the meeting’s topic. He considered non-meeting related cell phone use to be rude. It is also suggested that in small meetings, one ask permission to use the device rather than just proceed [1]. It is also expected that such use would be meeting-related.

The Etiquette Question

The etiquette question continues as well. In a Robert Half Technology survey, 51 percent of CIOs (sample of 1400) said the rise in poor workplace etiquette can be attributed to the increased use of mobile devices [5]. In this same survey, 67 percent of them said breaches in technology etiquette are more common today than three years ago [11]. The usage patterns that are viewed as rude vary, with one example coming from Judith Sharp, Monroe County tax assessor, who said that it disturbs her when people pay more attention to their smartphones than to people they are with. Greg Main, president of i2E a nonprofit organization that manages the Oklahoma Technology Commercialization Center, said he is most offended by blatant "multitaskers" with whom he is trying to engage in conversation. "It could be a variety of things from cell phones to e-mail," Main said, "It is just rude behavior" [11].

Another breach of tech etiquette identified in this survey is when people leave their cell phone ringers on during a meeting, as noted by 88 percent of respondents. A close second, at 80 percent, is sending instant messages, while sending and receiving e-mail during a meeting is third, with 79 percent saying it's annoying [11]. In Tung’s [12] interviews of workers about technology use in the workplace, one respondent stated that "When the person I am speaking

with looks down at his or her BlackBerry, it's the same as turning away to talk to other people. It is very rude. They are not giving you full attention.”

Preferred Communication Methods

There appears to be no consensus with regard to whether the use of emails, texts, telephone or face-to-face organizational communication results in more productivity. In a global survey, 67 percent of senior executives and managers said their organization would be more productive if their superiors communicated more often by personal discussion. In contrast to their opinions in this regard, the top personal method of communicating for these same business leaders is e-mail, based on the survey by NFI Research [6]. One respondent stated that “Personal discussion is the foundation of communications.” Another said that personal communication provides a foundation and “enables all of the other forms of communication. Having a personal connection builds trust and minimizes misinterpretation and misunderstanding” [6].

The difference in opinion could have some basis in generational membership. Older individuals are more likely to believe that using email is taking the easy way out of interactions, but is not always the most efficient. They believe that time is saved by calling or meeting others face-to-face to answer questions and respond to issues. One survey respondent stated “I often find that when I look the other person in the eyes and ask them something I get far more than I ever would over e-mail.” Younger workers are less likely to find texting, emailing, and web surfing distracting. According to Schonfeld [9], these individuals are more likely to find these activities “productive and efficient.” “ The Blackberry is a great tool for getting information, setting schedules, making appointments and getting more done,” said a respondent. “It's increased the pace to get more done; it's doubled the pace. It gives me more opportunities to get business” [8].

Research Question 7: Is the use of personal technology in meetings considered to be rude?

Research Question 7A: Are there generational membership differences in whether it is considered rude to use personal technology in meetings?

Research Question 8: Is there acceptance of, or participation in, multi-tasking activities during meetings?

Research Question 8A: Are there generational differences in acceptance of or participation in, multi-tasking activities during meetings?

Research Question 9: Is the use of personal technology while talking to others considered rude?

Research Question 9A: Are there generational differences in whether use of personal technology while talking to others is considered to be rude?

Research Question 10: Does more intra-organizational communication take place via email versus face-to-face?

Research Question 10A: Are there generational differences in use of email versus face-to-face communication is used in organizations?

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

This research study used a snowball sampling method to obtain respondents to a paper survey. The survey was approved by the HSRB of the University and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents represent the four generations in the workplace today; however, due to the low response rates for Veterans and Generation X individuals, analysis was done for data from Baby Boomers and Generation Y only. Since the data was primarily categorical, chi-square analysis was most often used.

There were 247 respondents. Males represented 46 percent of the sample. Generational membership consisted of 1 percent Veterans, (born before 1945) 14 percent Baby Boomers (born between 1945 and 1965), 10 percent Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and 76 percent Generation Y (born after 1980).

