

# Untethered employees

## The evolution of a wireless workplace



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# Untethered employees: The evolution of a wireless workplace

Mobility is changing our work practices and pushing them towards new modes of interactivity and collaboration.

The landscape of the workplace has changed dramatically, even in the past year. The same forces that have shifted the barriers to remote work—the ubiquity of Wi-Fi networks and high-speed cellular service, the move from boxy desktop computers to sleek laptops and tablets, and the migration from traditional landlines to mobile phones—are also changing the way we work within our office walls.

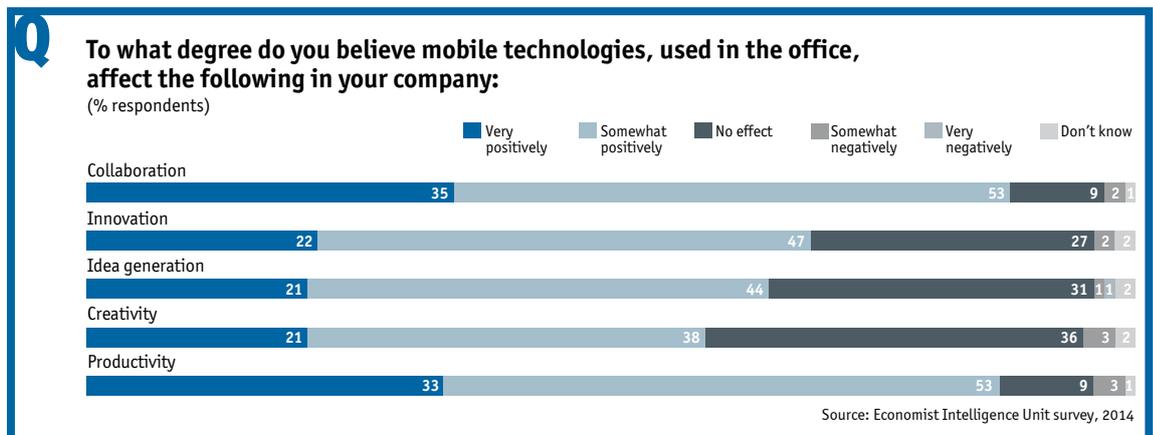
New, more mobile devices—laptop computers, tablets and phones—combined with cloud services are continuing to transform work processes by speeding workplace interactions, making communication easier, and creating novel and evolving ways for colleagues and clients to interact. They also affect our assumptions about work—and what employers and employees expect it to involve.

A survey of 300 corporate executives conducted by The Economist Intelligence Unit suggests that, around the world, mobility is changing our work

practices and pushing them towards new modes of interactivity and collaboration. Workers and companies have many reasons to continue to value offices, including organisational cohesion and the flow of ideas that comes from bringing people together physically. But firms can now harness the benefits of mobile technologies to create offices that blend traditional ways of working with innovative and creative work processes.

## Workers without desks

In the past, managers worked in physical offices and their staff worked in large open spaces or so-called bullpens. During the 1970s, businesses moved workers to cubicles, granting them more privacy, but isolating them from one another. In this decade, powerful notebook computers and fast wireless networks have allowed for greater physical mobility within offices—breaking down barriers and often transforming the very nature of projects.



Increasingly, the expectation of companies—and workers—is that all the information they need will be accessible on any platform.

This greater mobility allows teams to convene for meetings and disperse rapidly into smaller groups or to work solo as needed. The EIU survey showed that 74% of those surveyed say “a need to speed up and facilitate communication” is a top motivator for deploying mobile devices. The promise appears to be paying off: 89% report that mobile technology improves communication in the office and 83% think it improves workflow.

These technologies are having a positive effect on the business community; a majority of respondents to the EIU survey believe that mobile technologies enhance productivity.

Unisys, a global IT and consulting firm with headquarters in Pennsylvania, has deployed mobile and social technologies across its workforce. Gloria Burke, chief knowledge officer at Unisys, who is responsible for its enterprise social business strategy, says the increasing use of mobile devices allows workers to be more productive and to monitor their projects and workflows more effectively.

