The Fact of Business Life

Think about it! How many things in your life have a chip?

BY PARKER GRANT

Borrowing from the recent pop music hit, telecommunications technology is an exciting and sometimes frustrating situation of blurred lines. More than ever there is a state-of-the-art overlap between telecommunications at work and at home.

Less than a generation ago, conventional office phones and personal cellphones were the only similarities while most businesses and homes had separate-use PCs and laptops.

Eventually Wi-Fi connections started to blur the lines between personal and workplace online telecommunications, although most employees rarely had remote access to the company's restricted server.

Fast-forward to only about five years, when the limitless technology of smartphones and tablets made personal and workplace telecommunications contemporary and routine.

For some businesses, it continues as a workplace dilemma.

Some say the overlap was inevitable and any "dilemma" is unfortunate, unnecessary and a problem that the companies may have brought on themselves. Without technical specs and jargon, today's smartphone, tablet, laptop and other devices are an unavoidable reflection of how very much telecommunications has become a routine and entrenched part of daily lives.

It's inevitable that consumer trends are mirrored in the workplace.

Duncan Stewart, Deloitte's Director of Research for Technology, Media & Telecommunications

For more than a decade, Deloitte (the iconic financial services firm) has surveyed and tracked the latest and emerging technology, media and telecommunications trends and published its annual Deloitte Technology, Media and Telecommunications (TMT) Predictions Report.

The Deloitte data is sourced from global industry players and polls. The data includes Canada-only predictions based on 1,032 Ipsos-Reid interviews conducted online nationally.

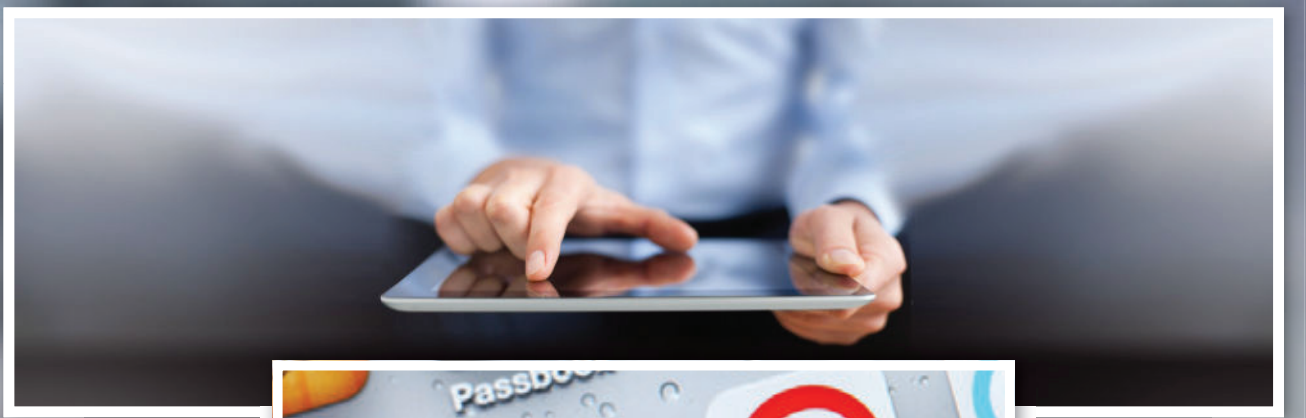According to Duncan Stewart, Deloitte's high-energy and plugged-in director of research for TMT, "Telecommunications is a very mainstream, sophisticated reality. The numbers tell the ultimate story. Telecommunications, primarily the sales of smartphones, tablets, laptops and other popular technology, is now a $760-billion global business.

"Businesses now having to deal with growing employee expectations about companies offering Bring Your Own Devices (BYOD), working from remote and telecommuting is not very surprising."

Stewart and other tech industry experts agree and caution that telecommunications in the workplace is not the future – it is the present. And while some companies have adapted and made a relatively seamless transition, other businesses are dealing with three common telecommunications dilemmas.

For many businesses telecommunications also involves the sharing of information via social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, websites and blogs.

Making the right choices

The valid cliché that technology is changing at warp speeds makes choosing the most usable hardware, software, gizmo upgrades and competitive bundled service deals for the company's unique and specific technology needs a tricky manoeuvre.

Big companies usually have the benefit of in-house IT specialists evaluating and matching the company's needs with the most effective options. Businesses that can't (and don't) justify IT staff are often left to scramble or rely on outside consultants to be up to date with effective and cost-efficient telecommunications options for their specific needs.

Many service providers offer business telecommunications services, so it's important that a company do research to find what packages may be available. No one package is suited for every business. For example, if a business rarely contacts clients who live out of town, phone services with unlimited long distance may not be worth the cost.

From the basic and traditional telecommunications business options like telephone and faxing to email and the Internet to video and voice conferencing to speech recognition, cloudbursting and the mind-boggling gamut of company-provided or Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) tools like smartphones, laptops, tablets and increasingly popular phablets (part-smartphone/part-tablet with a screen size of 5.0-6.9 inches). For many businesses telecommunications also involves the sharing of information via social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, websites and blogs.

"The growth in sales of smartphones, tablets, PCs and gaming consoles has been about 11.8 per cent compounded annually since 2003. Deloitte predicts that growth won't stop, but it will plateau," Stewart predicts.

"Devices are getting cheaper. Less money for hardware means more money that can be spent on software, better data speeds, services and content. The decade of software is upon us.

"No matter how you look at it, analyze it and take it or leave it," he suggests. "The key is to keep up with the latest info as much as you can. Regardless what industry you're in, you must be at least aware of what's out there."

