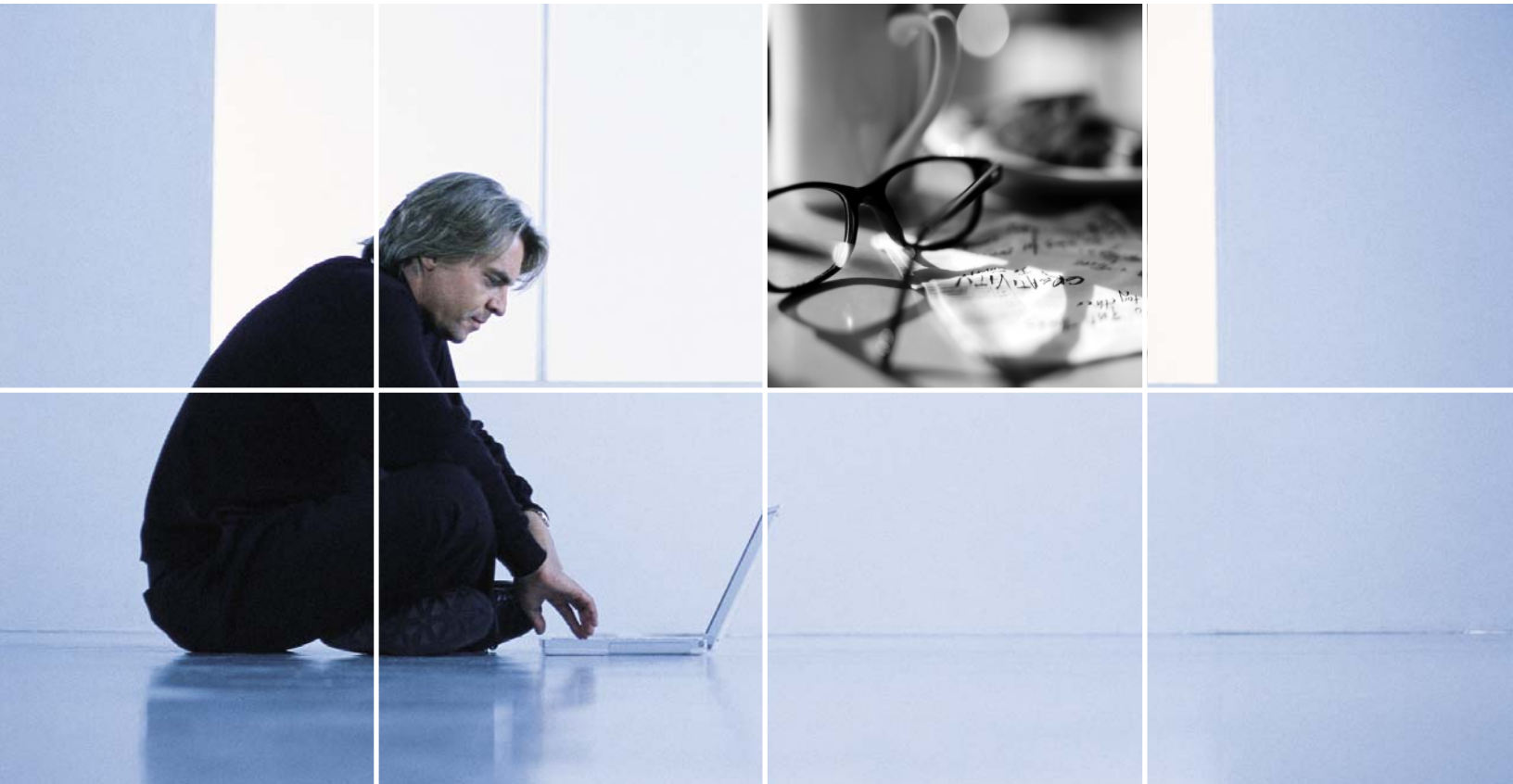


The mobile working experience

A European perspective



An IBM Institute for Business Value executive brief

IBM Business Consulting Services, through the IBM Institute for Business Value, develops fact-based strategic insights for senior business executives around critical industry-specific and cross-industry issues. This executive brief is based on an in-depth study by the Institute's research team. It is part of an ongoing commitment by IBM Business Consulting Services to provide analysis and viewpoints that help companies realize business value. You may contact the authors or send an e-mail to iibv@us.ibm.com for more information.

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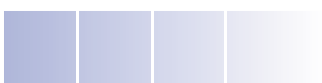
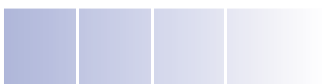
Executive summary

Technological advances, together with the needs to improve employee retention, reduce costs and respond more rapidly to customers, have created a new generation of mobile workers in Europe. To better understand the perceptions and challenges of mobile working across Europe, the IBM Institute for Business Value, in cooperation with the Economist Intelligence Unit, surveyed 351 remote workers from 29 European countries. This study highlights a number of important issues associated with mobile working, including the:

- Rise in the number of individuals who have recently begun working in a mobile environment
- Difficulties that mobile workers face in communicating and collaborating with colleagues
- Dangers associated with becoming disconnected from the informal networks that are used to share knowledge and identify opportunities within the organisation
- Challenges mobile workers face in balancing the demands of work and home life
- Importance of having a reliable, easy-to-use technological infrastructure.

Based on these findings, we propose the following recommendations for companies that have existing mobile working programmes or are considering them in the near future:

- Develop an outcome-based performance measurement system that levels the playing field between remote and office-based workers
- Improve the reliability and functionality of remote working technology
- Make sure that employees (and their managers) have the appropriate skills and capabilities to work in a mobile environment
- Provide visible corporate and managerial support for mobile working.



Introduction

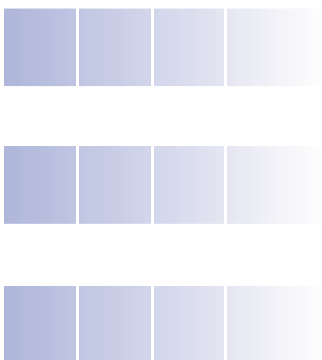
A new generation of workers is emerging within European organisations. For these employees, the car, the home office, the hotel and the customer site have become the nexus of their working lives. This shift to a more distributed, flexible model of work has important implications for the future of organisations. This includes the way people interact with their colleagues, how employees are managed and evaluated, and how work is coordinated and accomplished.