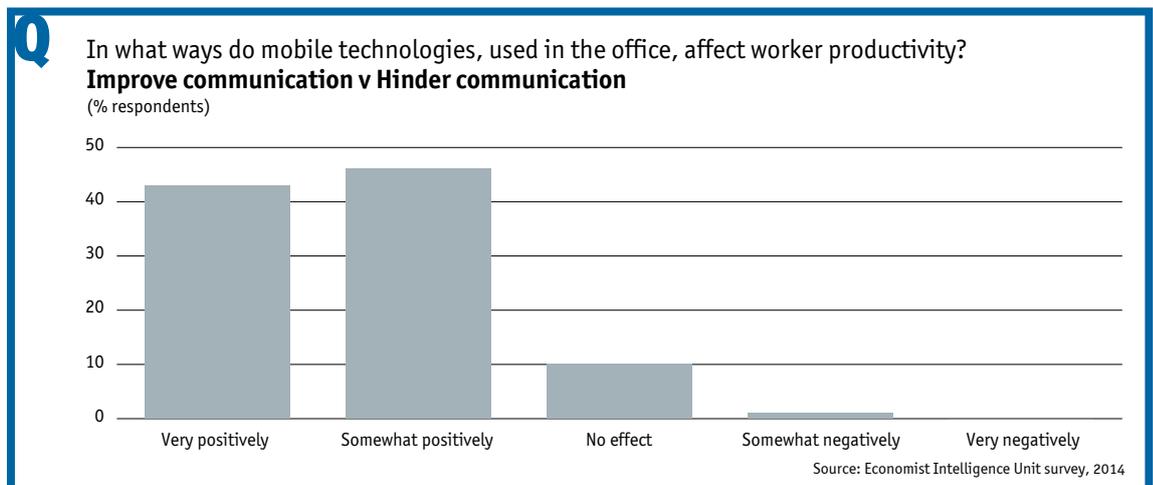
“No matter where your work takes you, whether internal to the enterprise or external, you can go from meeting to meeting with your tablet or your mobile device, and have a pulse on what’s happening,” she says. “Your workflow doesn’t stop. You’re just taking it from location to location.” Increasingly, the expectation of companies—and workers—is that all the information they need will

be accessible on any platform. Ms Burke points to the extensive intranet that her company’s mobility strategy not only takes advantage of but demands. Training, onboarding, communications and operations all rely on a network that is built not just for mobility but also for platforms that include laptops, tablets and smartphones.

Freeing people from their desks can result in a more open and collaborative environment. At Unisys, innovation, collaboration and mobility are tightly linked, Ms Burke says. The company deploys crowdsourcing and social technologies to draw ideas from its employees. Mobile technologies also affect how workers communicate their ideas to colleagues.

“Global idea-fests within companies have become a popular and effective way to crowd-source ideas from employees on topics that are important to the business, particularly around innovation,” Ms Burke says. “You want to make sure that an employee can present an idea from a tablet or mobile device.

“The number of mobile devices and tablets being used for business is increasing exponentially, so you must think about how employees will access your intranet and extranet environments, as well as how they will execute basic daily tasks. For any kind of initiative that you launch within the company that requires employee participation or interaction, you should ask, ‘Have I allowed for mobile connectivity or mobile participation?’”



“  
For any kind of initiative that you launch ... you should ask, ‘Have I allowed for mobile participation?’  
”

Gloria Burke,  
chief knowledge officer,  
Unisys

## A domino effect for tech

The decision to go mobile has implications for technology use more broadly; executives surveyed by the EIU say it has influenced the adoption of other technologies. The majority of respondents say that mobile technologies have significantly or moderately driven the adoption of business cloud services like Salesforce.com (59%), security technologies (65%) and social media (57%) in business. A smaller percentage (45%) say that mobile devices are driving the adoption of applications to make use of big data.

WeWork, a US-based firm, runs co-working spaces in major cities around the world, creating environments designed to encourage and enhance collaboration across functions and companies. Its chief product officer, Roe Adler, says the role of cloud services is growing. “The need for servers is becoming very negligible,” Mr Adler says. “The revolution of cloud services has created a situation whereby a vast majority of businesses can rely on cloud services, period.”

Cloud services, which enable ubiquitous, on-demand access to shared resources, are particularly well-suited to mobile work. Wireless speeds and cellular data speeds are all getting faster, facilitating access to information in the cloud and releasing users from specific servers and network connections.

