



10 Ways to Use Smartphones to Improve Workplace Efficiency



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10 Ways to Use Smartphones to Improve Workplace Efficiency

If there was been one united front in business over the past several decades, it has been a massive push toward greater efficiency and a higher level of productivity per worker. This isn't an accident: The rapid emergence of technology in the workplace has simply allowed a wide variety of tasks to get done easier, faster, and with less overall effort, than was required even 30 years ago. From the arrival of personal computers in the workplace to the proliferation of personal computers at home, smartphone devices in the pocket, and tablets on every table, today's office has high expectations and plenty of tools to help workers meet them.

For those looking to increase the efficiency of their entire office, generally via an administrative assistant position or one of office management, the tools and capabilities of today's smartphones are virtually limitless. Even so, there are ten particular ways that smartphones can dramatically improve office efficiency, building on years of progress that was originally made by office workstations and personal computers. Before assuming that these devices are only as good as their phone and text messaging applications, consider the following major advancements in smartphone technology and office efficiency that are transforming workspaces around the world.

1. Project Management Goes Pocket-Sized with Smartphone Applications

Project management has been a mainstay of administrative assistants and office managers since the dawn of each profession, but it has advanced in major ways over the past several years. Once tracked by a series of post-its, bulletin boards, and corporate memorandums, today's project management can be executed largely without a single sheet of paper. It's all thanks to the development of desktop and mobile project management applications, like the industry-leading Basecamp and its challenger, Evernote for Business.

Both of these applications center on getting things done in the office, encouraging electronic collaboration between various people, positions, departments, and ideal timeframes. In the case of Basecamp, portability means that office workers can create and complete "to-do" items at any time, and they can feel free to share important developments and documents as soon as they receive them via email or other means. Evernote for Business allows a business' employees to brainstorm collaboratively, even if they're working from different cities or even continents. The sharing of ideas, tracking of goals, and completion of required tasks, all make Evernote for Business a strong tool.

For administrative assistants, this means it's simply easier to ensure that an entire office is on the same page. If a major client is coming in next week, administrative assistants can leverage the power of project management tools to ensure that all departments have provided the proper correspondents, documentation, and copies, for the meeting. Electronic communications means fewer interruptions to workflow, so productivity can proceed apace throughout the day.

2. Sometimes the Best Workplace Isn't the Workplace

Just a decade ago, it was almost unthinkable that someone could work from home and accomplish the same number of tasks that they'd get done in the office, let alone accomplish more than they would get done in a corporate environment. Today, the initial concerns about working from home, or from anywhere else in the world, are largely an excursion in nostalgia. Smartphones have made it possible for employees to perform virtually all of the day's tasks at home, filling in the gaps that were often left by employees who only had access to a company computer during their extended stay outside the office. Among the critical "gaps" filled in by equipping employees with a smartphone:

- The ability to take company phone calls, even without being in the office. Today's VoIP tools allow businesses to forward all calls, or only those to a certain extension, to an employee's company-provided smartphone. The employee can answer and handle the call just as they would in the office, without the caller being aware that they're not actually sitting at their desk at the time of the interaction. That makes for a seamless way to address customer concerns from anywhere on the planet.
- Smartphone wireless hotspot service can turn virtually any community in the world into a Wi-Fi access point, allowing company employees to work from the back of a taxi, the window seat of an airplane, or the outdoor cafe in a town they happen to be visiting at the time. With instant connectivity for tablets, laptops and more, this feature turns any environment into a connected hub of productivity and efficiency.

3. Work on Documents Can Proceed via Smartphone

For a real look at how smartphones increase efficiency, consider the always-on nature of today's cloud-connected office applications. Whether it's the document management tools of Google Apps, the iCloud-connected iWork tools from Apple, or Office 365 from Microsoft, today's administrative assistants and office managers have continual access to key documentation and collaboration tools wherever they might be.

This actually allows administrative assistants to help their coworkers and customers throughout the day and into the evening, even if they've already left the office. These tools give professionals access to files stored on remote servers, hosted by the likes of Google, Apple, or Microsoft, and allow them to download, forward, modify, and save them whenever they need to. In an era before smartphone applications and mobile data connectivity, such efficiency would have been impossible. Clients, co-workers, and customers would have simply had to wait until the next day's business hours to get their hands on crucial materials.

4. Nothing Communicates More Quickly than a Text Message

In the pre-smartphone era, most businesses didn't equip their employees with an official mobile device. Furthermore, most companies actually banned these devices in the workplace until very recently. It's easy to see now why that might have been a mistake, at least in terms of communication: Few modes of communication are quicker or more effective than a text message sent from an administration assistant to a key contact. Because these messages are short and to the point, they're quick to type out, easy to send, and even easier for the recipient to understand.