In recent years, a number of studies have focused on worker mobility. Several have addressed the growing number of mobile workers across Europe, and the benefits associated with mobile working, such as reductions in office space, commuting time and road congestion. Other studies looked at remote working practices within a single organisation to better understand the impact and challenges associated with mobile working.

Our discussions with clients, and our own experiences in mobile working within IBM, led us to approach this topic from another perspective. By focusing on the *experiences* and *perceptions* of remote workers, who both reap the personal benefits and wrestle with the challenges of working away from the office on a day-to-day basis, this study highlights the critical issues across a number of countries, industries and mobile working environments. Further, the study provides guidance for executives as to where and how they should focus their time, attention and resources as they look to improve the productivity and work experience of mobile employees.

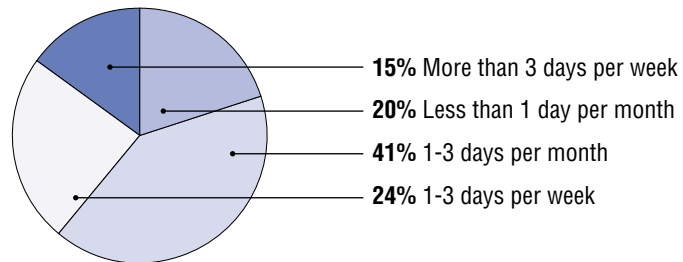
About the study

To better understand the perceptions and challenges of mobile working across Europe, the IBM Institute for Business Value, in cooperation with the Economist Intelligence Unit, surveyed 351 remote workers from 29 European countries. The participants, who represent organisations from a wide range of industries and company sizes, work within a variety of job functions (see the Appendix for study demographics). In addition to the survey, several interviews were conducted with academics and leading practitioners across Europe to obtain additional perspectives.



Within our sample of mobile workers, we found a wide distribution in the amount of time spent away from the office (see Figure 1). Eighty per cent of the survey participants are likely to work outside of the office at least once per month, and a significant proportion, 39 per cent, are away from the office one to three days per week, or more. The “hard core” of mobile workers – those averaging more than three days a week out of the office – account for one in seven of all respondents. What is perhaps more surprising than the sheer number of employees working remotely is the speed with which the trend is accelerating: 48 per cent of those working remotely have been doing so only since early 2002 and 15 per cent started in the past year. This rapid rise of new mobile workers reinforces the need for companies to pay attention to the broader social and technical issues that are associated with mobile working.

Figure 1. How often are you a mobile worker (outside of the traditional office)?

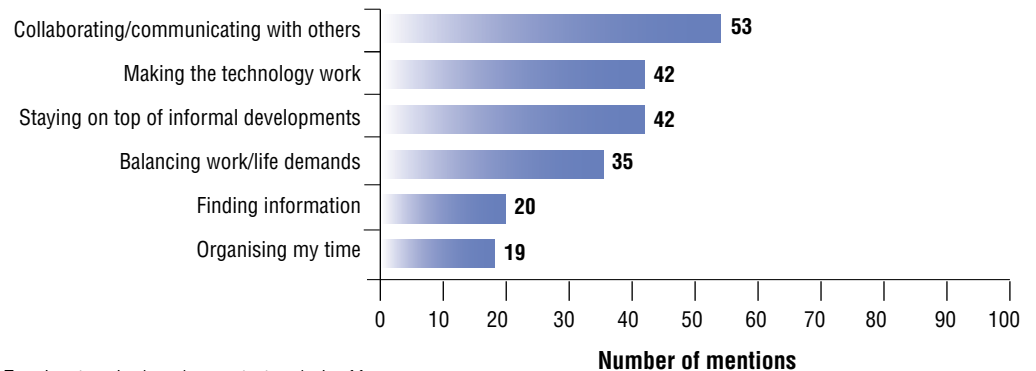


Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Bringing people together in a virtual world – still a work in progress

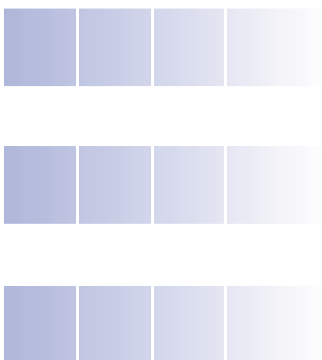
As the number of mobile workers increases, so does the number of problems associated with bringing people “together” and enabling them to work as team members. When survey participants were asked about the most difficult challenges they faced in working remotely, communicating and collaborating with others was the most widely mentioned problem (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. What is the biggest challenge you are facing as a mobile worker?



Note: Top six categories based on content analysis of free responses.
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

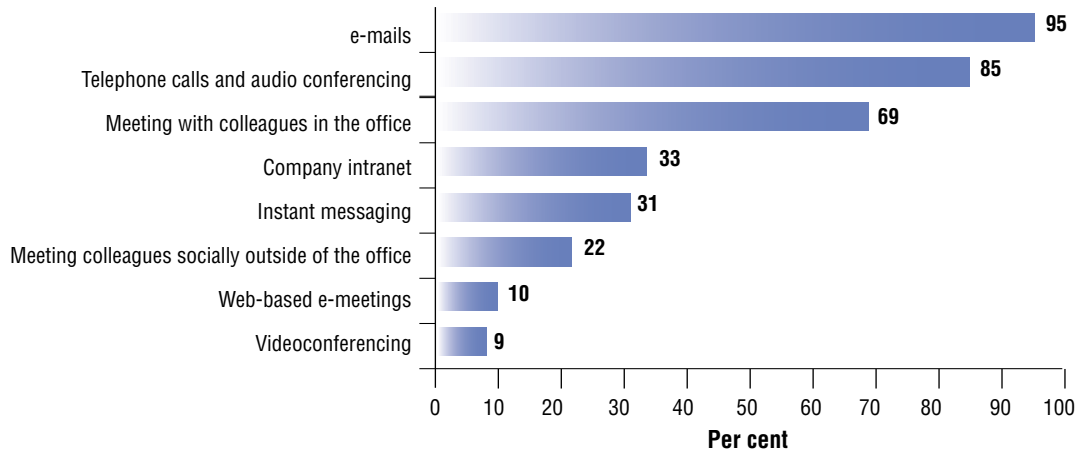
“The biggest challenge is to coordinate the work with other remote workers and meet the deadlines for common work.”
– Survey respondent