At the same time, enterprise mobile technology is merging with other services. For instance, in the past, telephony and data networks were separate, but now the former usually runs through the latter. Such a unified-communication infrastructure allows individuals to be available at a single phone number even when away from their desks. It can tell the network whether someone is available for calls or instant messages—or if he or she is in a meeting and cannot be disturbed. In addition, by eliminating physical desktop phone sets, these unified services can help to cut costs.

Cloud services, too, have helped businesses achieve savings. “The overall capital expenditure on IT has gotten crazily less and enables way more,” says Mr Adler of WeWork. “More people are

able to build more things because they can spend the money on operational expenses and small-fee services. It’s not about ‘What did I save and how do I spend?’ This is an enabler that lets you start a business with hardly any capital. If you imagine yourself in a five-person company, you have no idea how big you’re going to be in one year.”

Smartphones and tablets give easy access to video, voice technologies and apps on a single device. As they grow more powerful, they are finding their way into offices—sometimes replacing notebook computers. Ms Burke reports that at Unisys it is common for people to come to meetings armed not with laptops, but with phones and tablets.

Yet, paper remains a presence in many workplaces. A significant percentage of respondents in our survey (44%) say that printers and scanners are “very important” to their job, while 37% answer “somewhat important.” A majority of respondents (61%) thought that use of mobile screen-only interaction with information would increase in coming years; despite predictions of a decline in print, paper is still heavily relied on in most modern offices.

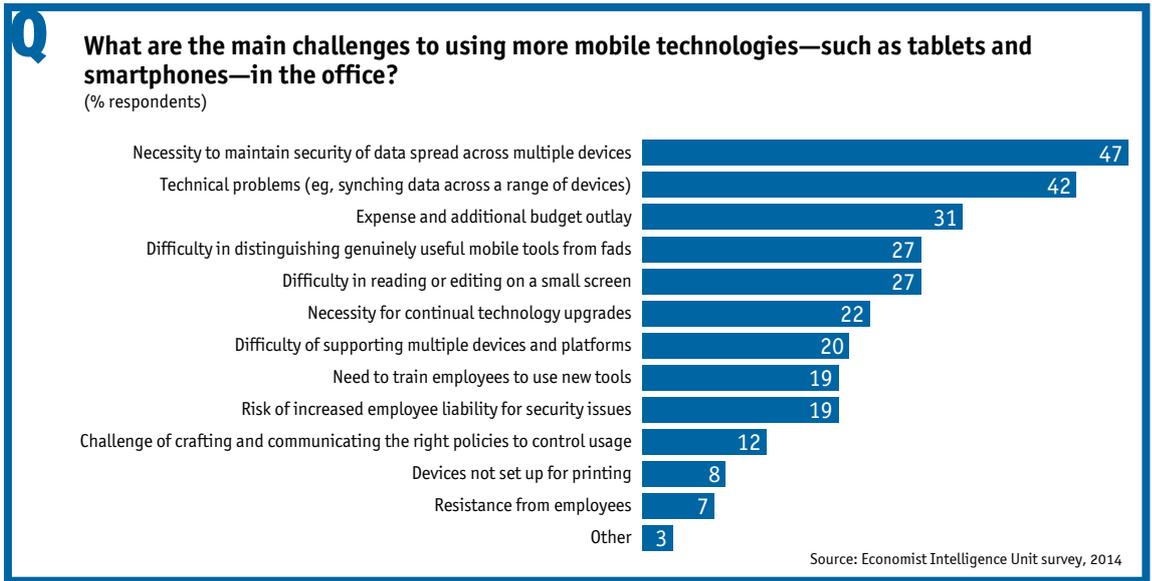
“It’s a fair assessment to say that many, many former paper processes have been made electronic, in all sizes of business,” says Anne Valaitis, director of InfoTrends’s image scanning trends and professional and managed print services consulting practice. But, “Very often, paper becomes the lowest common denominator when you have disparate systems that need to communicate with each other. In healthcare, as one example, insurance companies, doctors, payers and payees are all using different systems and use paper to communicate. It’s often the easiest way for a consumer to communicate with a business entity.”