Personal Productivity

Research Question 1: How does my personal use of technology affect my productivity? This question was addressed through three questions asking about the effect on personal productivity of use of mobile devices during meetings, the ability to ignore mobile devices during a meeting and whether the use of these devices during meetings is distracting. There was no clear consensus about the effect of personal productivity with the use of mobile devices during meetings, although responses were more positive - evenly divided among strongly agree, agree, and neutral. Most individuals were able to focus on the matter at hand during a meeting and ignore these devices. It appears that the use of personal technology by others during meetings is a source of distraction with more than half of respondents indicating that they strongly agree or agree. Research Question 1A: Does the view of personal use of technology differ by generational membership? There were no generational differences regarding personal productivity and mobile device use in any of these areas.

Research Question 2: Does the use of personal technology by a person in a face-to-face meeting negatively impact that relationship? There was general agreement in viewing this type of activity as having a negative effect on a personal relationship with results evenly divided among strongly agree, agree, and neutral. Research Question 2A: Does the use of personal technology by a person in a face-to-face meeting negatively impact that relationship regardless of generational membership? There were no generational differences in this situation.

Organizational Productivity

Research Question 3: How does mobile technology affect productivity? In order to answer this question, we asked whether the use of mobile devices during meetings results in less productive meetings. More than half of respondents agreed or agreed strongly. We also asked whether the use of mobile devices during meetings results in longer meetings and more than half of individuals either agree or strongly agree with this. Finally, we asked whether respondents had established their own individual policies about mobile device use during meetings. Half stated they ignored the use of devices and the other half dealt with the situation on a case-by-case basis.

Research Question 3A: Does the perception of how technology affects productivity vary by generational membership? There were no generational differences in perceptions about the loss of productivity during meetings when mobile devices are used by meeting participants. There was, however, a difference (chi-square $<.00$) in the manner in which individuals dealt with mobile device use in their own meetings with Baby Boomers more likely to resolve it on a case-by-case basis and Gen Y workers just as likely to ignore it as to resolve it case-by-case.

Research Question 4: What should organizations do about policies for mobile device use? In order for us to determine whether organization recognize the potential loss of productivity as a result of the use of mobile devices, we asked whether organizations should have policies regarding the use of technology at meetings and at the workplace. Most, 75 percent indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that there should be policies governing the use of mobile devices at meetings and even more agreed or strongly agreed that these policies should be instituted for the workplace as a whole. In both cases, there were significant (chi-square $<.00$) generational differences with more Baby Boomers than Gen Y individuals in agreement.

Research Question 5: Are organizations enacting policies for mobile device use? For 70 percent of the individuals, the company where they work has no policy governing the use of mobile devices. But when asked whether there should be policies, only 52 percent agreed.

Research Question 6: What organizational training policies should exist for mobile technology use? Employee training should include proper use of mobile devices.

Research Question 6A: Do beliefs regarding organizational training policies for mobile device use differ by generational membership? There was a significant difference between generations (chi-square $<.00$), with more Baby Boomers in agreement with establishing training than Gen Y members.

Social Perception

Research Question 7: Is the use of personal technology in meetings considered to be rude? To answer this question, respondents were asked for their reactions to several workplace situations: mobile device use for personal activities while in a meeting, lack of attention to a meeting presenter and reaction to an individual who checks their mobile device during a conversation.

Research Question 7A: Does this view differ by generational membership? There were significant differences among generations in this regard. More Baby Boomers than Gen Y individuals viewed the use of mobile devices during a meeting negatively (chi-square $<.05$) as well as this use during personal conversation (chi-square $<.00$), and lack of attention when acting as a meeting presenter (chi-square $<.00$).