This boosts workplace efficiency in a big way: Administrative assistants can reduce the total amount of time that they spend in contact with customers, all without reducing the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Furthermore, the use of mobile messaging frees up a crucial phone line for more critical business matters, making it easier for high-value clients and targets to reach the company's upper echelon of executives and account managers. Finally, a simple text message communicates more personally than any other method, endearing the company to its clients and making them more likely to continue doing business with that particular enterprise. By reducing phone usage, improving contact times, and bolstering customer loyalty, the simple text message might be the most persuasive argument for a smartphone-infused workplace of any size and scale.

5. The "Company Phone" is a Thing of the Past, and Workers Benefit

In an era before wide smartphone proliferation, administrative assistants and others had "work phones" that they took with them outside the office in case a crucial communication had to be delivered outside of regular business hours. This company phone could also be used to conduct official business on the company's dime, saving the employee money while ensuring they had inexcusable access to business numbers and incoming calls. The problem with this approach became apparent shortly after mainstream smartphones became the driving force of mobile growth: Most employees rarely used these phones, and some never used them at all, because they were unfamiliar with the phone's functions or operating system. Others weren't sure if the device had limits, security problems, or other potential disadvantages.

The BYOD movement, which stands for "Bring Your Own Device," is changing all that. Increasingly, companies that embrace smartphones in the workplace allow their employees to use their own phone for this purpose. A security profile is established on the device that serves to restrict certain applications' use of mobile or fixed data services. Some applications are blocked entirely. With control over the phone's access to data, but no control over the phone's make and model, companies improve employee efficiency by giving them access to the device they feel most comfortable using. That makes them more likely to use the phone proactively, boosting efficiency in a big way throughout the organization.

6. Location-Aware Apps Make Collaboration and Management Easier

One of the biggest applications unveiled by Apple at its fall keynote several years ago was the development of "Find My Friends," an application that allowed people to track their friends' exact geographic whereabouts as long as they had permission to do so. The application was largely released in response to applications like Yelp and Foursquare, which allow users to check in at various locations and announce their coordinates to those who follow them through those applications.

Businesses are not left out of the loop in this area. Numerous location sharing services exist for the corporate community, and their utility becomes more apparent with each passing day. With a larger number of offices participating in telecommuting and flexible scheduling, it's not uncommon for today's employees to be scattered around a pretty wide geographic area at any given time. If a client calls asking to speak with that employee, or meet them in person, these location sharing services make it easy to find and contact that employee within seconds. They can either be encouraged to get to the office quickly, or customers can be given their exact location and arrange a meeting without waiting. Efficiency benefits in a big way via this service, and helps to erase the natural geographic boundaries that arise in a society with an increasing number of telecommuters.

7. Near Field Communication Makes Accepting Payment a Breeze

In many offices, administrative assistants are responsible for collecting payment from vendors, clients, and others. This process is one that has traditionally required a small payment terminal, but the presence of smartphones in offices is changing that pretty quickly. One of the primary ways this is changing is via a technology known as Near Field Communication, or NFC. The wonders of this technology are delivered by a small chip embedded in the smartphone which, with one simple tap of the device on a receiver, can transmit credit card or other payment information wirelessly and instantly. A receipt for the transaction can automatically be emailed to the individual making the payment, saving both time and office supply costs in the process.

Better yet, the instant and wireless transmission of payment data means there's no waiting around for a payment terminal to dial a phone line, verify the customer's financial details and ability to pay, and return a response. Other services, like mobile PayPal payment applications and the Square card reader for mobile devices, offer similar benefits for administrative assistants who know that every second saved can be put to good use getting other tasks done before the close of business.

8. Sick Days Don't Have to Mean Missed Meetings Anymore

Videoconferencing has been a business buzzword for the last 20 years, spurred by the early development of a Microsoft Windows application called NetMeeting. That early attempt at connecting various points of communication into a central server has since been abandoned, but the concept behind it has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. It's all thanks to the convergence of high-speed broadband data connections and increasingly portable devices with rich displays and front-facing cameras. Today, businesses can actually use a smartphone or tablet in the conference room to record an entire meeting or business conference. It can then be broadcast to multiple company smartphones via services like Skype and proprietary business software designed specifically for collaboration of this magnitude.

This is absolutely invaluable for the administrative assistant. A day away from the office, whether for health reasons or any other personal matter, need not be a day away from the goings on of the office. Instead, administrative assistants can see and hear the meeting, and they can even interact with it simply by speaking up at any point. Their voice will be broadcast in the room just as it would be if they were present, and they'll be on the same page as their coworkers without having set foot in the workplace that day.

