Chapter XX

Disciplining Innovation?
Mobile Information Artefacts in a Telco Innovation Center

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the pattern of bargains with the devil as a means of examining the adoption and use of mobile information artefacts. It argues that, in contrast to other attempts to impose discipline on innovation work practices, the introduction of mobile information artefacts is requested by knowledge workers. Vendor advertising plays a tempting role: proclaiming that the artefact is a consumer good for the knowledge-worker and a productivity tool for the employer. This enlightenment—and deception—results in knowledge workers persuading their employer by appropriating the productivity discourse of the vendor. There follows a honeymoon phase of play and pleasure for these “techies.” But this is the prelude to destruction, as the knowledge-worker faces demands for their promised productivity. The artefact disciplines their innovation work, even erodes it; thus the situation of the employment relationship within relations of consumption results in the knowledge-worker (and their employer) being exploited by the vendor.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile information artefacts are an increasing presence in the pockets and palms of knowledge workers. A fact recognized by their nomenclature: popular types are the Pocket Personal Computer (PC) and the Palm (Pilot). Accompanying the person from home to the office and back, such artefacts disregard and disrupt the work life boundary. One study considers the consequences for employees can be “very positive” (Breu, Hemingway, & Ashurst, 2005); another “a dual-edged sword” (Towers, Duxbury, & Thomas, 2005). Both focus on work flowing into life: a flow unhindered, for no resistance beyond switching off the artefact is to be found. Neither considers the possibility
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of an inverse flow of life into work. This chapter contributes conceptually and empirically to such findings by positing the possibility of an inverse flow of life into work and exploring the significance of mobile information artefacts for line-, peer-, and self-management. Empirically this chapter draws upon nine months experience of work in the innovation centre of a European mobile network operator in the United Kingdom.

Such experience is appropriate for seeking to uncover practices of resistance, misbehavior, and dissent concerning mobile information artefacts whilst looking through the factory gate to the extra-organizational influence of the vendor. As practices of resistance, misbehavior and dissent are “covert and subterranean [they] are inevitably…difficult to identify and research” (Collinson & Ackroyd, 2005, p. 306). They are even more difficult to research when depending upon “large data sets and increasingly available quantitative survey materials, rather than in-depth or longitudinal fieldwork” (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995, p. 619): it would be difficult to construct a survey that might penetrate through the false or faulty consciousness of employees on issues such as the impact of vendor discourse on their actions. Even in an interview, employees may not be forthcoming about practices of resistance, misbehavior, and dissent. The experience of work in the innovation centre is viewed through a critical conceptual lens, shaped by theorists such as Adorno, Baudrillard and Milbank.

During this time in the innovation centre a new service was developed:

It was just a bit of fun—not yet a business project [i.e. not something that had been officially approved and funded]—but it could be a useful service, for parents to track their children, for instance, not just, or specifically, for employers to track employees. It was just unfortunate that we should use Mike [a fellow Graduate Trainee] in the demonstration to Colin [a Senior Consultant and Manager of one stream of research in the innovation centre]. (Dave, Graduate Trainee)

The service ran on a smartphone—an artefact that blends the information power of a Pocket PC and the telecommunication power of a mobile phone—and enabled one to see the location of fellow subscribers to that network. The innovation lay not so much in the technology, but in the fusion of data: the information of a subscriber’s strength of signal vis-à-vis three or more masts, used by any network to determine which mast your call will be directed through, and a standard digital mapping service. The phone numbers used in the trial were those of Graduate Trainees (in some cases with, in some cases without, their consent). During the demonstration of the service to a manager, the unexpected location of one such trainee was exposed: instead of being in a neighbouring town—for a medical appointment—they were several hundred miles away.

One might consider that this event of the disciplining of a member of staff through the use of a technological innovation, a mobile information artefact, is a relatively unique event. However, the more standard services of mobile information artefacts—such as a task tool for “to-do” lists and a calendar for time management—may be used to discipline—for good or ill—the innovation of knowledge workers. Such artefacts can be seen as one of many attempts to reduce knowledge worker discretion and autonomy, other attempts in the innovation centre being: the roll out of a company-wide innovation inducement scheme; the global integration (i.e., reduction) of research and development resources; the re-layering of the management hierarchy; the recruitment of cheap labor (i.e., centrally-funded Graduate Trainees on placement) and the abolition of “seed money” to develop concept demonstrators. However, whilst these attempts were opposed by the knowledge workers, the introduction of mobile information artefacts was welcomed, indeed, requested, suggesting a more complex picture.
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