

The mobile smoking room

We are waiting only for the new medium to finally find its place as a distinctive medium. One that isn't a reflection of the medium we have been bound to the last 15 years, but that is a new medium offering new prospects – and that may one day change our way of thinking, working and cooperating. Meet a technofreak who has spotted the mobile phone's potential to create corporate mobility.

By Vibeke Wara

It's strange how cooperation has evolved in multinational companies. While we talk with our colleague in Tokyo daily, we have no idea what is happening in the office beside us. We sit glued to our monitor in a bubble of emails and desktop metaphors. When we don't have our customer on the phone, it's our supplier. Our colleague sits beside us. We know his position and, vaguely, what he does. But that doesn't concern us directly, so our grind continues – emails, orders and contracts far and wide – without our neighbor.

Most large companies have a fairly typical organization structure with sales, marketing and HR. The bigger the organization becomes, the more categorical it becomes and the more branched its activities. Apparently, in the end, it is assumed that if you are a marketing project leader, you are good *only* at marketing.

But does that mean marketing people have nothing to say about development, and salespeople would rather not be involved in recruiting? It is really surprising when you talk to people about something happening in their company – surprising how they lift their hands in a “none of my business” reflex when you ask about something that doesn't directly concern their daily job. Does this indicate a lack of engagement, or does it indicate an overly-rigid company structure?

Influence in the smoking room

For most employers, a good employee is an engaged employee. How else to explain the billions spent yearly on attitude adjustment and the communication of company values through flash games, events and fringe benefits. Companies brand themselves, but usually not into the core that motivates them.

While user-generated content has become an essential driver in the media world, it's surprising how rarely employees are allowed to express themselves at the workplace. Influence is one of the magic words, if we look at what motivates employees. It is one of the assessment criteria in the competition “Denmark's best workplace.” But how do you gain influence when you aren't a marketing manager or change leader?

Some years ago, I worked in a multinational concern. We were 250 employees at the local office. Of the 250, about a third were smokers. In other words, about 80 smokers had to share a smoking room of about five square meters. That was what made the smoking room a dynamic oasis of new ideas and decisions. When we stood together packed like sardines - developers, marketing people, salespeople and buyers - we learned that others actually had views about what we worked with each day – often radical views. Idle chit-chat often became new ideas and concepts, and the smoking room became an incubator of projects with many sparring partners who otherwise would have had no influence.

We become engaged when we are heard. What would have become of our projects back then if we had not listened to the voices that created them? And how would the company have been to work in, if we had not had the smoking

room? I remember my time in this company as an explosive time with engaged colleagues, innovative projects and friendships across professional fields.

Today, the smoking room is *outdoors*, and the few remaining smokers are hardly likely to brave the winter wind to chit-chat in the doorway or up on the roof terrace. But how do we create a counterpart to the smoking room? How do we create a place where we are able to meet like-minded colleagues across jobs and professions?

Interdisciplinary communication

In the past, when we hadn't yet become glued to our PC, emails, PowerPoints and spreadsheets, a few of us pecked away at typewriters, while the rest of us ran around networking, organizing, getting new ideas and participating in meetings. Information technology has helped us work much more effectively and complete more and many tasks at the same time. But it has also isolated us from the foundation of a company's development. We now work in bubbles and have grown worse at interdisciplinary communication.

Yet, we now have technology that lets us read emails on our cell phone and coordinate projects from a sunny lawn. Technically, we could give up sitting at our PCs and, instead, use all our time in meetings, running around, coming up with new ideas and working in groups

Fields of new mobile technologies are blooming at our feet. Nokia recently announced plans for *social networking* applications for their Highend 60 series, which have long been the phones of choice for businesspeople. Nokia released its Bluetooth sensor back in 2005, but it has since remained untouched because no one has known how to use it.

In addition, the *moblog* (mobile weblog) is becoming a well-known tool for young people and active adults, who use them to upload photos from trips and events. The computer helped us multitask, and now the mobile phone helps us network. As laptop computers become cheaper, companies use more money to expand their internal communication from the PC to smaller portable units such as PSPs, PDAs and smartphones. Danish children and young people replace or upgrade their cell phone every other year, and that says something about employee expectations for their telephones in the future.