## Untethered utopia is elusive

The very thing that make laptops, smartphones and tablets so attractive—their mobility and connectedness—make them soft spots in a company’s technology defences. The value of a lost or stolen laptop goes far beyond its physical replacement cost; the data it holds or accesses can quickly make its disappearance a security problem

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”

Anne Valaitis,  
InfoTrends



Fully 47% of the EIU's sample say that security is a top concern with mobile technology.

that puts an entire company at risk. And although the trend of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) grants greater fluidity to work environments, it further imperils a firm's control over data and information.

Fully 47% of the EIU's sample say that security is a top concern with mobile technology. Not only are executives worried about security in general, but 19% cite employee liability as a source of unease.

At Unisys, Ms Burke says, security is based on two-factor authentication, where workers not only rely on user names and passwords but, in an extra step, PINs are sent to their mobile phones. Users have flexibility, but not full freedom, in the hardware they use to connect to the network. The firm limits, for instance, the mobile operating systems they support.

But the dangers go beyond the physical loss of a device or compromised password. Scarcely a month goes by without one online service or another advising of data theft. If users can select their own devices or online services, IT departments may lose the ability to vet them for data safety. In the worst case, a user may not even realise that corporate data are at risk.

The EIU survey found that security was not the only pitfall executives worry about. Forty-two percent of respondents say the challenges of using more mobile devices at work include technical

problems and the need to synchronise data across a range of devices. Meanwhile, nearly one-third of respondents (31%), say that the expense of and additional budget outlay for new technologies is a potential hurdle. Yet, one of the survey's most surprising findings may be employees' eagerness to embrace the mobile trend: only 7% of survey respondents cite worker resistance to adoption of mobile technologies as a concern.

## Catching the wireless wave

Across the world, the move towards mobile work is occurring at a smart pace. Globally, 74% of respondents to the EIU survey say that laptops are "very important" to their job. Executives in regions such as Africa and the Middle East are notably keen on mobile technologies—perhaps reflecting a "leapfrogging" over the non-mobile infrastructure that Western companies have built.

If work is moving more and more to mobile technology, then why not do away with offices entirely? Because people are social animals, explains Peter Thomson, co-author of *Future Work: Changing Organizational Culture for the New World of Work*. "You still need the social interaction," he says. "People come in to meet other people. You still need the human interaction. For lots of people, the home is not the right place to work."

Mobility inevitably allows (or forces) work and private life to overlap, changing the nature of both.

“People want to belong,” says WeWork’s Mr Adler. “Belonging starts with a sense of a goal we all try to achieve together. People want to have true, meaningful relationships with the people around the workplace. The more we facilitate that, the happier our members are. Happier employees just mean a better company. That’s where the magic happens—where people are happy to hang out together as part of what they call work, but is, in fact, also just part of their social lives.”

Mobility inevitably allows (or forces) work and private life to overlap, changing the nature of both. That may be liberating for some but uncomfortable for others. Yet, it is not the age of the worker, but comfort with technology that predicts how happy he or she will be with a mobile work life. “Once you get the idea of how convenient it is, you realise that by using your mobile device, you can take care of a variety of transactions. So you don’t have to go to a particular device to view something or download something or collaborate,”

Ms Burke of Unisys suggests. People often assume that older people are less open to new technologies, but she says, “It’s really socialisation”, rather than age.

As technology continues to advance, the most successful business leaders may be those willing to encourage and invest in a mobile workforce, creating a better, more dynamic and flexible office. Many are already doing so, according to Mr Thomson. “Senior executives, people at board level, have seen over the horizon that the world is changing,” he says. “They have the strategic vision. The managers at the bottom understand how the new digital world works. But the middle layer is still somewhat resistant.”