For Research Question 8 - Is there acceptance of, or participation in, multi-tasking activities during meetings – we asked “When attending meetings, do you find it offensive when someone is using a laptop, Blackberry or I- phone for their personal use?” More than half of all respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed. To address Research Question 8A - Are there generational differences in the acceptance of, or participation in, multi-tasking activities during meetings? There was a significant difference by generation, with more Generation Y individuals who agree or strongly agree (chi-square $<.00$) that they had trouble paying attention

to others around them when they texted. This difference is also found when asking respondents whether they have had a cell phone conversation (not texting) during a meeting. Although done by less than 1/3 of individuals, there were significant generational differences (chi-square $<.01$), with nearly all Baby Boomers indicating rarely or never, and 15 percent of Generation Y indicating always or sometimes. Most respondents, 86 percent, agree or strongly agree that it is rude to talk on a cell phone during a meeting. We also asked whether meeting attendees read email or texts in meetings that are unrelated to the topics at hand. More than half of the respondents sometimes do so. There was a significant difference (chi-square $<.00$) among generations with twice as many Gen Y individuals indicating sometimes and twice as many Baby Boomers indicating rarely. Some respondents indicated that they text other meeting participants. There was a significant difference between generations (chi-square $<.00$), with nearly half of Gen Y responding sometimes. More than half of Baby Boomers responded never, but less than 10 percent of Gen Y were in this category. The size of the meeting group does not seem to affect the perception of those using mobile devices to do personal work, with twice as many respondents indicating that it is not acceptable to do this even in a large meeting. There was no significant difference among generations.

In order to answer Research Question 9 - Is the use of personal technology while talking to others is considered to be rude?, and Research Question 9A - Is there any generational difference in whether use of personal technology while talking to others is considered to be rude, we asked respondents four questions. The first was whether they were offended when presenting an important issue to individuals who then did not pay attention to them. More than 75 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. More than half of Generation Y respondents, however, were neutral about the behavior, significantly different from the Baby Boomers (chi-square $<.00$). The next question was whether the distraction of a personal device used by one individual when speaking to another would be considered rude. The responses were similar, with more than half indicating that this would be considered rude. There was a significant generational difference here as well, with more Generation Y individuals having no strong response either positively or negatively and approximately 20 percent disagreeing (chi-square $<.00$). The third question, asking whether relationships with co-workers suffered when these individuals responded to personal devices during face-to-face meetings, yielded no significant result for the responses to the question. Finally, respondents were asked whether they considered the use of mobile devices during personal meetings and conversations to be a sign of the increased level of rude behavior in the workplace. Again, there was no strong sense of agreement. Although approximately half agree or strongly agree with this statement, one-third reported they were neutral.

For Research Question 10 - Does more intra-organizational communication take place via email versus face-to-face? In this case, respondents were equally divided in their responses among agree, neutral, and disagree. Research Question 10A: Are there generational differences in use of email versus face-to-face communication is used in organizations? – There was no significant generational difference in these responses.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Perhaps the design of communications technology systems in organizations needs to become a conscious process. More often than not, these systems have evolved without direction and have led to deterioration of organizational communications. Gorman [3] contends that face-to-face exchanges should be the primary mode of communication in the community, with technological communication being secondary. One way of approaching this design is to consider whether a communication is a relationship-building or a process exchange [3].

These results indicate that employers will need to consider generational differences in the areas of personal productivity, organizational productivity, and perceptions of mobile device use in the workplace.

Personal Productivity

According to these results, individuals generally felt that their personal productivity is increased by the use of mobile devices. The ability to access email at times and places convenient to the worker provides a means of accomplishing tasks during more hours of the day. Research can be completed more promptly and efficiently, allowing for better decision-making. These advantages were not generation-specific; therefore, employers appear to be gaining from increased productivity of all workers.

It was interesting to note that although individuals felt that their own productivity is enhanced by the use of personal technology, its use by others in their presence is seen as a distraction. This finding also did not differ by generation. It seems to follow that the use of these devices during meetings will contribute to a loss of personal productivity due to the distraction of multiple person use. Twice as many Gen Y as Baby Boomers reported multitasking during meetings. The perception of this level of activity as the norm by Gen Y workers is not shared by Baby Boomers who view it as a way to absent oneself mentally from organizational activities.

Negative perceptions are shared by each generation with regard to the effect on personal relationships from mobile technology use, no matter the age of the worker. Since workplace relationships enable the accomplishment of individual and team tasks, the damage done to them from technology use would impede work progress. Having awareness of the effects of one's use of devices during personal encounters and reducing/eliminating this activity should enhance relationships and assist in increasing personal productivity.

