

Smartphones blurring the lines between the personal and the professional sphere

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Credit: Pixabay/FirmBee

TU Wien and the Lower Austria Chamber of Labour have conducted a study into smartphone use. The lines between work time and free time are often blurred.

You might check in the evening to see if the boss has sent an email. Or, perhaps, go through the numbers for the meeting over breakfast. Maybe you reach for your phone when you need to quickly find out some information on the weekend. For many people, heavy [smartphone](#) usage means that there is no longer a clear boundary between working hours and their private life. TU Wien and the Lower Austria Chamber of Labour have conducted a study that examines the effect that smartphone use has on work. Being constantly available can intensify stress, irritability and rumination about work. It is recommended that people make a conscious effort to create space in their life, during which they can leave the workaday world behind.

Combination of surveys and objective usage data

"One of the crucial advantages of our study is that we combined two types of datasets," says Martina Hartner-Tiefenthaler from the Institute of Management Science at TU Wien. "For one, we evaluated surveys and short diary entries. For the other, we were able to refer to data that was recorded on the participants' phones; this was done using the smartphone app 'YLVI', which was developed at TU Wien by the research group Industrial Software (INSO, led by Thomas Grechenig) specially for the study." This way, it was possible to check whether the participants' self-assessments corresponded to their actual usage behaviour.

Using the app, it was possible to show how big a role the smartphone now plays in our lives: on average, the test subjects looked at their phone 84 times a day – that's an average of once every 13 minutes during waking hours. The phones were also unlocked an average of 44 times per day.

More stress, more hassle, more neck pain

The participants could be divided into three categories – those with moderate, medium and heavy smartphone usage. Some significant differences between the groups did emerge, however, "those who use their phones less are more satisfied – and that applies both to work days and days off," says Martina Hartner-Tiefenthaler. "If you are constantly having to look at your phone, it becomes an additional source of stress, which can be burdensome." Heavy smartphone users are less capable of immersing themselves in their work yet, interestingly, they feel bored more often. On days off, they are more likely to indicate that they feel under time pressure or that they are stressed; they also feel irritated or annoyed more often. However, it is not possible to fully settle the question of cause and effect using the data: does heavy smartphone usage affect satisfaction? Or do people reach for their phone more often because they are less satisfied? "We need to carry out further studies into this, over a longer period of time. We suspect that both sides influence the other. We have already planned intervention studies with the aim of examining this subject area," says Martina Hartner-Tiefenthaler.

All groups were equally happy with their health – that said, those who use their smartphone heavily complained of chronic [neck pain](#) much more frequently.

Creating space

Despite the potential negative effects of the blurring of the lines between career and private life, Martina Hartner-Tiefenthaler doesn't necessarily advocate a strict separation. "Sometimes, day-to-day organisation is easier if the lines are not too strictly drawn. Some people report that they are better able to enjoy their free time once they have quickly dealt with an important matter that needs to be addressed," says Hartner-Tiefenthaler. However, she does recommend being aware of your smartphone usage. She also recommends setting very specific email and

smartphone-free times, and clarifying with your employer in what way they expect you to be available. This helps reduce [stress](#) and aggravation.

Provided by Vienna University of Technology

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