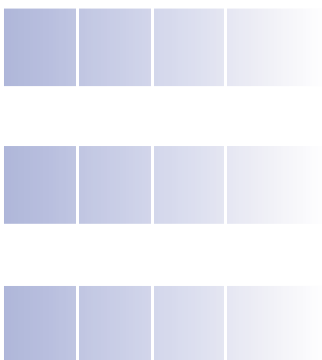
Over 54 per cent of respondents found it difficult to participate in meetings while working remotely, while 44 per cent said it was difficult to collaborate with team members. Those participating in the study reported that collaborating with others in a virtual environment is dependent upon an individual's particular skill and experience, and upon the supporting technology that can enable people to interact more effectively. Almost two-thirds of respondents stated that knowing how to collaborate in a virtual environment was a critical skill for mobile workers. Hands-on experience in virtual collaboration seems to make a valuable difference: those who were new to telecommuting were more likely to find it difficult than those who had been mobile workers for three to five years. Given the rapid increase in those who are new to mobile working, companies need to find ways to reduce the learning curve associated with effectively collaborating using virtual technologies.

When asked how they currently interact with colleagues, the leading methods by far were *e-mail* (95 per cent) and *telephone calls and audio conferences* (85 per cent) (see Figure 3). At the same time, over 40 per cent of workers said that better tools for collaboration would make them more effective mobile employees. Our survey also highlighted the relatively low level of adoption of higher bandwidth and more interactive software tools that can potentially improve the virtual collaboration experience. For example, the survey found that only one out of three used instant messaging on a regular basis, while just 10 per cent regularly took part in Web-based electronic meetings and 9 per cent in videoconferences.

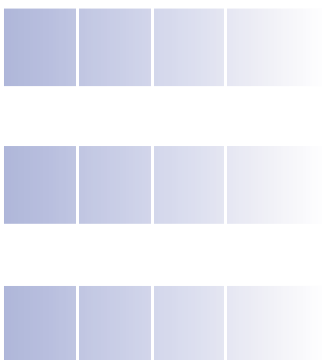
Figure 3. How frequently do you interact with your colleagues using each of the following methods?



Note: Per cent of respondents selecting "1" or "2" on a 1-5 scale where 1 = "very frequently" and 5 = "never."
 Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.



“I worry quite a lot about getting disadvantaged because of the lack of company information and gossip around the office when I’m away working hard at home.”
– Survey respondent



Given the overwhelming use of telephone and e-mail, it is not surprising that individuals are finding it difficult to work together in remote environments. When e-mail is used as a primary communication channel, a number of potential problems can arise. As e-mail often lacks the nuances of face-to-face communication, it is easy for messages to be misunderstood, including leading a recipient to potentially overestimate the significance of a problem. Vanderbilt University professor Ray Friedman, who has studied conflict escalation in electronic communication, states, “E-mail reduces feedback and social cues, allows for excess attention to be focused on statements made... (it) enhances biased perceptions of the other party and makes it harder to resolve disputes.”¹ Audio conferences, which are often used to support realtime communication between workers, can also be challenging for the remote worker, particularly when the majority of participants are colocated and a minority is relegated to audio status. One survey participant remarked that his organisation needed to, “Make meetings Web-based or at least not have everyone in the office sharing the same conference phone so I can hear them properly.” In addition, the lack of visual cues can make it difficult to interpret physical gestures and other subtle signals, potentially limiting the ability to surface truly important issues and resolve difficult situations.

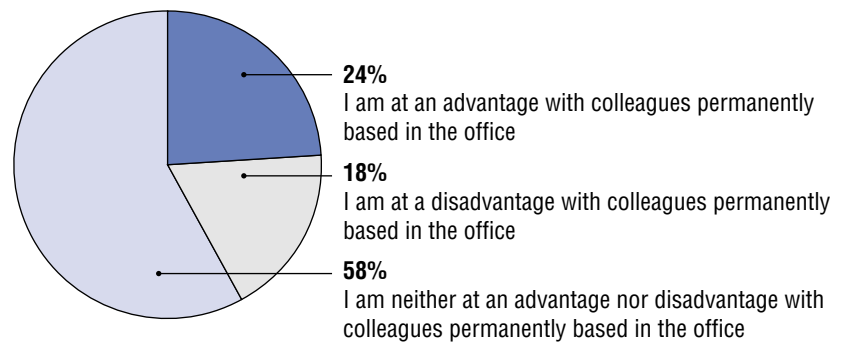
The dangers of corporate invisibility

Among the drawbacks that mobile workers face is losing touch with the informal networks that exist within all organisations. Almost half of those surveyed believe it is more difficult to develop relationships with work colleagues in a mobile environment. *Access to informal insights/gossip* was cited as the second biggest challenge faced by mobile workers. Also, more than 40 per cent indicated that mobile working makes it more difficult to hear about developments and opportunities within their companies, while almost one-third believe that they are left out of key meetings and decisions (see Figure 7). “Coffee machine conversations and networking just don’t happen,” and “Working at home can be isolating,” were common refrains from mobile workers.

These findings suggest that mobile workers may have more difficulty developing and tapping into their “social capital” – the resources that exist as the result of developing informal connections and relationships within the organisation. Without this social capital, remote workers often find it challenging to learn about new job opportunities, identify shifts in organisational direction and mobilise resources on an informal basis. As one survey participant remarked, mobility makes it “harder to understand the real situation and to have a more realistic view of what’s going on.”

