Changing the Way We Work

Well, my wife and I finally bought a set of iPhones. The wait was fairly short and the setup was painless. Now we had bright and shiny phones that worked the way we wanted. What we didn't understand was how much a smartphone can change the way we work.

Two years ago I had commented on the difficulties of cell phone use ("A Prison Cell," October 2006). I remarked at the time that if Apple ever produced a phone with an interface design similar to the iPod, I would buy one so I could break out of my prison cell. But when it was introduced some months later, I didn't jump at the chance to buy one because I wouldn't be able to easily manage a to-do list and calendar. So, I sat on the sidelines until a newer model (iPhone 3G) was released. However, it was not the 3G and GPS capabilities that caused us to make that morning trip to the mall. Rather, it was the raft of applications including a good to-do program from independent developers that became available at the same time.

After getting rid of our old phones, the next devices to go were our personal digital assistants (PDAs), which held our calendars, contacts, and the task lists. But, as inhabitants of Atlanta, we didn't give up our landlines because we never forget that wind, rain, and especially ice can disrupt our power and strain the wireless network. Because we have telephones at home, our smartphones become most useful once we leave home.

On a recent trip to the Veneto region of Italy, I didn't take my laptop computer. Until now, I used it to offload the pictures taken during the day. Without the laptop, I simply carried more memory cards. And our e-mail, RSSs, and the newspapers were available on the cell phone. The iPhone may not be the best way to keep up to date, but it's good enough while on the road and a whole lot easier to pack and carry than a laptop.

There is also the playful aspect of this device. My son, Patrick, and I like Pandora radio (http://www.pandora.com), a Web service that lets you create a customized radio station that helps you find new music based on your favorite songs and new selections suggested by your choices.

I have used the phone to access the papers that I have to assign for this journal. Despite the small screen, by rotating the phone to achieve broad display and by scaling, I am able to read and evaluate manuscripts. It was this process that got me to thinking about reading documents in the future. Trying to scroll through a paper to see if it has information or data that you need is a bit trying on a smartphone right now. But if published papers in the future incorporated a linked outline of the sections of the work, perhaps with a short one- or two-line gloss (sort of a textual twitter) on each section, it would be easier for a reader to understand the paper before diving into the details.

There are those who seek an all-encompassing mobile computer that can meet every need. But I doubt this will come to pass. In the future, I believe that our computer-related work will be divided into two overlapping areas: information and production. Information (e-mails, RSSs, web searching, and browsing) will be acquired almost anywhere and be displayed on our mobile device. Whereas production, which would include writing (word processing), computation (spreadsheets), graphic design (image manipulation and art generation), and other keyboard and display-intensive applications would be confined to full-sized laptops and desktop computers. But these devices will be synchronized (e.g., IMAP e-mail) with each other.

Every so often, I will take a look at this gadget cradled in my palm and compare it to the devices I have used over the years. In spite of all the silliness that can be found on them, these things are amazing. I realize that it is the nature of technology and the process of engineering that they will continue to improve, extending our ability to find the information we need to satisfy our curiosities.

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