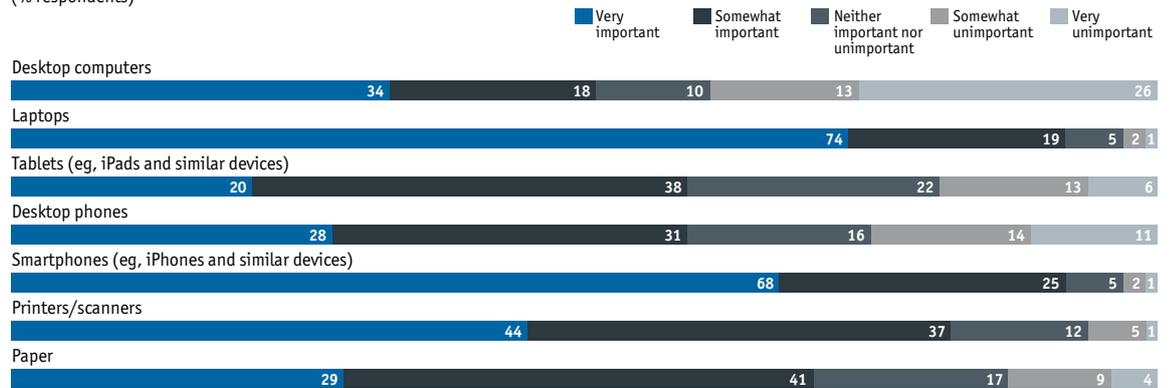
“A whole set of business metrics says it’s kind of crazy not to have an agile workforce,” Mr Thomson says. “In the end, organisations will have to move this way because otherwise their best people will vote with their feet.” ■

# Appendix: survey results

Percentages may not add to 100% owing to rounding or the ability of respondents to choose multiple responses.

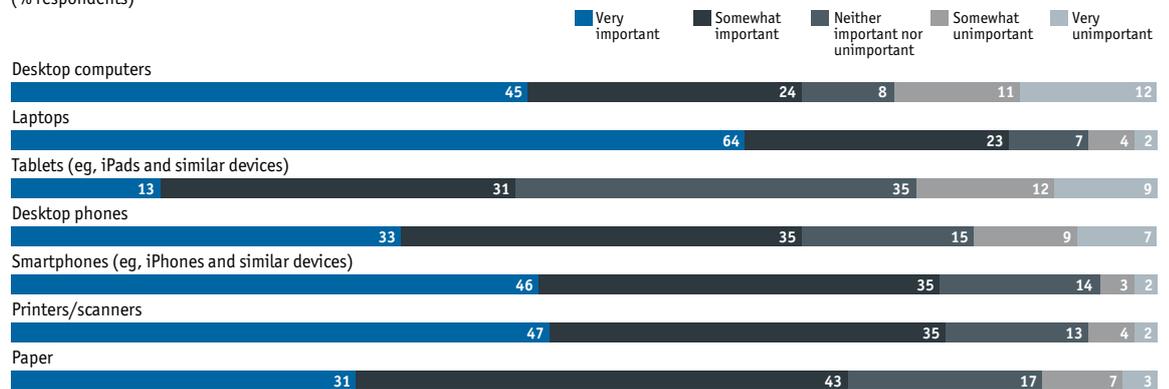
## How important are each of the following office tools to the performance of your job?

(% respondents)



## How important are each of the following office tools to the performance of your employees' jobs?

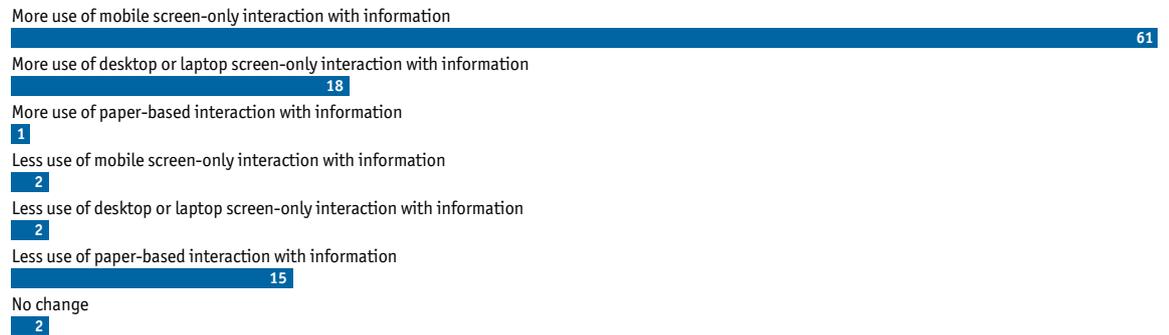
(% respondents)



**When interacting with work-related information, what is your preferred method for creating, editing and consuming content?**  
(% respondents)



