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NAVIGATING THE DUAL ROLE OF SMARTPHONES IN E-WORK: ENHANCING PRODUCTIVITY WHILE MANAGING DISTRACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Technological progress has made smartphones more than just a communication tool. Nowadays, there are ways to work remotely using a smartphone. Digital advancement and COVID-19 were global milestones for the culture of digital transformation and led to more flexibility and mobility in the workplace. This research aims to study the real experience of smartphone workers. Focus is paid to the e-workforce, comprised of jobholders with work flexibility experience who have formed different post-pandemic standards. Six workers led qualitative examinations from Austria to collect unprocessed data for this study. As reported by these results, working from home via a smartphone 'works'. But there are many factors to consider. Notably, smartphones are a vital piece of equipment for respondents in finishing tasks, but while smartphones offer substantial advantages, using them at home for work is not without challenges. These devices can become an unwelcome distraction at the very least and a legal and operational risk at worst. Smartphones increase mobility and flexibility, as well as the flow of workplace communication, but they also cause distractions in the workplace.

Keywords: flexibility and mobility, work from home, smartphone, lived experience

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INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and retaining good talent are serious issues facing employers today. Workforce turnover (voluntarily and involuntarily) is a significant issue globally. The key differentiation between involuntary (beyond the management (Ongori, 2007)) or voluntary turnover (when employees quit) lies in who undertakes the process. "It has been acknowledged that people are a significant source of competitive advantage" (Ghani et al., 2022, p. 1). In summary, myriad elements explain why jobholders accept, stay in, or quit a job.

Flexibility and mobility have both become a *sine qua non* of the working environment with different working models. Many countries have introduced various working models, but global employment and the social outlook remain uncertain and fragile (ILO, 2022a). Flexible working practices (FWP) reveal that working without stringent limits around working areas, agendas, and agreements is possible (Cooper and

Baird, 2015; Groen et al., 2018). Beno et al. (2023, p. 10) simply defined work flexibility as "having various flexible work schedules (their own choices as to when, where and how they engage in the working process) for better managing their work and personal lives". This refers to practices that allow individuals to decide and manage their work schedules (Maxwell et al., 2007) and to manage work and family responsibilities (Kim et al., 2019).

"The world is more connected now than ever before" (Beno et al., 2023, p. 339). The new work shape is flexible, as shown during COVID-19 with mass working-from-home experiments. Both the digital era and COVID-19 have shifted attitudes and preferences around the flexible working practices of employers and employees and have the potential to impact on cultural norms. FWP are beneficial for both employers and employees, as it is a strategy for retaining talent (Grobler and De Bruyn, 2011) occurring in various forms (Cagáňová, 2019; Beno and Caganova, 2023; ILO, 2022b). As stated by Beno and Hvorecky (2021, p. 7), in a war for talent "it is very hard to fix the borders since it also depends on personal mindsets." A total of 80% of the global workforce does not sit behind a desk to do their jobs (Emergence, 2020).

Smartphones have become nearly ubiquitous globally. More than two-thirds of the global population uses a mobile phone, the total having reached 5.48 billion users in April 2023 (Dateportal, 2023). Harris et al. (2020) highlighted the popularity of smartphones. Smartphone ownership has become increasingly prevalent. Generally, smartphones provide unique opportunities for social interaction. Consequently, we are interested in exploring FWP using only smartphones. The configuration of FWP is a complicated task because different restrictions relate to work demands and employee preferences must be considered. The aim of this research, then, is to study the real experience of smartphone workers. The following research questions have been formulated:

1. Does work from home entirely with a smartphone work?
2. Is it possible to give up a laptop for a smartphone?

The structure of this paper is as follows: The next section, methodology, gives a brief outline of the methods carried out regarding the qualitative study. The next section serves as the culmination of all the findings. A section describing, analyzing, and interpreting the findings follows. The final section serves to summarize the main points of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Like Van Manen (1997), the intention of this study is to capture the essence and nuances of smartphone workers. Prior to scheduling the interviews, a 15-minute phone screening was conducted. Two e-workers refused participation, and one did not meet the inclusion criteria. Six met the inclusion criteria and were involved in this study. The semistructured format we used offers flexibility to the investigator and the participant (Knott et al., 2022), but "bias due to poorly constructed questions is a common criticism of qualitative interviews" (Young et al., 2017, p. 12). DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019, p. 7) further added the following pitfalls: underestimating the resources required to recruit participants, interview, transcribe and analyze the data. Aside from these obstacles, this format "can be a productive way to collect open-ended data from participants" (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019, p. 7). Semistructured interviews were done via Zoom. This free-of-charge medium is suitable for collecting data. Gray et al. (2020) pointed out that Zoom can be used for high-quality and in-depth qualitative interviews when face-to-face interviews are not possible. Archibald et al. (2019, p. 7) state, "Zoom may serve as a highly suitable platform for collecting qualitative interview data."