9. Goal-Setting is Easier with a Pocket-Sized Reminder

Anyone who started their office career before the smartphone craze will probably think back nostalgically on all the ways they leveraged the power of post-it notes throughout their career. One of the most important things done by the average post-it is to simply set a goal for the day, week, month, or year, and stick in place as a permanent reminder. It's a noble way to aspire to something a bit better, but it's now firmly outdated in a more high-tech era of corporate efficiency and productivity. Instead of these sticky notes of self-improvement, today's administrative assistants use apps like Everest, Streaks, Habit List, and CheckMark Goals, to set a goal, give it an estimated date of completion, and strive to something better.

Their smartphone is determined to help: Each of these applications uses a variety of vibrating alerts, alert tones, and pop-up notifications to keep office workers on track to meet interim benchmarks and achieve their ultimate goal by the deadline they've imposed on themselves. With less clutter than ever before, and a better system of enforcing long-term achievement, goal setting is a particularly great way to boost office morale and efficiency in the 21st century.

10. Employee Flexibility Directly Benefits from Workplace Smartphone Deployment

Companies looking to hire new administrative assistants need to be aware that today's candidates increasingly value a work-life balance when evaluating potential employers. While their top concern is always landing a great job and enriching their experience in the field, most of today's younger applicants want to know that a company "gets" their embrace of technology, encourages them to use the power of technology to get the job done, and understands that they'll often blend productivity with personal communication throughout the day. The smartphone is the number one way to not only demonstrate a commitment to these ideals, but also to bring this ideal work environment to a new generation of office workers and administrative professionals.

The smartphone is, in and of itself, a testament to the power of flexibility: It can track goals while syncing corporate documents and enforcing long-held goals. It can communicate with clients, friends, and family members all at the same time. It can access open social networks while adhering to tight corporate security policies and information sharing restrictions. Younger workers understand this better than most, and many of them readily admit that the smartphone is where they feel most comfortable interacting with, working with, and encouraging others throughout the day. An embrace of this key piece of technology sets the company apart from its rivals and encourages the most talented and qualified applicants to apply for an open position. The result is an office that is more talented, effective, and efficient over the long-term.

10 Great Reasons, and Many More that Haven't Even Been Invented Yet

The smartphone market might not be innovating as fast as it did immediately after the release of the first iPhone, but it's still moving at a rapid pace. In fact, new smartphones and mobile chipsets are often released on a faster schedule than desktop or laptop computer hardware and software. Over the next couple of years, a few major developments have already been hinted at by the market's most impactful developers and research firms:

- Increasingly large smartphone screens will be paired with smaller, wearable devices. The warning shots were fired by Google Glass, but the big winners will be companies that allow office workers to swap their smartphone for a connected watch. With on-the-wrist reminders of important deadlines, meetings, and client phone calls, all instantly synced with a mobile device, the office is about to get even more efficient as tech expands beyond the touchscreen.
- Mobile carriers in the United States have announced a collaborative mobile payments solution, known as ISIS Mobile Payments, which will be deployed to the 99 percent of American citizens who currently own, or will someday own, a smartphone. That galvanizes the market for mobile payments and essentially creates a major standard that will soon creep into offices, retail environments, and more.
- Voice over LTE technology, known as VoLTE, is already supported by some smartphones and it will be deployed throughout 2014 and beyond. This technology is essentially Skype calling without the Skype middleman, turning corporate videoconferencing into a high-quality, native feature that can be instantly broadcast over any cellular network. That makes it even more efficient to broadcast key meetings and conferences to employees that are out of the office for any reason.

It's Time to View the Smartphone as the Next Office Workstation

Technology just keeps getting smaller, and that means it's time for office environments to view the smartphone as an essential component of greater productivity, efficiency, and talent acquisition. Just like the office workstation that preceded it, the smartphone offers new ways to keep employees in touch, on task, and in line with their long-term career goals. Smartphones give employees the tools they need to communicate more quickly with clients, to work more effectively from both their home and their desk, and to collaborate with coworkers throughout the day and at any time in the evening.

Businesses know how important productivity is to their bottom line, especially in an era of increasingly tight margins and uncertain economic performance. The smartphone simply offers the best path toward creating a more efficient workforce that can get the job done anywhere, with any number of next-generation tools, at a significant cost savings for the organization. With the rise of BYOD programs that pair workers with their existing smartphones and applications, there is no reason not to embrace these technologies in order to create better, more effective, more connected administrative assistants who will inevitably lay a solid foundation for the company's future.