**Which of those methods will change the most over the next five years?**  
(% respondents)

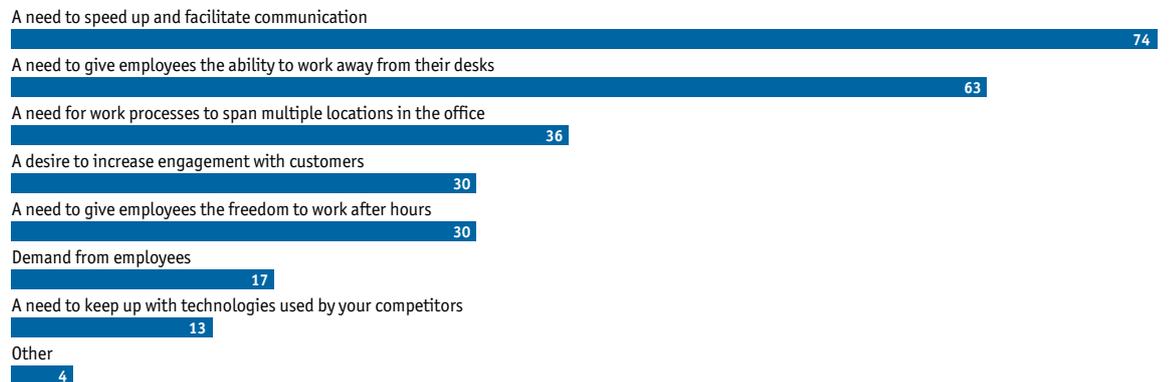


**To what extent are mobile devices (such as tablets and smartphones) changing the way employees work in your organisation?**  
(% respondents)



**What motivates your organisation to deploy mobile devices in the office?**

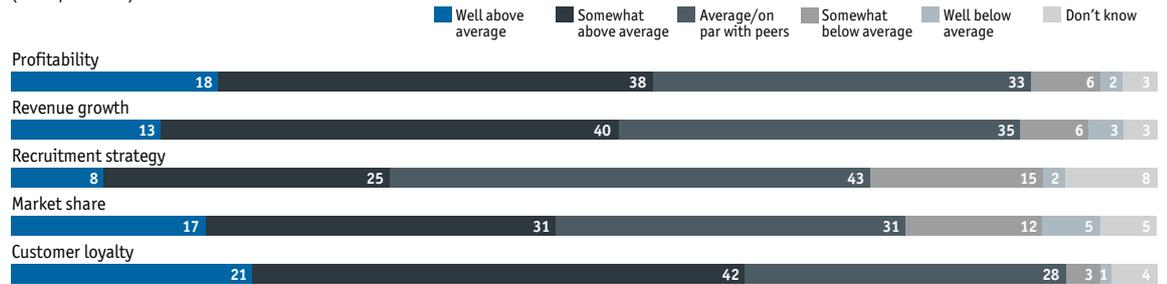
Select the top three.  
(% respondents)



**In your opinion, how does your organisation compare to its peers in each of the following performance areas?**

Please rate on a scale from "Well above average" to "Well below average".

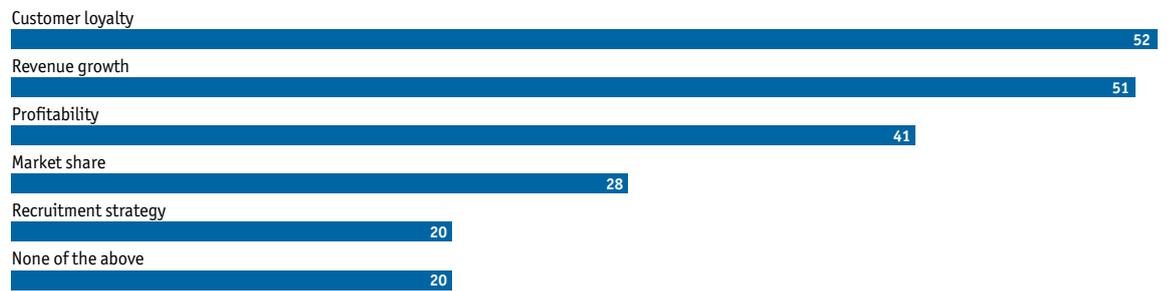
(% respondents)



**In which of the following areas is your organisation using mobile technology to enhance performance**

Select all that apply.