In this study, we adapted a purposeful sample as a non-probability sample, beginning with specific perspectives in mind to examine and seek out research participants. A very narrow and specific criteria were created: gender, e-work experience (part- or full-time), suitable smartphone occupation and smartphone ownership, and willingness to participate for one week by working from home via smartphone. The sample included six participants from Austria, consisting of three females (D-F) and three males (A-C), whose ages ranged from 27 to 42, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants grouping

Country	Participant	Gender	Job	Employment	Age
Austria	A	M	Social media manager	Full-time	42
	B		Editor	Full-time	38
	C		E-commerce business	Full-time	29
	D	F	Online tutor	Full-time	40
	E		Translations services	Part-time	33
	F		Testing apps	Part-time	27

Source: Author's work.

The selected participants were contacted via Zoom after a pre-selection phone call and their indicated time slot was confirmed. Each participant was interviewed for about 90 minutes and the following questions were asked after their one-week experience:

1. Could you work solely at home (part-time or full-time) via smartphone?
2. What were the pros of working via smartphone?
3. What were the cons of working via smartphone?
4. What did you need to be able to work at home using only your smartphone?
5. Could you do your job just on apps?
6. Was your work done well?

The phenomenological approach and coding effectively comprehend more about smartphones, workers' lived phenomena, and viewpoints (see Table 2). Phenomenology is a flexible, reflective, and iterative method for this study (Vagle, 2014). Sokolowski (2000, p. 12) explained that "it is a way of looking at what we usually look through". Each participant presented a unique personal experience. In-depth conversations yielded three essential themes (Code level 1 to Code level 4 in Table 2) stated by all participants. Qualitative research is most apt for determining complex concerns such as the work-from-phone experience. Phenomenology co-creates interpretations between researcher and participants (Wojnar and Swanson, 2007), includes small sample size (Smith and Osborn, 2003), and explores an area of investigation flexibly and in detail.

Four-level coding (see Table 2) was developed by "standardizing the textual units in order to organize and make sense of the qualitative data derived from the interviews" (Beňo, 2023, p. 5). The first level comprised "smartphone work". The second level further distinguished (1) the smartphone work model, (2) evaluation, and (3) the smartphone work equipment. The third level is (1) part-time/full-time, (2) user satisfaction, and (3) ability. The last level comprised (1) work at home, (2) advantages and disadvantages, and (3) job tasks.

Table 2: Four-level coding scheme

Code level 1	Code level 2	Code level 3	Code level 4	Items
Smartphone work	Smartphone work model	Part-time/ Full-time	Work at home	Occupations, activities
	Evaluation	User satisfaction	Advantages, disadvantages	Savings, access, costs, mobile data, distraction, always-on culture, happiness, productivity
	Smartphone work equipment	Ability	Tasks	Apps, technology, reliable smartphone, connections

Source: Author's work.

All interviewees who agreed to participate in this study were fully informed regarding confidentiality, secrecy, perceptivity, and data protection. Everyone agreed verbally to participate in the interviews.

Participation was voluntary.

RESULTS

The pandemic has created a culture of rapid digital transformation. Working remotely is not a far-off dream anymore, but, as Participant E explained, "something that many of the younger workforces has come to expect". Therefore, many employees have moved their careers online. The list of potential job opportunities has grown and become more diverse and flexible. Four participants were full-time employees, and two worked part-time in various occupations (see Methodology section, Table 1). As the interviews show, smartphones have made great inroads into their lives, and their occupations allow them to work entirely with this work-communication device. Participant A explained that "my smartphone is more than just a communication device, much more a source of entertainment and educational tool." In fact, respondent B pointed out that "my job doesn't even require a computer anymore." As interviewee C clarified, "In the right sector, with proper planning, everything is possible from your smartphone,". Respondent D, an online tutor, added: "going mobile gives on-the-go teaching to stay connected anywhere,". Interestingly, E noted, "anything I could do on a laptop, I could do on a smartphone,". As a tester of apps, participant F said: "yes, absolutely, you can do so". All of them agreed that working solely with a smartphone requires some planning and logistical consideration. Of course, not every job - not every employee - can work just with a smartphone. All participants are of the opinion that knowing which occupations can be performed remotely via phone seems to be valuable for understanding the future of the sources of labor supply. "An architect would probably need special programs or tools, even a bigger screen," added participant A. During the interviews, respondents summarized the following points on how to work from home via a mobile device: "a) have the right apps to get the job done, b) do research, c) get used to working with a smaller keyboard, d) back up everything, and e) give a touch of user-centric experience in the mobile revolution."

