Chapter 7

Making a Rod for One’s Own Back: Employee Bargaining for Smartphones in a Telco’s R&D Department

Christopher Russell
Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter identifies a new pattern of bargaining for technology, based upon nine months’ ethnographic fieldwork amongst the engineers of a Telco’s research and development department. Bargains for smartphones were initiated by the employee and negotiated with the employer by reference to the productivity discourse of the vendor. After a honeymoon phase of exploration, the reality of operation was markedly different, resulting, in several cases, in the disposition of the smartphone or, in one case, the disposition of the employee to leave. Such bargains were driven by conceptions of the personal and organisational use value of the artefact, and this finding reveals shortcomings in the drivers, influences, and stages of adoption found in existing models. A new conceptual framework is presented that facilitates exploration of the contribution of personal and organisational use value to technology adoption.

INTRODUCTION

Smartphones are an increasing presence in the pockets and palms of professionals. Blending the information power of a small personal computer and the telecommunication power of a mobile phone, they accompany the person from home to the office and back. By their disregard for any work-life boundary, they become artefacts of potential personal benefit and thus disrupt our understanding of technology adoption in organisations. For such understanding is shaped by, or at least captured in, models developed for older technological artefacts and other organisational forms. Models which take the perspective of the manager and imply the stages of technology adoption are unproblematic, rational and planned. This chapter presents an empirical enquiry into
how smartphones are being bargained for in the Research and Development (R&D) department of a telecommunications company (Telco). The chapter is structured as follows. The Background section identifies personal costs and benefits of smartphone use in organisations, as found in the extant literature. It notes that these studies do not identify which, if any, participants had initiated the bargaining for a smartphone. A method for exploring the bargains struck by employees is then outlined. The section R&D Engineers and their Smartphones describes episodes and presents interview fragments showing examples of bargaining for smartphones found in the telco. The following section Implications for Existing Models of Technology Adoption reveals, on the basis of this case, shortcomings in the extant models, both in terms of the stages used to understand such adoption and the drivers and influences thought to determine such adoption. On the basis of this analysis, the section Future Research Directions outlines a conceptual framework which could be used, cognisant of the identified potential pitfalls, in future studies. The chapter then draws conclusions from the bargains found in the Telco.

BACKGROUND

Through their mobility and functionality smartphones, even organisation-provided ones, have become technological artefacts of personal significance. Research to date has identified benefits and costs for individuals of organisational smartphone adoption. For instance, in terms of benefits, smartphones may liberate an employee from their desk (Ling, Julsrud, & Krogh, 1997), help them maintain connection with family and friends (Wajcman, Bittman, & Brown, 2008) and reduce their short-term stress by enabling them to keep up with their emails (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2005) whilst waiting for an egg to boil (Towers, Duxbury, Higgins, & Thomas, 2006). In terms of costs, smartphones may increase the employee’s long-term stress as their ability to keep up with emails actually generates more emails (Mazmanian, et al., 2005), help create new family conflicts (Fenner & Renn, 2010) as family members resent the intrusion of smartphones into shared time and space (Middleton, 2007) and limit the employee’s rest and recuperation as others expect them to read and act upon messages at whatever the time of day or even night (Middleton, 2007). In some of these studies smartphones were dished-out across an organisation, division or role as part of a management-led technological change project (e.g. Mazmanian, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2006; Mazmanian, et al., 2005; Orlikowski, 2007). In others it is not clear whether, or which, employees may have initiated the adoption of the smartphone itself (e.g. Ling, et al., 1997; Middleton, 2007; Middleton & Cukier, 2006; Towers, et al., 2006; Wajcman, et al., 2008). As a result, it is not possible to discern how employees who have exercised agency in the procurement of the smartphone have subsequently experienced it in use. Such non-mandated adoption and use would be expected based upon the benefits for individuals of the use of smartphones in organisations outlined above. Based upon the Scandinavian literature of employee initiated adoption or development of other technologies and systems (Bødker, et al., 1987; Ehn, 1988; Ehn, Kyng, & Sundblad, 1983) one could assume that having exercised agency in the procurement of the smartphone, the employee is more inclined to experience, and report, the benefits as opposed to the costs of their use. A recent study of smartphone experiences also suggests that it makes sense that voluntary users ‘would more likely frame their experience in a positive light, focusing on the benefits’ (Matusik & Mickel, 2011, p. 23) and suggests the need for future research to examine this. Further, one might expect that whilst such employees exercise agency in the adoption of the smartphone, over time the smartphone itself