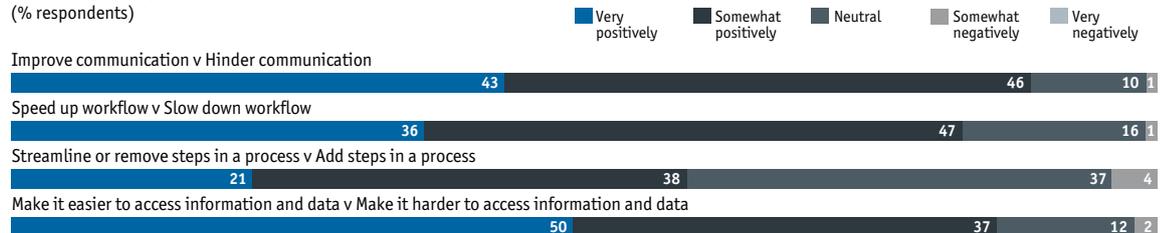
(% respondents)



**In what ways do mobile technologies, used in the office, affect worker productivity?**

Select all that apply.

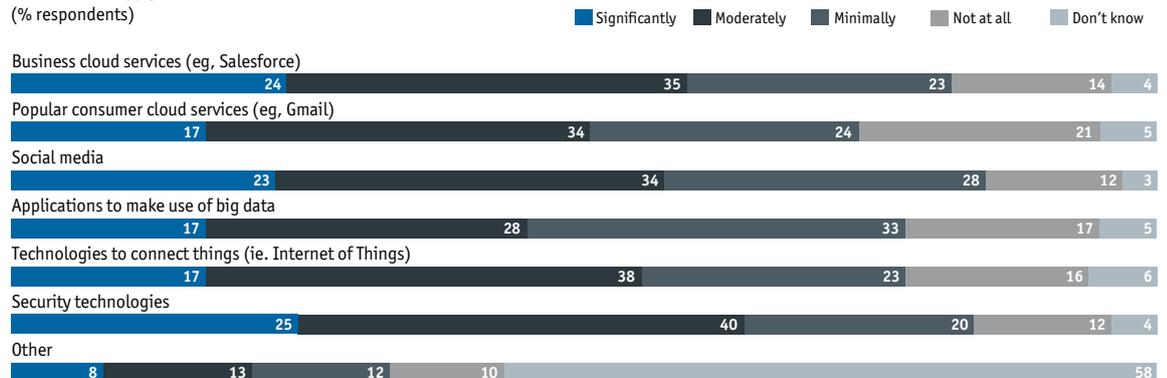
(% respondents)



**To what extent is mobile device usage in your office driving the adoption of other new technologies?**

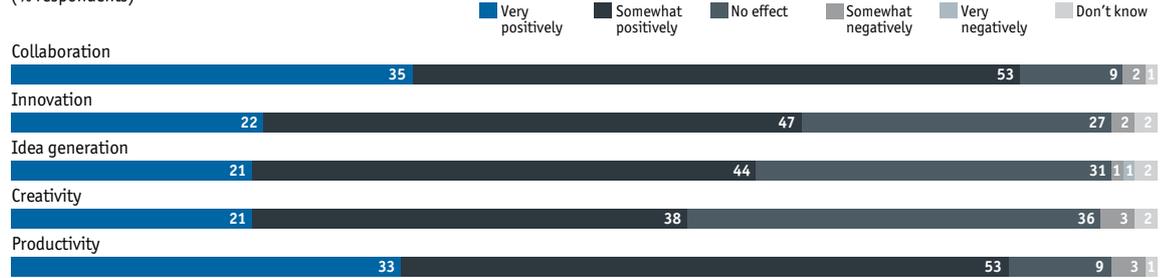
Select all that apply.

(% respondents)