While mobile employees across Europe expressed a fair amount of angst about being “kept out of the loop,” we found somewhat less concern about their ability to advance within the organisation. Within our sample, only 23 per cent reported that remote working made it more difficult to get promoted. This suggests that the majority of mobile workers did not consider mobile working by itself to be a significant impediment to promotion. In fact, many of them said that they were on equal (or even better) footing with their office colleagues (see Figure 4). However, 61 per cent did report that face-to-face time was important for advancement. This suggests that some in-person contact is necessary to achieve appropriate visibility within the organisation.

Figure 4. All things considered, which of the following statements best describes how you are perceived within your organisation?



Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Turning it on and off: The work-life challenge

The subject of work-life balance is a complex issue for many mobile workers. On one hand, over half of the survey participants said that a better work-life balance was among the most important benefits of mobile working (see Figure 5). Approximately three-quarters particularly liked the flexible hours afforded by remote working and the increased ability to manage their own time. Flexibility appears to play an important role in improving mobile workers’ overall job satisfaction; over two-thirds said that their work arrangements had a positive effect on this indicator.

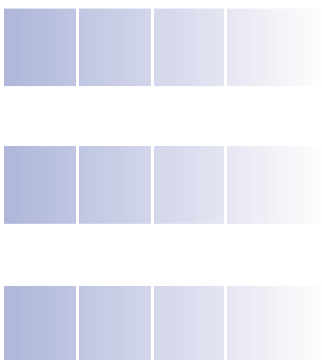
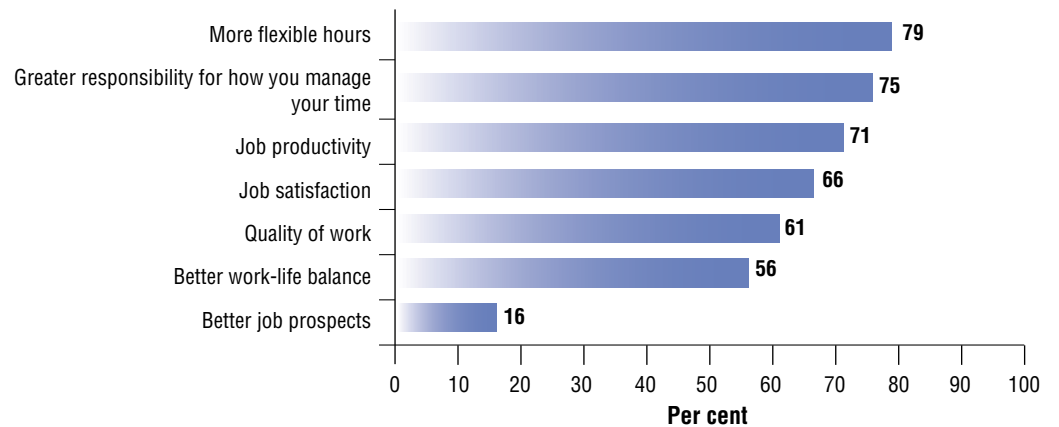


Figure 5. As an individual, what are the biggest benefits to working remotely?



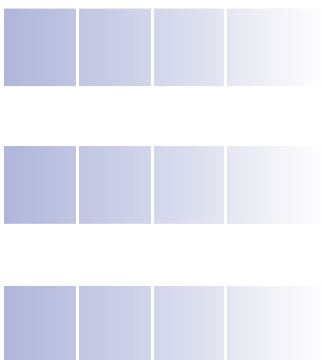
*Note: Per cent of respondents selecting "1" or "2" on a 1-5 scale where 1 = "major benefit" and 5 = "no benefit."
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.*

Despite these positive findings, one statistic points to a fairly widespread challenge: 61 per cent of respondents find it difficult to separate home and work. (See Figure 6). When investigating this issue further, there appear to be two primary reasons that mobile workers struggle to balance home and work demands. Firstly, the relative ease of being able to work at any time of day or night makes it difficult to "switch it off." One respondent stated, "It is very difficult to avoid checking my e-mail during the weekend (and consequently spending a minimum of 20 minutes reading them)" while another said it is difficult to "resist the temptation of always getting online to check messages because of the risk of missing something important."

Figure 6. To what extent does remote working make the following goals and activities more difficult for you?



*Note: Per cent of respondents selecting "slightly more difficult" and "much more difficult."
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.*

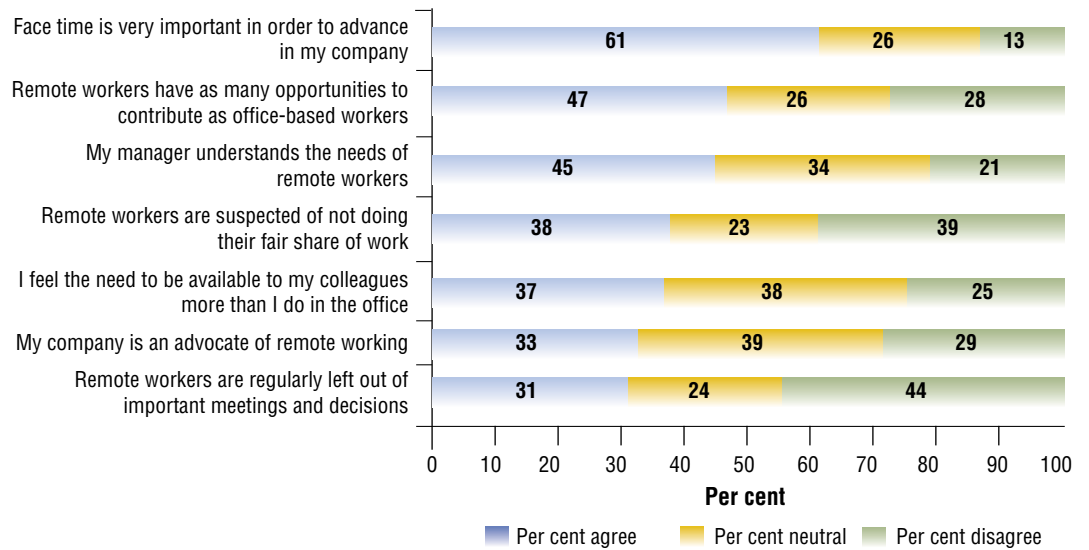


“There is a lot of tradition and suspicion about remote working when many still hang on to the office.”

