Chapter 11

Factors Influencing Managers’ Use of Mobile Tablets: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

In recent years mobile tablets are being used by many managers. Yet hitherto there is a lack of research on managerial use of the new mobile technology. Hence, this study aims to explore the factors that influence the use of mobile tablets by managers and how mobile tablets impact the use of other digital devices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a panel of mid- to high-level managers who had incorporated mobile tablets into their work routine. The findings reveal that mobile tablets are suitable for managerial tasks due to nine main factors: non-routineness, collaborative nature, time-critical, information-centric, mobility, user friendliness of the interface, reliability, connectivity, and autonomy. Also, the use of mobile tablets has significant impact on the use of other digital devices as well as traditional manual process of using pens and papers. This study fills in the research gap and provides a foundation to help managers establish a business case for or against mobile tablet use.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mobile technology such as iPads has become increasingly popular with overwhelming sales success (Hughes, 2013; Gartner, 2017). According to Gartner (2017), the worldwide sales of mobile tablets have reached 168 million units in 2016. The mobile technology permeates not only personal routines, but also work practices. In fact, the popularity of mobile tablets in workplaces has led to an
emerging and profitable enterprise tablet market (Endler, 2014). More importantly, contemporary managers are no longer tied to stagnant and heavy-duty desktop computers. Instead they are on-the-go with light-weight handheld tablets that contain necessary work information at finger-tips.

Two of the first researchers investigating the use of mobile technologies in business, Grover and Goslar (1993) found wide use of mobile phones among managers for routine activities. Tan and Sie (2015) revealed that Internet-based smartphone is undergoing rapid innovative changes. Mobile device allows managers to be efficient, multitask without disrupting others, respond immediately to messages, and work from anywhere (Middleton & Cukier, 2006). Managers use a range of portable devices to achieve convenience, mobility, input efficiency, and content readability (Karlson, Meyers, Jacobs, & Kane, 2009). Such technology is seen as disruptive because it frees people from tethered systems, such as landline phones and desktops, and provides users with ubiquitous access to people and information. The trend towards adoption of mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones in the workplace is strong and likely unstoppable (Harris, Ives, & Junglas, 2012). Yuan, Archer, Connelly, and Zheng (2010) found that managers work away from their primary working location for more than 30% of their work time. In Kim’s (2008) study, the percentage even reached 60%. Puuronen and Savolainen (1997) argued this remote work is something mobile technology enables. Since managers spend more time away from their primary work location, Gebauer and Shaw (2004) confirmed they use mobile applications more often than other employees. Gebauer, Shaw, and Gribbins (2010) asserted that mobile technology will improve managers’ performance when the characteristics of managerial tasks match those of mobile technology characteristics. One proposed reason why mobile technologies are widely adopted in the workplace is ‘the old computing was about what computers could do; the new computing is about what users can do.’ (Shneiderman, 2003, p.2).

While some see mobile technology as a transformational tool, others call it a disruptive device (Pren'tice, 2010). Even though many managers are current business users of mobile tablets, the role of the devices within the managerial technology portfolio is still largely unknown. While prior studies (e.g., Gebauer & Shaw, 2004; Ioimo & Aronson, 2004; Liang, Huang, Yeh, & Lin, 2007; Tan & Sie, 2015) have investigated the use and impacts of conventional mobile technologies such as laptops, smartphones and personal digital assistants (PDA), there has been a relative dearth of research on the use of mobile tablets by managers. In response, due to the widespread managerial use of tablets in workplace (Endler, 2014), it is important to understand the work nature of managers and how these mobile devices fit into managers’ work routine. Therefore, this research aims to understand the underlying factors influencing the use of mobile tablets by managers and how mobile tablets impact the use of other digital devices and media. Particularly, we focus on the nature of managerial work and the characteristics of mobile tablets that act as the influencers. To achieve the research objectives, we employed exploratory qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews with a panel of mid to high-level managers who use mobile tablets in their work routine.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a literature review on the use of mobile tablets. The third section describes the qualitative research method. The fourth section provides the research findings. The fifth section discusses the findings, then follows the conclusion and future research.