Smartphones seem to be friendly tools, making everything reachable through one device and one touch. According to Participant A: "Through my palms of my hands, I can do everything: take pictures, scan, sign, host meetings, pay, attend events…". Today's technology seems to make life easier than in the past. According to the opinions flowing from the interviews, there will certainly be some advantages (saving money, access to apps, convenience) and a few disadvantages (costs/mobile data, distractions, blurring work-life boundaries, security risks, always-on culture) while using a smartphone for work from home. "Using a smartphone to run your business cuts costs," was especially important for Participant C. Participant D added, "saving the cost of a laptop, an office and even wi-fi when having 5G connection". "Choosing the right phone is essential for saving money," according to interviewee D. Respondent F stressed that "there is a higher possibility of spilling a full glass of water all over your laptop than over your smartphone." Participant B mentioned that "your smartphone is more powerful than your PC and more waterproof too," echoing respondent F. For interviewee E, this experiment discovered "access to great apps needed for the work". As manager A said: "which apps will work best for you depends on you and your investigation." Because as interviewee C pointed out: "once you have the right tools, you will be ready to succeed." Participant B used ten apps during the week and "found very few difficulties in daily operations". Working from the phone allowed Participant A to "be more productive by checking how different departments were doing while sitting at the airport". Interviewee C agreed, because "when urgent approval was needed, he simply pulled out his smartphone". Importantly, respondent D highlighted that she "customized the device by setting up mobile apps and the device by herself and not by IT regulation". For Participant F, location independence was crucial: "you can take your smartphone anywhere without being restricted to specific places." This is similar to respondent E, who said, "When eating in a restaurant and waiting for your order, you can use that time to do your work. Using my device, I tracked project outcomes more skilfully and responded immediately." Interviewee B emphasized better focus: "a smartphone will keep your focus on the task at hand."

Working from a smartphone at home may give you a competitive edge in some areas, but it also has certain disadvantages. "I was in the middle of a project and a text notification popped up," explained respondent B. But as interviewee C said, for him personally, "there was no distracting me from working since I was already on my smartphone." Respondent A mentioned being unable to multitask, saying that "you can only work on one task at a time on your smartphone." Participant E compared working on a laptop and on a smartphone, where "any task involving multiple apps or windows feels about 60% slower, closing apps many times when copying and pasting." Respondent D specified software compatibility issues: "writing a lecture was easy but uploading it to Moodle was a nightmare." Interviewee F recommended going to "a physical store and testing a piece of hardware yourself to make sure it works with your phone before purchasing online".

All respondents agreed that working from their smartphones offers flexibility. As stated by Participant A, "you can work from anywhere at any time of the day." However, according to interviewees' responses, this may also be one of the biggest burdens. Participant B felt like being "constantly on the clock". Respondent C added that there is almost "no clear division between family (free time) and work time". "You always have your smartphone with you," he stated. The risk of cyber theft was mentioned as the biggest drawback. But, as respondent A answered, "this can be effectively managed." Respondent B said, "choose mobile software and apps with security built in directly." The rest of the respondents did have various antivirus apps.

Smartphones and smartphone apps allowed respondents to work remotely with the same functionality on their smaller devices. The following factors deriving from answers by the respondents should be considered when finding a smartphone and mobile operating system that does the job: a) a smartphone is needed that works (reliable signal to make calls and access data) (according to respondent A, "coverage, customer service and cost are crucial for being able to work properly with your smartphone"); b) the advantage of IT department support; c) mobile apps, such as Apple's iOS, Windows Mobile and Android; and d) physical features as already mentioned by participant F, e.g., voice quality (speakerphone, headsets) and keyboard (on-screen or physical).

All the interviewees agreed that they could do their jobs just on apps. But multitasking is not possible when working on a smartphone. Participant E explained, " I could not listen to a YouTube playlist." As stated by respondent A, "without using Cloud storage it does not work." In this vein, participant B stressed the necessity of "backing everything up". "Some apps require a company VPN for connecting to the Internet," explained participant D.

Surprisingly, all respondents discovered that working from a smartphone influenced their work quality, satisfaction with finished tasks and work duties, and collaboration with customers and colleagues. They felt productive on their smartphones. As respondent A stated, "I was able to get things done as I normally would." Respondents B and F both emphasised "a greater sense of focus". As interviewee C said, "without multiple apps at the same time, means more focus." Respondent D somehow felt "more relaxed and happier. I love my smartphone." Respondent F did not like being "tethered to the desk" but liked "having more ability to be productive wherever I wanted to be". All respondents felt they were more connected and available compared to laptop work. "It forced me to be more attentive and active listening to my customers," explained respondent E.

