

# Wired and Wireless: BlackBerry Technology and the Work-life Balance

*“In progress” Case Study*

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## Abstract

This study examines the impact of BlackBerry technology on work-life balance. BlackBerry's represent a paradigm shift in mobile technology, bringing together mobility (the idea of being always on, always connected), device convergence (combined PDA, mobile phones) and push technology (constant and immediate connection) in a single device. While the technology is neutral, how it is used and its impact is not. This case study explores a broad range of issues associated with the use of BlackBerrys for work purposes based on in-depth interviews conducted with individuals working in investment banks. We focus on the contribution of BlackBerrys to the work-life balance, how BlackBerrys shape the boundaries between the work and non-work domains, and how these boundaries are negotiated or navigated.

## Introduction

BlackBerrys enable individuals to increase their ability to work in virtual environments. Handheld digital devices were originally developed as self-contained organizers, diaries, and note-takers and recorders to enable more mobile employees to retain critical information digitally for ease of access and update. However, with the developments in telecommunication it has become possible to link these devices wirelessly to the internet with the resultant increased functionality. Being able to send and receive emails and access internet sites makes a fully mobile office possible. Technology, and BlackBerry technology in particular, has created a major shift in the way people can now work with information (Elliot, 2002).

In contrast to earlier wireless technology that required the user to activate the internet capability to retrieve and action emails, the Blackberry is a constantly connected device that pushes email to the user as it is received. The opportunity to frequently monitor and respond to email enables a sense of control over the pace and substance of information flow (Mazmanian, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2006). At the same time this encourages a compulsive checking of email

and an inability to disengage from work (Mazmanian et al., 2006). Positive characteristics, such as flexibility and client responsiveness are matched with more negative perspectives, such as work intensification and a blurring of work/life boundaries.

With over three million BlackBerry users in the US securities industry alone, which represents only 4% of the immediate addressable market (Armstrong, 2006), the impact of BlackBerry technology is worthy of attention. In this paper, we extend the traditional models of work-life balance by specifically exploring the role of BlackBerrys as a tool that shapes the boundary and relationship between work and non-work domains, as well as shaping the consequences of that relationship. This research has important implications for the individual, management professionals and organizations.

### **Research Setting and Methods**

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two employees, ranging in seniority from managing directors to associates, from two global investment banks. Both banks had formal commitments to work-life balance as a way of attracting and retaining outstanding people, an issue which internal surveys had identified as “one of the biggest issues for staff” (SK, Bank 1). Investment banks were chosen because they were early adopters of the BlackBerry, therefore had some history using this new technology. Furthermore, because these banks have head offices and/or interests in different time zones, as well as high levels of remuneration linked directly to personal achievement, the potential of this technology would be readily identified along with issues related to work-life balance.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

Three major conclusions are emerging from our research. First, we found that BlackBerry users more likely to experience work-life imbalance were those who did not articulate conscious and definite strategies in the use of their BlackBerrys for managing and negotiating the boundaries between work and non-work. Second, while those that described their ability to achieve work-life balance as a matter of personal discipline, positional power appeared to be an important contingency moderating this outcome. Third, an important interaction was identified. The way in which individuals used BlackBerrys to further personal goals raised the base-line expectations: the advantages the BlackBerry afforded in terms of flexibility and control over work load extended the expectations of connectivity. This created tension with individuals’ definitions of work-life balance and contradicted the espoused expectations of the organization. Despite these outcomes, individuals wanted to retain the connectivity made possible by having a BlackBerry and organizations had significant productivity improvements from individuals using these devices. However important questions related to how positive outcomes for both individuals and organizations can be sustained are highlighted.

### **References**

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