– Survey respondent

Secondly, there appears to be another issue that motivates remote workers to spend more of their time online. Almost 40 per cent of mobile workers believe they need to be available to colleagues more than they do in the office (see Figure 7). In addition, 38 per cent believe that remote workers are suspected of not doing their full share of work. This was particularly true of respondents from the United Kingdom, where almost half said their co-workers questioned their work effort and contribution. It appears that remote workers, to be perceived as equals with their office-based colleagues, are putting in more time and making themselves more accessible in an attempt to overcome traditional misperceptions of home-based workers’ level of contribution to the organisation. In a continuous attempt to justify their working arrangements, many find themselves neglecting the work-life balance that may have initially attracted them to remote working in the first place.

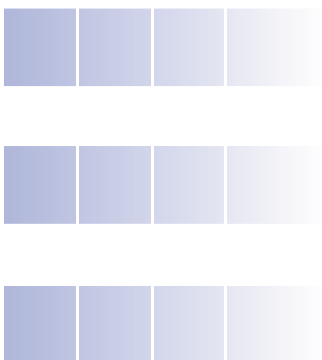
Figure 7. Do you agree with the following statements as they relate to your company?



Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Mobile working technology: The importance of simplicity and reliability

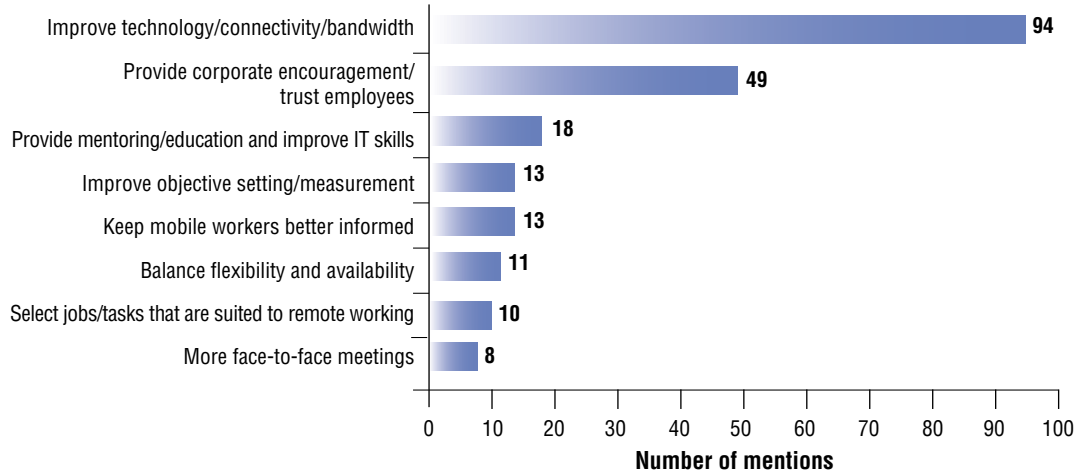
Survey participants were clear in expressing their need for better and more reliable mobile technology to enable them to accomplish their work. When asked for the single piece of advice they would give to their companies, *improving the technology and associated support* was by far the most frequent response (see Figure 8).



“Getting technological things to work properly, adequately and quickly enough... it is extremely rare for a laptop to work in any other environment other than in the office properly because of a myriad of dial-in, access problems, etc.”

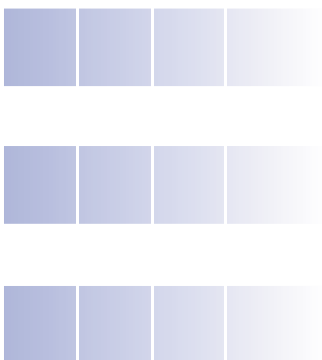
– Survey respondent

Figure 8. What single piece of advice would you give to your company regarding the way it supports or manages remote workers?



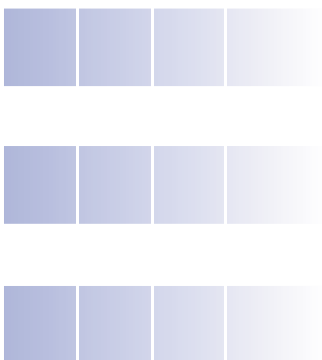
Note: Top eight categories based on content analysis of free responses.
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

In addition, 61 per cent indicated that better technology would help them be more effective remote workers. It also appears that the longer one works in a mobile environment, or the more frequently one works remotely, the more likely technology is to be an issue. Both frequent mobile workers (those who worked more than once per week at home), and those who had been mobile workers longer than five years, were more likely to report that better technology would improve their remote working experiences. At the same time, a notable percentage suggested that better technological support would improve their productivity. Thirty-eight per cent of those sampled suggested the need for better help desk resources, with a higher percentage of non-managers stating that they were in need of greater assistance than those at the managerial level.



“A sound performance management system is critical – its got to be based on facts...Remote working is not an excuse for poor management or performance.”
– Survey respondent

“Polish and package the technical remote working package to the last detail...so that employees do not have to worry about the technical set-up, or for instance, data security.”
– Survey respondent



Recommendations for action

Based on the results of this study, the IBM Institute for Business Value has identified a number of areas where companies can improve the productivity and working experience of mobile employees:

Develop an outcome-based performance measurement system that levels the playing field between remote and office-based workers

In many organisations, managers struggle with evaluating individual performance. For remote workers, this becomes much more challenging because managers have less visibility into how and when work is accomplished. Almost one in four participants responded that having their performance evaluated was more difficult in a remote environment. One remote worker commented that organisations need to develop, “more precise objectives, so everyone knows what is going to be measured at the end of the day.” By developing goals that are results-driven, companies are more likely to accurately evaluate the performance of all staff, regardless of their location. Focusing on performance can also potentially alleviate the work-life conundrum facing mobile workers. With clearer measurements in place, remote workers can focus on achieving outcomes, rather than managing perceptions with co-workers and managers. As one respondent said, “If company managers suspect that employees do not work productively from home, they could try evaluating the concrete results of remote workers...they might be surprised at how much more work is done when employees are allowed to control and take responsibility for completing tasks.”