This experiment positively affected mutual cooperation with others. Respondent A mentioned, "I felt like I answered and got the requests faster," while B added, "being more attentive and communicative".

DISCUSSION

According to Deloitte (2023), a total of 68% of the workforce from Switzerland utilize their smartphones for work during their leisure time. This study demonstrates, on the contrary, how to use the smartphone as a work tool. Based on the interviews, the smartphone is a personal gateway to access anything the respondents like. They can do anything with just a smartphone. Additionally, mobility is the second factor. Location is no longer a restriction. All things considered from the interviews, accessibility, mobility, and smartphone power paired with convenience demonstrated a boost in the usage of this device in the work-home environment. However, smartphones are mainly used for

communication (Saha and Saha, 2018) and not as a working tool, as investigated in this study. The smartphone as a purely working tool has both positive and negative effects. The findings of this study, which have highlighted the positive effects of using smart devices in the workplace, is in line with Miller-Merrell (2012). Based on interviews, respondents rely on technology to do their jobs, similar to Emergence's (2020) data. Beňo (2021) found that a remote workforce provides many choices but also comes with its share of exceptions. This agrees with the participants' views, although it was stated that working solely with a smartphone provides many advantages and disadvantages. As with e-working (Beňo, 2021), this kind of work depends on many factors: the right sector, with proper planning and modern technology. The main focus of smartphone personal utilization is calls, emails and texting. For professional purposes, the main focus of using mobile devices is voice calls and search engines (Neştian et al., 2020). The workforce does not use the smartphone's full potential in today's work environment. This study has demonstrated the shift, which shows that a smartphone may be the main device used to do the job. This is identical to consuming media via smartphones rather than via TV in countries with higher smartphone penetration (Dolan, 2023; Wike et al., 2022). All respondents gave a positive rating for the productivity of working with a smartphone at home. These data are similar to those of Nair (2021), which stated that smartphones increased their productivity. This is followed by data obtained through interviews with similar findings to Bittner et al.'s (2021) study that the smartphone promotes autonomy in the workplace.

Any work has the aim of developing some kind of result. This result is a product of many completed tasks done by the employee, for example cruising and working remotely at sea (Cole, 2023). Various tools are necessary in order to finish them, as demonstrated by this experiment. The biggest advantage of working with a smartphone from home is the better user experience. The smartphone was a vital tool for respondents for completing the work.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research aspired to study the real experience of smartphone workers. The data has contributed new insights into identifying the strengths, and tentative conclusions can be drawn because they are always accessible to modification based on new evidence or further investigation. The participants in this study reported working from smartphones at home. According to the participants in this study, this flexibility process may start a journey of working from your smartphone from home. Overall, the data have given preliminary indications that subjective approaches to working from home with your smartphone may be beneficial and valuable to employees.

The following research questions have been formulated:

1. Does working from home entirely based on a smartphone work?

   Although some tasks are suited to a desk setup, all respondents used their smartphone as a work tool. As demonstrated in this study, smartphone workability varies depending on the nature of the tasks and individual preferences.

2. Is it possible to give up the laptop for a smartphone?

   The answer is yes. Whatever the workforce task is and wherever the workforce is located, working from your smartphone from home is possible, but thoughtful consideration to employees and business-specific needs is required.

Work environments that deliver the right support and arrangement for staff mobile phone use while unquestionably transmitting the hazards will appreciate their perks in advance.

The main difficulty of this study is its novelty. Secondly, the study was conducted in Austria. Participants were native German speakers. The use of the native language throughout the study was important; it appeared to add deeper, more intense, richer, qualitative meaning to the explanations given by the participants, as shown by the words they selected to clarify their experiences. English translations could still impact the interpretation of the transcripts and present cultural nuances in the data. Sayings and expressions vary from culture to culture and are language-specific. Therefore, the meaning should be comprehensible as it was expressed in the native language. Another limitation was that the qualitative analysis was time-consuming and delayed the results' presentation. Despite these limitations, this

study's findings were accurate and credible. Furthermore, collecting evidence from multiple replications in various cultural and organizational settings may expand the credibility of our findings.

In future studies, researchers should be aware of the risks of pain and injuries to the hands, and they should therefore explore healthy hand solutions to help decrease fatigue and keep hands flexible (e.g., loosening exercises, regular finger stretches and targeted wrist exercises) regarding how to use the smartphone ergonomically. Furthermore, instead of semistructured interviews, mixed research methods could be adopted to boost the awareness and willingness of employees to use their smartphones solely for work at home. Interestingly, smartphone self-efficacy (the ability to be able to cope with difficulties or the capacity of performance - influence over events affected by life), which deals with individuals' personal belief in their potential to use smartphones successfully to complete different activities, is another psychological factor which could be investigated in more detail.

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