

Chapter 48

The Lived Experience of Smartphone Use in a Unit of the United States Army

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones bring major changes to the way people gather information and interact. While smartphone use unleashes productivity it also has worrying implications. This study focused on the most important aspects of user experiences of smartphones in an Army work environment. Theory U and systems theory guided the research. This phenomenological study was based on interviews with soldiers of a variety of ages, ranks, and duty positions. While the findings are consistent with other research, it is clear that smartphone use ties to a number of complex leadership challenges. Paradoxical aspects of smartphone use are apparent as it also fosters stress and anxiety. More concerning, such use jeopardizes the development of the traditional military culture of the unit. Current Army policies do not address the concerns expressed by respondents. The results of the study are a call to action for Army leaders and offer a compelling case for transformative change.

INTRODUCTION

The simple truth is that the Web, the Internet does one thing. It speeds up the retrieval and dissemination of information, partially eliminating such chores as going outdoors to the mailbox, or having to pick up the phone to get ahold of your stock broker or some old buddies to shoot the breeze with. That one thing the Internet does and only that. The rest is Digibabble. – Tom Wolfe, “Hooking Up”

Mr. Wolfe got it wrong. The global connectivity of internetted communications has now extended to mobile devices so ubiquitous that almost 100% of the teenagers and adults in the United States carry one (CTIA, 2014). That connectivity is bringing major changes not just to the way Americans gather and exchange information but also to the way in which they interact with one another and with the orga-

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nizations they are part of. Indeed, smartphones are now being used like a “digital Swiss Army Knife,” replacing possessions like watches, cameras, books, and even laptops (Chappuis, Gaffey, & Parvizi, 2011, p. 21). In fact, voice communications are now only the fifth most used function of smartphones (Johnson, 2012, para 4). While there is little doubt that mobile information communications technologies (ICTs), commonly called smartphones, enable individuals and machines to much more efficiently exchange information, a variety of research indicates that the ubiquity of these devices and the associated entangled, adaptive network of people and machines leads to a number of increasingly more stressful, more worrying implications (Hillis, 2010). These include changes in how users think, how they interact, how they consider time, and how they deal with the gnawing insecurity resulting from conflicting information, unexpected disconnection, and expectations of immediate response. Those changes also affect organizational cultures, even society as a whole (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Rushkoff, 2013).

Those cultural aspects are especially important in military units where strong interpersonal bonds of camaraderie and esprit-de-corps are the hallmarks of effective combat outfits. What happens to those bonds when young soldiers are more comfortable “living” on their smartphones and would rather send a text message than endure the “real time” commitment of even a phone call much less a face-to-face conversation (Turkle, 2011, p. 202)?

This study, which focuses on the lived experience of smartphone usage in an Army unit, addresses those questions and many more. More importantly, it explores the importance of embracing organizational change and transformation in order to confront the implications of the ubiquity of information and constant connectivity in a distracted present. Even more concerning are the long-term degradation of individual intellect and collective culture that some attribute to the widespread use of those devices (Carr, 2010; Turkle, 2011). Indeed, change in this area is so rapid and the accompanying “survival anxiety” (Schein, 2013, p.100) is so great that long-held habits and processes of communications and information sharing must be unlearned and new approaches relearned (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Schein, 2013). This study argues that to deal with the smartphone phenomenon, leaders must let go of their deeply-held beliefs, open their minds, hearts, and wills, and lead from the future as it emerges (Scharmer, 2009).

Background of the Study

Organizations of all types have gained great advantages in productivity efficiencies and worker effectiveness through the implementation and assimilation of mobile information communications technologies (Kudya & Diwan, 2002). The benefits of this technology, including timeliness, flexibility, ubiquity, competitive advantage, and the ability to carry out otherwise impossible tasks are well documented (Kakabadse, Kousmin, & Kakabadse, 2000; Powell & Dente-Micallef, 1997). Military commentators, including General Officers, often note the revolutionary impacts modern information technology (IT) on military operations (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). In fact, many of the benefits of ICTs or smartphones stem from the ability to foster innovation and creativity.

Complexity, ambiguity and chaos - the unintended consequences of smartphone usage – may, however, also bring counterproductive effects. The strains on users from technology-related stress – technostress – are linked to significant behavior and health issues (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011; Brod, 1984; Weil & Rosen, 1997). Persons experiencing technostress have lower productivity, lower job satisfaction and decreased commitment to the organization (Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan, B., & Ragu-Nathan, T., 2007). Other studies suggest that technostress can lead to the ineffective acceptance and usage of new technologies (Sami & Pangannaiah, 2005). Interestingly, the most innovative organizations often exhibit

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