

The big question:
**Is your smart
 phone making
 you dumb?**

The explosion in smart phones was supposed to make our lives easier – but are they actually lowering our effectiveness and hurting our health? **Amanda Bown** investigates the rise of the ‘activity illusion’

When smart phones exploded onto the market, we were told the answer to all our work/life woes had arrived. For here was the new wonder tool that would boost your productivity, improve communication with your colleagues and help you manage your workloads on the move, at home or even in a coffee shop. Above all, they meant you could now work at hours to suit you. And we loved it: according to a 2011 YouGov survey, 33 per cent of UK adults have smart phones with technology to access emails; with 26 per cent of us using iPhones and 14 per cent BlackBerrys. In the first quarter of 2011, the UK’s data usage on smart phones for email and internet access soared by 75 per cent.

We’re more in touch than ever before – but there’s just one problem. Many of us find ourselves checking email inboxes at all hours of the day and researching on the net as we ‘relax’ on the sofa, never fully able to leave work at work. For many of us, our smart phones mean we do more work than ever before, and logging off is getting harder.

THE WORK/WORK BALANCE

Organisational behaviour specialist and author of *The Activity Illusion*, Ian Price, suggests that the rise of smart phones has left us working harder and longer hours, yet less effectively. This, he says, is ‘the activity illusion’. Yes, we’re constantly busy and ‘working’, but we’re also constantly interrupted. Research suggests that if we stop what we are doing every time our smart phone buzzes, it takes 30 per cent longer to get our work done. What’s more, this stop-start routine means we make twice as many mistakes and are unable to focus on our work, one task at a time. The other major issue with smart phones, according to

lan, is our habit of compulsively checking for new messages: ‘It overstimulates our brain’s dopamine system and neurologists are beginning to recognise this impairs our cognitive ability, reduces our ability to concentrate and often makes us tired and frazzled,’ he explains. ‘If you check messages during the night, you then risk not allowing complete recovery and rest, with potential consequences for long term health and resilience.’

A MATTER OF TIME

However, there are those that argue that smart phones are having the positive effect on our work/life balance that they promised. Phone manufacturer Nokia argues that the technology actually saves you time, rather than eating into it: ‘Smart phones allow professionals to respond to urgent requests immediately,

and that means not having to rush back to the office to respond to any work demands,’ explains Nokia spokesperson Mona Kokkonen.

However, the ease of responding to emails may have made it tougher to decide what really is an ‘urgent request’.

‘We tend to treat everything as

urgent, which means we’re often “too busy” to do the things that really matter in life, such as being truly ‘present’ when we’re with friends and family,’ says Ian. This often results in an increasing failure to focus on the things that matter to us in both our working and private lives. Research shows that the average smart phone user will spend around an hour per day outside of working hours checking their emails, and these users spend an hour on each day off doing the same. Interestingly, people without smart phones were found to spend no time checking emails outside of their working hours.

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THE BUSY BUZZ

It's hard to admit, but many of us can start to feel proud of how busy we've become. Repeatedly checking and responding to emails on smart phones, constantly staying updated on corporate life, regularly updating on Facebook or Twitter... it all fuses together to create a self-fuelling communication spiral that can make us feel important and needed. However, our technology habit could ultimately have an impact on our health, says Ian. 'Neurologist Baroness Susan Greenfield has concerns that our immersion in phones, computers and game consoles (particularly in the young) prevents our brain from developing the ability to perform deep thinking,' he says. 'Plus, falling back on emails as a default mode of communication can impair our working relationships.'

So, it seems it might be time to kick, or at least limit, our smart phone habit. Get off your chair, speak to people in person, and when you're not at work – be not at work; it's called downtime for a reason! Your brain and body will thank you for it. ■

More information

■ *The Activity Illusion* by Ian Price is published by Matador, priced £13.99.

5 STEPS TO SMART PHONE SANITY:

- **Take control of your inbox**
Limit yourself to 30 emails at a time; it will help you feel on top of your work.
- **Set aside smart phone time**
Allocate specific times during the day when you will tackle emails, rather than replying as they arrive.
- **Be ruthless!**
Only leave emails that need a response in your inbox; if in doubt, delete them!
- **Lose the alerts**
Turn off the 'new message' flashes and noises and focus on whatever else you're doing. If it's urgent, they'll call!
- **Learn to love your auto-reply**
Put an auto-reply on your emails when you're not at work. You can then screen for anything that needs urgent attention.