BYOD policies

He traces the widespread use of smartphones, tablets and laptops to explain the surge in demand for a BYOD workplace and the growing popularity and increasing employee push for telecommuting (working by remote) as a routine work option.

"One of the biggest challenges in today's workplace is changing some company outlooks and policies about technology," cautions Steve Van Binsbergen, senior director of business segment marketing at Rogers. "So far, according to national stats, only about 10 per cent of companies have implemented a full BYOD format. The problem is not lack of technology and hardware. The problem is lack of company BYOD policies and procedures.

"It's a bit crazy but about 25 per cent of Canadian employees still carry two smartphones. One for personal use and another for work. Surveys have shown that a vast majority
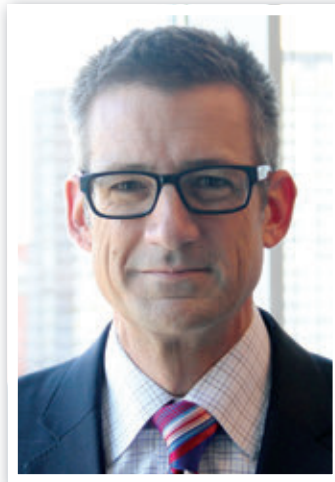
Steve Van Binsbergen, Senior Director of Business Segment at Rogers

would unconditionally comply with company BYOD policies but, unfortunately, most workplaces don't have BYOD policies and procedures in place," he shrugs.

Telecommunications experts like Stewart and Van Binsbergen agree. Whether a company still resists new telecommunications options, clings to concerns about the possible impact on employee performance or has security and risk management issues about open access to company information and databases, it is an unavoidable reality that business, regardless of size, has already shifted from a tethered to an untethered work world.

"Workplace surveys show that eight out of 10 employees feel that popular technologies like company-issue smartphones, tablets and laptops or policies about BYOD use on the job would make them more focused and productive," Van Binsbergen cites with enthusiasm.

"More than 75 per cent of employees surveyed say a company-issue smartphone would increase their job satisfaction."

The trend of telecommuting allows employees to do their job away from the office, from home, huddled over a caramel macchiato at Starbucks or waiting for a flight at the

> According to a recent BMO (Bank of Montreal) survey of Canadian business owners, Alberta companies are way ahead of the rest of the country in adapting to telecommunications.

gate, and it has been documented that employees respond positively and experience increased productivity about technologies that enable working from remote.

"Workplace mobility is a major issue," Van Binsbergen points out. "Organizations are realizing what employees want and what technology is capable of. I know a client who was really struggling to recruit. Eventually he realized that not providing a smartphone or a tablet and not having a BYOD program was keeping candidates from considering his company."

Workplace mobility is a big feature in the Calgary workplace.

According to a recent BMO (Bank of Montreal) survey of Canadian business owners, Alberta companies are way ahead of the rest of the country in adapting to telecommunications. The survey found that more than 34 per cent of Alberta-based companies already offer telecommuting for their employees.

Despite the latest, innovative technology options, four solid communication basics continue as the standard for most businesses: email, videoconferencing, voice conferencing and faxing.

Although Twitter and texting have long overshadowed email for personal communication use, email continues as the business communication of choice, primarily due to ease of access and reach.

"Email is effective for communicating information in the workplace," he explains. "But it is terrible for open and instant communication. That's why a lot of business use relies on SMS, instant messaging. It's great for quick questions and instant answers, chat groups for collective group thinking and participation."

Email is also the most efficient way to send business information to groups at the same time and it's a popular format for sending out proposals without incurring bulky printing and mailing costs.

Videoconferencing – with popular online service providers such as GoToMeeting, and software like iVisit and WebEx – is a high-tech version of face-to-face communication, but saving the time and expense of travelling.

Faxing may be considered a bit vintage but continues to be popular with its ability to quickly transmit hard copies of documents without waiting for the time delay and expense of mail or couriers.

For many businesses, the fax machine's ability to generate backup (date and time) transmission receipts is important.

The Internet boosts even basic telecommunications, from voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP) – a popular and cost-efficient way to make online phone calls – to fax modems that send faxes online or directly to a conventional fax machine.

Whether management is convinced or still hesitant about newer and newer state-of-the-art technology, there is widespread workplace consensus that, aside from the preferences of employees, the popularity of business telecommunications is driven by proven ways to reduce operational costs.

Concern about side-effects

Despite the cost-conscious consensus and the availability of so much new, cutting-edge technologies, there is a telecommunications tsunami gushing through the contemporary workplace.

Some employers, even those who are reasonably techno savvy, are still leery about negative side-effects such as work efficiency, productivity, performance, face-to-face communication ability, deteriorated problem solving, reduced interpersonal interactions, weakened verbal, writing and social skills and other possible impacts of more and more technology and telecommunications in the workplace.

A recent study about Facebook and Twitter found that heavy users may have diminished analytical skills and significantly reduced ability to think for themselves, without relying on the input and opinions of others.

Beware! Well-intentioned business skeptics must tread softly.

Technology is such a solid (almost sacred) fact of work life that daring to even objectively question any aspect of its wonderfulness may provoke defensive put-downs and comparisons to clichéd out-of-touch and embarrassing '80s shrugs about "computers are just gadgets that will never last."

"Companies that are ignoring social media are beginning to feel like the skeptics and hold-outs that used to, and still do, grunt about getting their assistants to turn on their computer," Stewart adds. "They're out there!

"Sometimes gadgets are just that, gadgets. But mostly it is an enormous proliferation of constantly updating technology and devices. Think about it! How many things in your life have a chip?" BiC