Impact of mobile technology

In selecting a case study to assess for my research, I was drawn to the topic of information overload, as it is something that I have struggled to cope with from time to time in my own daily work activities. More specifically, I often find myself spending a lot of my time tethered to any type of mobile technology that is available to me. In assessing some of my own troubles dealing with always being on-call, or expected to return e-mails simply because I had been provided a Blackberry, I wanted to identify how some other organizations dealt with information overload specifically with mobile technology.

I set out to identify how today's managers ensure that their employees fully utilize the mobile technology they are provided, but also do not become over encumbered with the information provided by the same devices. In turn, I discovered a study that was conducted by two individuals from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom on the West Yorkshire Police Force. This study focused specifically on the senior managers of the force, as the authors had determined that there was not an overwhelming amount of data specific to senior management's experiences in both information overload and mobile technology.

The West Yorkshire Police Force is one of the largest police forces in the United Kingdom, now employing over 9000 individuals in various roles (source on force). As most other police forces, the department employs a basic divisional grouping structure, where one senior level officer oversees the specific function of the officers that support that mission. Through my reading of the case study, it became apparent that most of the information

that was distributed throughout the organization was passed through vertical information sharing.

Only at the higher levels of the force did any type of horizontal sharing become apparent. The research conducted on the force was centered on the issuance of Blackberry handheld devices to approximately thirty members of the senior management staff of the force. The West Yorkshire force was selected for the initial implementation of these devices due to their site being one of the leads in developing information and communication technologies among the UK police forces (York, 3). At the time of the study, the officers had been in possession of the Blackberry devices for approximately ten months.

Some themes of information overload were definitely present within the police force. Much of that overload is due to the nature of police work. These individuals work in a very complex environment, where specific task related information can change very rapidly depending on the department and their tasks at that given time. Couple this job environment with the police force's organizations structure and information flow, and these senior managers are presented with a vast amount of information that they must interpret and assess.

One of the most apparent discoveries in this case study was that the organization as a whole did not have any specific strategy in how to deal with the information overload problem within the department. While most officers that were interviewed stated that information overload was a significant issue for the force, the officers determined that it was their own

personal responsibility to handle the excess of information that was presented before them as " part of the job" (force 3).

One example specific to mobile technologies was how the officers felt that the new devices afforded them the ability to read and respond to emails while they were away from their office. One of the officers in the study was quoted as saying, " I think it's shared the overload out… there's still overload but it's shared out now, so instead of coming back to the office and there's fifteen e-mails, I can be looking at them quite frequently when I'm away from the office, So, in actual fact, when I get into my office to do my work, it's a manageable volume.

" (force, 5) One of the key issues in a manager using mobile devices while away from the office is the concept of multi-tasking. While I'm sure that almost any manager is questioned on their ability to multi-task during their entrance interview, current research goes to show that multi-tasking actually hinders managers in some very distinct ways. The first, and probably the most counter-intuitive, is that multitasking actually slows us down.

Studies have shown that individuals that complete two separate task by multitasking, versus just completing one task before starting and completing the next, took up to thirty percent longer to complete the tasks and made twice as many errors (recovering, 64). While the officers felt that taking time to read and respond to a message while they were out in the field lessened their workload when they would return to their office, in all actuality they could have not only been increasing the amount of time required to

complete both tasks and perhaps even reducing the quality of both end products.

This could come into play when coupling with one of the major complaints of the officers regarding e-mail traffic on their Blackberry devices. Many of the officers stated that they would keep other individuals " in the loop" by including them on the cc: of a message. They felt that this would create an audit trail and ensure that there were not any gaps in the lines of communication (force 5). This issue presents two problems, with the first being that many of the individuals were receiving information that was not relevant to their role.

This requires those officers to take time to read a message that was sent to them, just to determine at the conclusion that it was not relevant to them specifically. If you add the potential errors that could have been generated in the message due to the officer multitasking, an individual that would need the information in the message could be receiving incorrect information that could create potential issues at a later time. Another potential issue with multitasking is that is has been shown to lead to higher levels of stress hormones.

A study conducted by Reuters identified that two-thirds of the study's respondents believed that multitasking lessened their job satisfaction and damaged their personal relationships. It was also apparent in this study that the police force had no strategy on how to cope with the usage of these devices outside of work hours, other than each individual developing their own personal strategies on device usage. Most officers would just develop

their own times for responding to messages based on their own after-work habits.

Some would just turn the device off at certain times, while others felt that they could spread out the pressure of the work day by answering messages during their downtime (force, 6). While at first I believed that developing a usage protocol could have been a potential improvement opportunity for the force, some of my research shifted my perspective. In reading an interview of Geoff Parcell, who is an independent consultant dealing in knowledge management, his perspective provided some clarity on how an organization should handle the situation.

He believes that organizations should start with their own self-assessment of how they can best manage the situation, and then pick the techniques that they are comfortable with and identify where they need to improve (interview, 728). While I do feel that the department did not totally fulfill this idea, they did let their personnel determine their own methodology for usage of their mobile devices.