

## SKILLS AND LEARNING: 'You can always ask a colleague'

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Few digital devices evoke the same pleasure and frustration as the latest generation of highly capable smartphones. "My new SPV M3100... seems to do everything," says Glenn Whitney, managing partner of ECD Insight, a London-based communication consulting and coaching firm.

But, "I haven't had the patience and mental focus to plough through the two instruction manuals it comes with. As a result, I have been constantly annoying our office manager with requests for urgent advice and coaching on the device to enable me to carry out simple functions, such as setting the notification alarm for when I receive text messages."

### ADVERTISEMENT

Picking the brains of colleagues with an identical device is a common response to the challenge of mastering a highly sophisticated piece of equipment in a short space of time.

For individuals, or executives in small companies, it is probably the quickest and most effective form of training, but it doesn't always work – witness the high rate of return of smartphones sold to US consumers noted by research firm Gartner.

But there are two reasons to think the plight of the itinerant-but-connected worker could improve. As mobile devices become more capable, company operations chiefs are getting together with information technology boffins and thinking up new applications.

And as companies dish these devices out to less tech-savvy workers, more thought is going into making them user-friendly. This trend is compounded by consumer-led adoption, which is similarly focusing manufacturers, software writers, telecoms operators and retailers on helping users get the best out of them.

Mr Whitney's SPV M3100 device, supplied by Orange, is a bespoke version of the TyTN machine made by HTC of Taiwan.

Besides offering voice telephony, video-conference capability, e-mail, and so on, it runs the Windows Mobile 5.0 operating system which, combined with a slide-out Qwerty keyboard, provides the user with many of the functions of a Windows-based personal computer.

Since most of us are familiar with Windows, says David Hooper, mobility business group director for Europe, Middle East and Africa at Microsoft MED, finding your way around the software should not be too difficult.

But, he points out, putting this kind of capability on a powerful device makes it easy to tailor it to a host of bespoke applications.

Utility meter readers and courier company delivery drivers have been using bespoke mobile devices for several years. But the latest smartphones allow far more than meter reading or ensuring a parcel goes to the right address on time.

According to the 2006 US Mobile User survey, 38 per cent of mobile workers in the US have company-based wireless devices, and it is expected to reach 58 per cent in three years.

Drive Assist, a UK company that provides replacement cars for those damaged in accidents, has 500 drivers, based in 15 depots, who deliver its 15,000 cars to customers, and collect them when no longer needed. They used to return to the depot after every job with a sheaf of forms.

But starting with a successful pilot scheme in May 2005, the company equipped each driver with a Windows-based smartphone. Each morning, the driver gets details of his first job on the device, its satellite navigation feature directs him to the customer, and he fills out the documentation on-screen. If he is collecting a car, the device can take him to the nearest car wash and direct him to deliver it to a new customer.

The smartphones delivered big efficiency gains through reduced paperwork and mileage, and improved driver productivity. Bob Monk, the operations director, highlights two features that were key to success: careful design of the software, and proper training.

Drivers were involved in designing the bespoke software, which looks just like the old paper forms. The device prompts the driver at each stage, and will not move on until each box is completed. Superfluous functions are blocked out, and only a selection of company phone numbers can be called.

Enthusiasm for the gadgets was encouraged by issuing them as satellite navigation devices first, a function also available for personal use. Training on filling forms onscreen came weeks later, when the gadgets had become familiar.

In total, drivers spent a couple of days training to use them, spread over a fortnight, including role-play situations with customers and dud addresses. Only about 10 drivers failed to adapt, and subsequently left the company.

Professor Eric Johnson, director of the Center for Digital Strategies at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, New Hampshire, says failure to understand how these devices can change staff jobs explains why adoption by a third of staff is widely considered a pretty good achievement.

He looked at the experience of a US pharmaceutical firm, Biogen-Idec, which distributed them to its drugs sales force as part of its sophisticated Customer Relationship Management system. Typically, he says, workers will only adopt Personal Digital Assistants if the devices enable them to do their job better.

Up-to-date information on the number of patients taking Biogen medication at a surgery was useful, but as Professor Johnson points out, the company was also asking for information some sales staff might see as their "personal intellectual capital," and fiddling with the gadgets could destroy their conversation and eye contact with the doctor. So despite ample training, some sales staff preferred to work the old way, and punch in data later.

The key lesson seems to be that by and large, users are only willing to learn to use the features on mobile digital devices that are useful, or that they are obliged to.

For an executive keen to get the most out of an off-the-shelf smartphone, that requires self discipline. "The tutorial is on the device," says a Nokia spokeswoman. "Most independent training providers don't focus on end-user training on smartphones. They focus instead on training for call centres who help end-users with their smartphones."

Of course, company IT helpdesks generally provide back-up on company-issued devices, but for all that, as we enter a new phase in digital mobility, finding a colleague ahead on the learning curve may still be the best training option.