Improve the reliability and functionality of remote working technology

For organisations to allow remote workers to focus on their tasks at hand, companies need to provide technology that is both reliable and transparent to the end user. Given the overwhelming number who identified the need for a more reliable infrastructure, it is clear that remote workers think their productivity is hampered by technological difficulties. As one individual suggested, “Consider expenses associated with adequate technology to support remote workers as investments that will enhance productivity and cost savings in the long term.”

In addition to developing a reliable infrastructure, it is clear that remote workers are looking for collaborative tools that allow them to work more effectively with their colleagues. Currently, among mobile employees in European companies, there is a strong reliance on e-mail and phone, with far less frequent use of more advanced collaboration tools. However, these tools can make a difference. For example, instant messaging can allow quick identification of which colleagues are available and enable electronic conversations without the time delays associated with e-mail.

Similarly, electronic meeting technology can enable a group to work simultaneously on a document, ensuring that everyone in the meeting can see and make changes in a realtime environment. Lastly, videoconferencing, although more expensive and bandwidth-intensive, can more realistically simulate the face-to-face interactions that are critical in helping groups work through difficult issues.

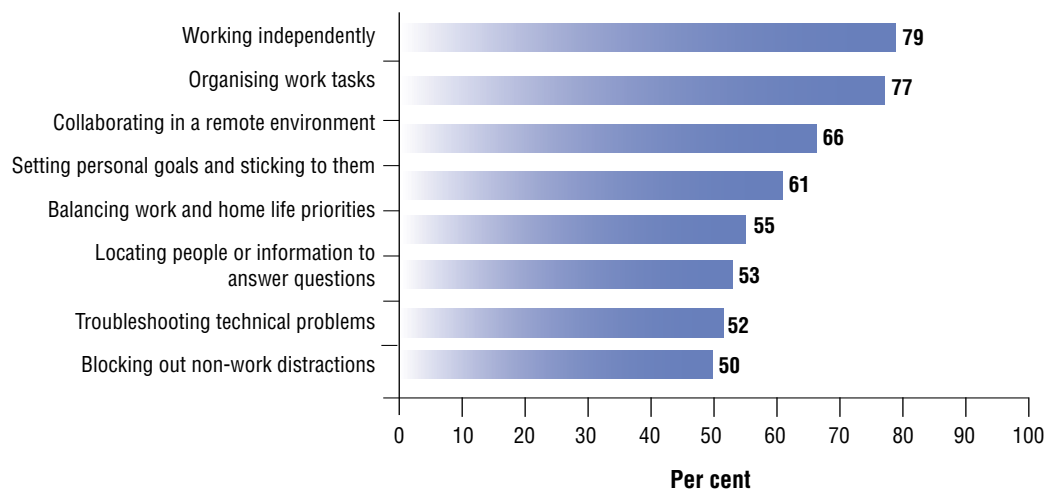
All of these technologies rely on the availability of broadband connections; a feature that many respondents viewed as very important for productive mobile working. As one respondent stated, “Provide broadband communication and a second, dedicated business phone line as standard to remote workers.” While availability and cost may be considerations in the decision to equip remote workers with these capabilities, it is clear from our respondents that providing high-speed connections makes a tangible difference to those who work beyond the boundaries of the corporate office.

Make sure that employees (and their managers) have the appropriate skills and capabilities to work in a mobile environment

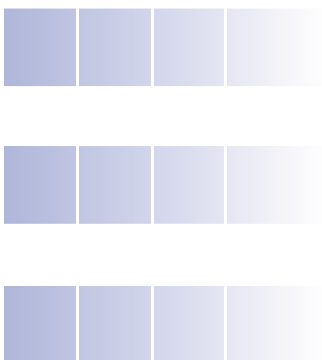
Working remotely requires employees to rely on an extended set of personal skills and capabilities to compensate for the lack of structure in a traditional office environment. When asked which skills are critical for mobile workers, approximately 80 per cent of respondents cited the importance of *being able to work independently*, 77 per cent highlighted *organising work tasks* and 66 per cent cited the importance of *being able to collaborate in a remote environment* (see Figure 9). Given the potential for distractions in the home environment, and the difficulty in getting quick answers to potential work impediments, structure and discipline are prerequisites for working outside of the office.

“Organising my time well is crucial. This includes balancing the different priorities of jobs, and being quick to respond to e-mails and phone calls from clients and colleagues.”
 – Survey respondent

Figure 9. Which of the following skills is most important when working remotely?



Note: Per cent of respondents selecting “1” or “2” on a 1-5 scale where 1 = “most important” and 5 = “not important.”
 Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.



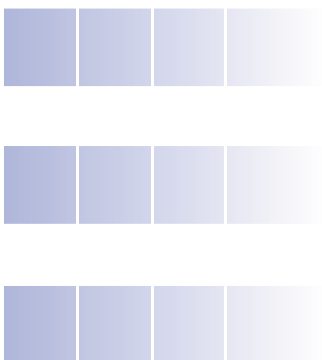
“People take their jobs seriously. It is their performance – not their geography – that should be the criterion of judgement. Trust your people; they have responsibility for millions of euros of business and the brand’s reputation, yet they are not trusted in how they manage their time.”
– Survey respondent

Given the technological challenges that many mobile workers face, being technologically savvy also appears to pay dividends. Over 50 per cent responded that the *ability to troubleshoot technical problems* was an important capability for mobile workers. One individual commented, “Get simpler and better technology so you do not have to become half of a tech expert yourself in just getting things to work.”

Formal training for mobile workers and their managers was also noted as a potentially useful resource. Almost one in four indicated that training would be among the top three ways a company could help remote workers, while one in three stated that managerial training would be among the most beneficial forms of assistance. Comments from one survey participant suggested that companies should “provide training and mentoring on the challenges of working remotely” while another offered that organisations should “train managers to appreciate and understand remote workers.” Providing education on issues such as time management, collaborating in a virtual environment, setting goals and objectives, “managing upwards” and even avoiding burnout could be beneficial to those who are new to the challenges of working and managing in a mobile environment.