Show me your cell phone and I will tell you who you are

In a few years (if not already), many employees will carry all-in-one Blackberries and smartphones. We used to be split up

CORPORATE MOBILITY

Corporate Mobility is a technological trend in which mobile technologies are used to improve companies' working methods and processes. It happens by optimizing the communication between employees and partners, and optimizing data exchange and generation. It also happens through employees becoming more mobile, because tasks are moved onto mobile devices, and through waiting times and mobile situations being exploited optimally.

into "PC" and "Mac" groups. Today, we glance over the shoulders of business contacts to see whether that is, indeed, the latest n95 in their hands.

School children are completely out if their phone is a clunky, last-year's model; they wander morosely around the playground while their friends compete over who has the most impressive pictures or videos from MTV, if they don't have an MMS budget.

Of course, old fogies think it's a completely catastrophic development: What will it end with? And then the parents are ruined by the cost of MMSs. No, it was probably much better when we harassed our parents for Lacoste shirts and Nike trainers.

Like it or not, the technology is here, it is here to stay, and it will become ever more pervasive in every corner of our life. Our cell phone is the object we hold closest to our hearts every single day. Our contacts are on it; so is our lifeblog. We use it to send emails, chat, take photos and videos of everything we do. Our cell phone can tell everything about who we are – especially if, as so many young people do, we use it as a diary. Moreover, it is an essential status symbol and even more important than our Blueberry bag and our Rolex (which was replaced with a phone long ago).

So, how do we use the cell phone's invasion of our space for something positive? How do we use it so that it actually improves our way of working, letting us become engaged, network and contribute to the initiatives we burn for?

Help to meet in the corporate world

Bluetooth-sensor technologies and moblogs have so far been considered something we use in private life – in community-based networks such as Jaiku, or in connection with online dating where, by putting up a profile, you hopefully send signals to people on the street looking for Mr or Ms Right. These concepts haven't been much of a success, because they require everyone to have the same Bluetooth application or follow the same moblog. If only 50 people belong to Enpresence in Copenhagen, you can walk the streets a long time before running into a member.

But in the corporate world, where colleagues and contacts move in the same places - to conferences, seminars, lunchrooms, airports, etc. – it's actually possible to make some sensible network applications that help employees and business connections meet. It's similar to what we already do. Before we go to a conference, we think about who we want to meet, and use our cell phone to set up the meeting. And if we are delayed, we use text messaging to let the person know we are running late or need to cancel. If someone created an event-based moblog with a Bluetooth-function, for example, we'd save a great deal of time finding the right people – those in our social mobile network, and maybe even new people.

The technology offers many opportunities to communicate knowledge. How many of us know what the people we see in the cafeteria actually do? Maybe I have experience with the problem the person at the next table is wrestling with,

but she will never know, because I work with something altogether different.

Companies today must actively adjust to climate changes. The consequences are often radical organizational changes in which employees get new functions and must accept new roles. The PC helped us multitask. Maybe mobile technologies are the way to help us gain more influence across professions, and so cooperate in a more dynamic unified whole and gain more engagement.

Corporate mobility?

Thanks to the cell phone, all of us are more present privately than we were just ten years ago. We have become experts in text messaging, leaving messages (something we disliked when I was a child) and calling somebody – anybody – whenever we are bored on the train. The corporate world is a little slower. Yes, all employees are issued a phone, but it has not entirely dawned on managers what sort of machine they put in the hands of employees

They understand even less how to exploit the cell phone's potential. We can truthfully say the technology has outpaced our inventiveness. It's the eternal question of chicken-and-egg, which we technofreaks constantly fight. But while we have long fought poor mobile internet connections, operator monopoly and bad batteries, we have crossed the techno-chasm with mobile wifi connections, cheaper internet connections, symbian-based platforms and large mobile memories. We are waiting only for the new medium to finally find its place as a distinctive medium. One that isn't a reflection of the medium we have been bound to the last 15 years, but that is a new medium that offers new prospects – and that may one day change our way of thinking, working and cooperating.

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To be in good company

“To be in good company.” That’s what it’s about in the company of the future. It is togetherness and co-operation around a purpose that will drive people, companies and the world forward. In other words, cooperations – not corporations – will be the attractive companies of the future.

By Thomas Geuken and Gitte Larsen