

Chapter 13

Mobile Phone Usage in Organizational Communication and Decision-Making: Experience of Employees in a Multinational Company's China Branch

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ABSTRACT

Through individual in-depth interviews, the authors examine employees' use of mobile phones for decision-making and internal/external communication in the China branch of a multinational company. The study shows that mobile phones are a key communication tool in the company. Voice calls are the most preferable way of mobile phone use due to their synchronous nature for instant communication and the rich verbal cues they carry. Text messaging is an unobtrusive way of business communication and it can be used as the formal documentation of business decision-making. Group text messaging turns the mobile phone into a mass communication platform for customer relationship maintenance. Contingency theory is applied to further discuss the findings, and practical recommendations are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

Different communication technologies, such as mobile phone and computer mediated communication, have become a powerful force in the ongoing globalization process and have strong effects on

the development of multinational companies by helping them to achieve efficiency, coordination, and communication. Research has proven that the use of technology can facilitate communication among managers across functional and geographical boundaries in multinational companies, and

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thus enhance coordination of multinational activities in the development of strategic opportunities (Anderson & Foss, 2005). A mobile phone allows people to keep in steady contact with families and friends in their social networks (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; and Ling, 2004), helps people coordinate everyday activities including setting up times and places to meet, seek information, and refine social activities (Campbell & Kelley, 2006; and Ling, 2004). In addition, mobile phones have various expressive functions that allow people to reach out to each other for social and emotional support (Campbell & Kelley, 2008; Johnsen, 2003; and Licoppe, 2004). The multi-functions and media richness of the mobile phone create great potential in different communication contexts, however, mobile phone usage in organizational communication, such as business management and decision-making processes, remains largely unexplored.

Through the study of the China branch of a multinational company, this research explores how the mobile phone could be used as an organizational communication tool for decision-making and information sharing among employees. In addition, this study also examines how the use of the mobile phone for formal and informal communication among employees contributes to relational closeness among themselves.

This research not only enriches the literature on technology usage for organizational communication, but also provides important information for multinational companies that consider using mobile phones for their organizational communication in China. Different from many Western countries, the mobile phone is widely used in organizational settings in China. The popularity of using mobile phone for business communication is related to China's unique social background of mobile phone usage. China currently has the largest number of mobile phone users in the world. By January of 2012, mobile phone subscribers in China reached 960 million, according to a report of the Chinese Ministry of Industry and

Information Technology (CMIIT, 2012). About eight out of every ten people in China own mobile phones. Because of the immediacy, convenience, and low cost, the Chinese use mobile phones especially to text widely. Therefore, in order to localize the communication strategies in China, it is very important for multinational corporations to understand how to effectively use mobile phones in their China branches for decision-making and connecting with employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Technology and Organizational Communication

Technology affects organizational communication at both the micro- and macro-level. Employees spend a lot of working time using technology, and their use of technology is related to their job satisfaction in different ways (O'Kane, Hargie, & Tourish, 2004). First, technology helps employees complete their tasks more easily and increases their confidence in their abilities, thus enhancing self-identity as an effective employee. Second, the wide collaboration and greater communication enabled by technology help employees develop interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. Third, technology supports information and knowledge sharing among organizational members that can increase organizational innovations.

However, managers might perceive technology negatively. Research shows that new technology can become a threat to management jobs as decisions are increasingly becoming the collective product of employees (Langnau, 2000). Therefore, managers might perceive new technological innovations in the organization as associated with employee mistrust of the management team. The management fear of new technology could become an obstacle to the adoption and diffusion of certain new technologies in the organization (Harrington

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