Organizational Productivity

Although there seems to be a perception provided by the media that mobile devices unequivocally contribute to productivity at all times, respondents in this study did not agree. In fact, the sense from these results is that mobile devices lead to lower productivity in meetings as well as longer meetings. As noted earlier, this could be due to the distraction experienced by individuals when others are using technology alongside them. There are generational differences in participation levels for this meeting behavior with Gen Y individuals more likely to text someone else at the meeting and to access irrelevant internet sites. Conversely, respondents

noted that the using mobile devices could actually enhance the speed at which additional resources could be referenced. This could lend itself to quickly answered questions or concerns, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the meeting. It is possible that individuals' perception of meeting length was affected by personal bias because participants did not feel that they themselves were any less productive, but somehow the meeting as a whole was. Overall, the survey results indicated that individuals in meetings were quick to blame others or disapprove of their technology use, but did not hold themselves to the same standard.

Generational differences did surface when examining whether organizations should try to address the productivity concerns by implementing policies to control employees' use of personal devices during meetings. Both Gen Y and Baby Boomers agreed that policies for device use should be provided for meeting participants.

At the organizational level, more than 50 percent of individuals felt that policies should exist, but few companies actually have them. A greater degree of control is desired by Baby Boomers. Generation Y respondents felt that use issues should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis or ignored entirely. Corporations need to understand that the influx of Gen Y employees is accustomed to using technology in everyday practices. These individuals are not used to having their access to devices limited and seem not to subscribe to any particular decorum. It may be necessary to create certain cultural expectations in order to tame their technology addiction. Gen Y respondents seemed unwilling to admit or recognize such reliance, but it is evident through to day-to-day activity that those who fall into this generation rely heavily on mobile devices to get them through the day. These workers have grown up used to using technology as they please, and when they reach the professional work force will be less willing to conform to organization, especially if they have not been established at the outset or, are laissez-fair. Scarcity theory posits that if people have something in abundance, and then they are introduced to an environment where that abundance is restricted, they will desperately seek that which is limited or gone.

Social Acceptance

The perception of the use of personal devices during meetings is more negative for Baby Boomers than for Gen Y individuals. Gen Y employees indicate that use could be helpful for increasing personal productivity; therefore, trying to control it by general policies is not desirable. The view that multitasking positively impacts employee productivity varies by generation as well. Gen Y workers' opinions were more widely distributed among responses with no clear consensus of agreement or disagreement. Baby Boomers have a negative view of those who use meeting time to accomplish personal work. They prefer that all meeting participants interact with the team on a personal basis in order to better establish the team's relationships. This generation also wants the respect that they feel is their due by virtue of their organizational level. Use of personal technology during these interactions is therefore viewed as personally disrespectful.

There were more Gen Y respondents who were willing to identify themselves as being addicted to personal technology. This level of use may help account for their sense that multitasking contributes to productivity. According to a report by the SHRM done in 2005, people ages 8-18

live “media saturated” lives. More than a quarter of their 6.5 hours per day of media access involved the use of two or more technologies simultaneously. Given this trend, which only appears to be growing, it is not surprising to find that multitasking is viewed as ordinary for this generation.

The major conclusion drawn from this research is that of the need for case-to-case determination when considering the use of personal technology in the workplace. Personal opinions were diverse and determined by situation. Upon examining the data, it became evident that people have difficulty making arbitrary decisions about appropriate mobile device use. They prefer to make decisions about their technology use according to the situation. This contingency approach is important to understanding the differences of opinion that exist between generations. Each has a different opinion about which “cases” or “situations” lend themselves to the use of technology and which do not. Perhaps the design of communications technology systems in organizations needs to become a conscious process. More often than not, these systems have evolved without direction and have led to deterioration of organizational communications [3].

Given the increasing frequency of technology use in corporations, it is clear the time has come to for them to either establish policies, or maintain a laissez-faire attitude about its use. Corporations that choose to follow the policy route may find resistance upon its implementation because those who have become accustomed to using it will feel a greater loss than those who were never given or never took the opportunity in the first place. By implementing policies and establishing expectations now, however, proper etiquette will be created. Hopefully, a social norm for the appropriate use of such technology will develop for future generations.

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