Provide visible corporate and managerial support for mobile working

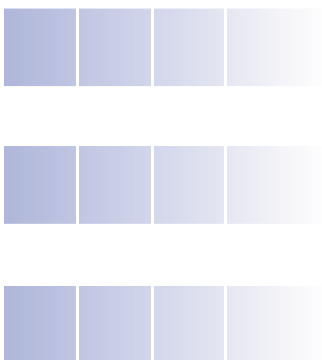
Perhaps the biggest challenge facing mobile workers is one of acceptance, both among one’s colleagues and the organisation as a whole. Only 32 per cent of those surveyed believe that their companies are advocates of mobile working – a worrying figure, given the recent rise in the number of people working remotely. When asked what single piece of advice they would give to their company, many said that companies should recognise the contributions of mobile workers and trust that mobile workers are performing their jobs. Given that mobile workers often overcompensate for their physical absence by working longer hours and making themselves more available to colleagues, managers and senior executives need to be conscious of the messages they are sending to these workers. Without creating a sense of trust and building a connection to the larger organisation, mobile workers can become further alienated, potentially leading to disengagement and turnover.



Conclusion

The findings from this European mobile working survey reflect an overarching theme that is consistent across countries, industries and companies of different sizes: the importance of simultaneously considering the social and technological challenges of mobile work. As the survey illustrates, the use of information technology plays an important role in the life of a mobile worker. Without a reliable, easy-to-use infrastructure, the mobile working technology quickly becomes an impediment to, rather than a driver of, enhanced productivity. At the same time, without the proper tools to find information located throughout the company, or to enable virtual collaboration, mobile workers find themselves struggling to stay abreast of recent developments, share ideas with others in the organisation and coordinate work on a global basis. Issues of measurement and promotion – while not dominant concerns of mobile employees – are still important factors that must be clarified as more and more workers join the mobile ranks.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is the need to foster the development of connection and trust among colleagues, and between the mobile worker and the organisation. As one respondent, when asked about the challenges of working in a mobile environment, said, “None, other than management’s suspicion that I am not putting in a full day’s work – there is an obsession with control and visibility that I have found impossible to change, even though the overall productivity and performance of my team has actually benefited from giving them the option to work from home.” Without this sense of trust, mobile workers may perceive that they are being relegated to a second-tier status in the minds of their peers and the corporation as a whole. While workers may overcompensate for this lack of trust by putting in additional hours in the short run, ultimately, long-term productivity may suffer as employees become disengaged and frustrated with the perceived lack of support for their working arrangements.



About the author

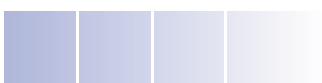
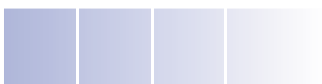
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About IBM Business Consulting Services

With consultants and professional staff in more than 160 countries globally, IBM Business Consulting Services provides clients with business process and industry expertise, a deep understanding of technology solutions that address specific industry issues, and the ability to design, build, and run those solutions in a way that delivers bottom-line business growth.

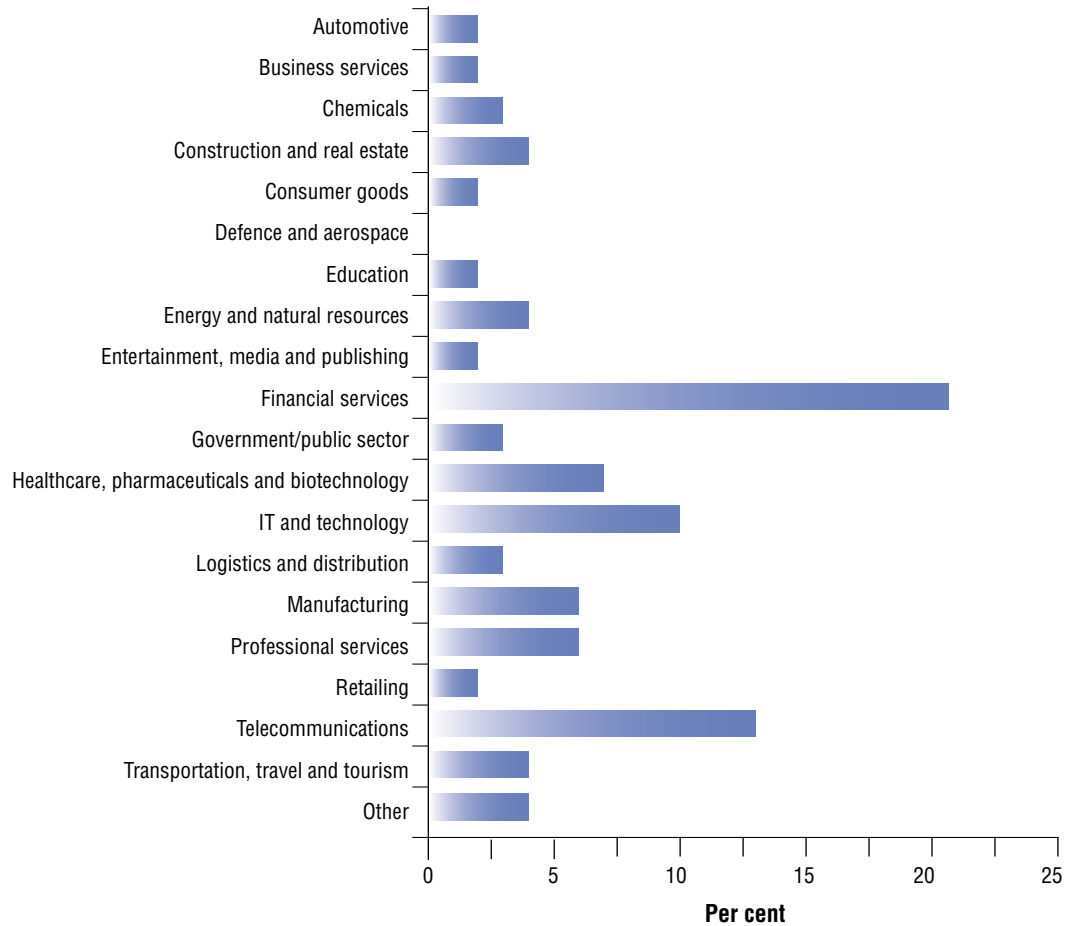
Reference

- ¹ Friedman, Ray and Steven C. Currall, "E-Mail Escalation: Dispute Exacerbating Elements of Electronic Communication." Vanderbilt University. Accessed March 30, 2005. <http://www2.owen.vanderbilt.edu/ray.friedman/pdf/emailescalation.pdf>



Appendix

Figure A1. What is your primary industry?



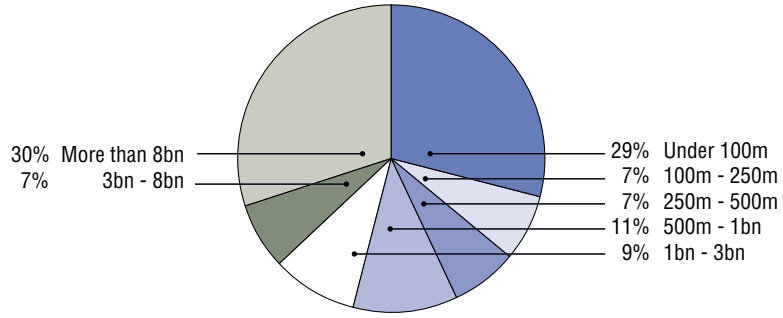
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Figure A2. What country do you work in?

Number of responses					
United Kingdom	100	Norway	10	Croatia	3
Italy	26	Turkey	10	Greece	3
Germany	24	Denmark	8	Hungary	3
Spain	19	Russia	7	Cyprus	2
Netherlands	16	Finland	6	Romania	2
France	15	Ireland	6	Estonia	1
Sweden	15	Luxembourg	5	Latvia	1
Switzerland	14	Portugal	5	Slovenia	1
Poland	12	Czech Republic	4	Ukraine	1
Belgium	11	Austria	3	Unknown/other	19

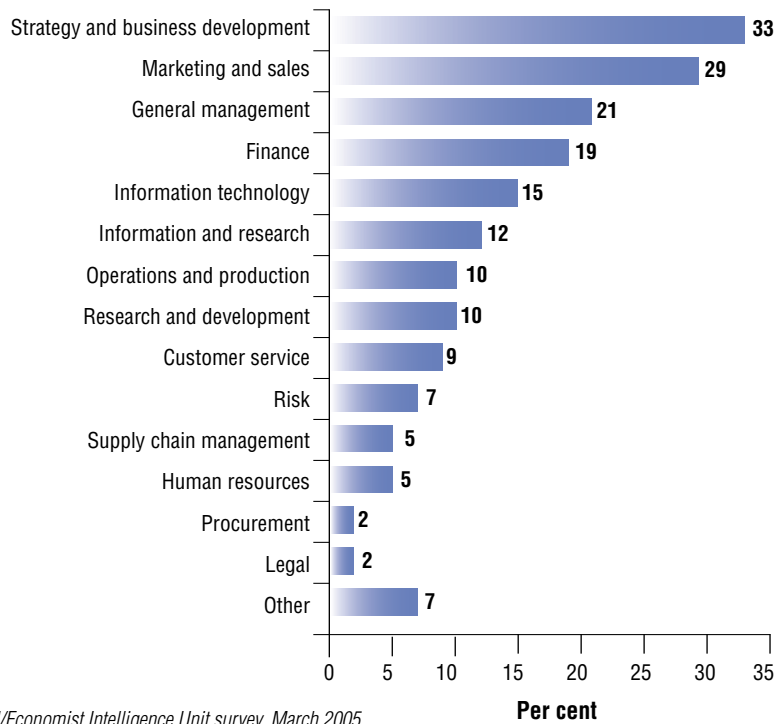
Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Figure A3. What is your organisation's global annual turnover in Euros?



Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Figure A4. What are your main functional roles? (select no more than three functions).



Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

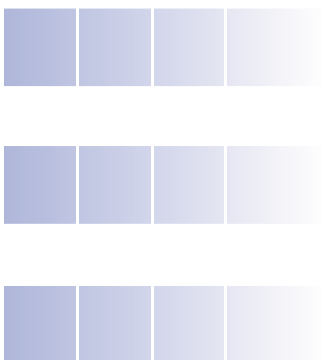
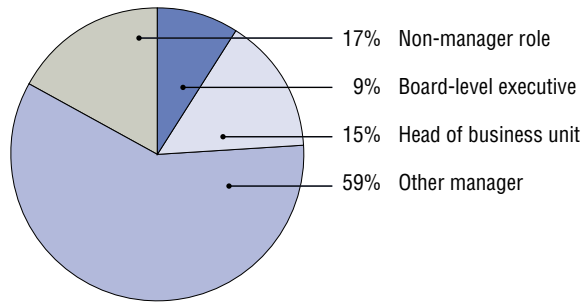
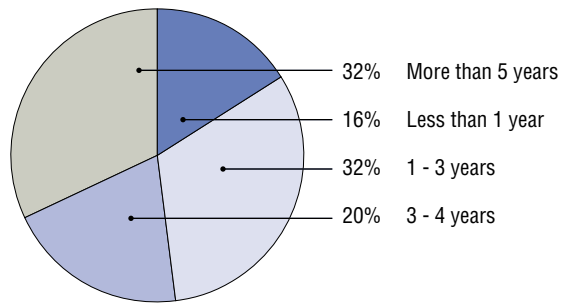


Figure A5. Which of the following best describes your title?

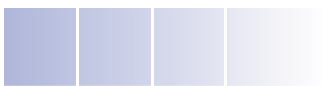
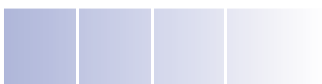


Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.

Figure A6. How long have you been a mobile worker?



Source: IBM/Economist Intelligence Unit survey, March 2005.





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