**To what degree do you believe mobile technologies, used in the office, affect the following in your company:**

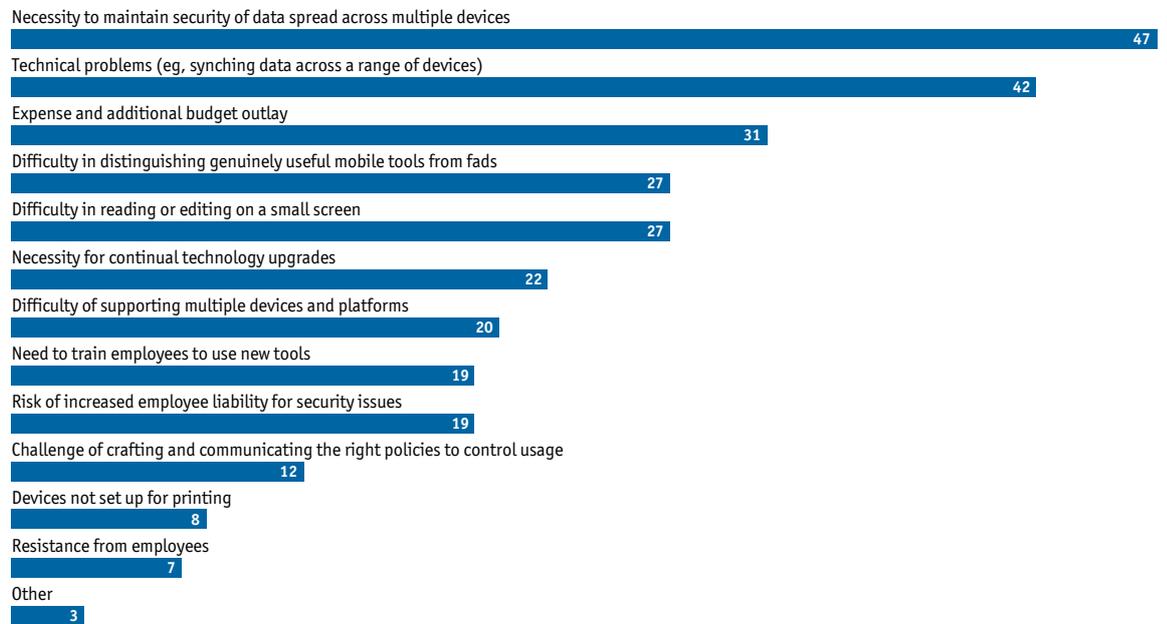
(% respondents)



**What are the main challenges to using more mobile technologies—such as tablets and smartphones—in the office?**

Select your top three choices.

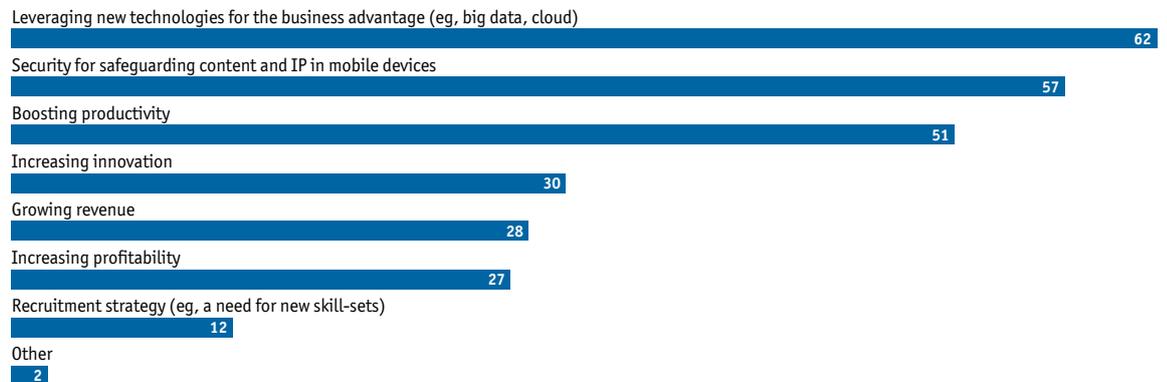
(% respondents)



**Over the next three years, which of the following strategic areas at your company will be impacted most by mobile technology, in your opinion?**

Select your top three choices.

(% respondents)



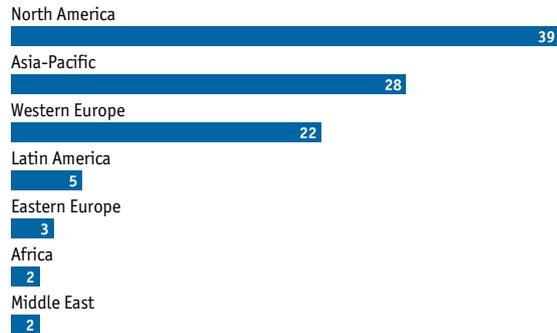
**In which country are you personally located?**

(% respondents)



**In which region are you personally located?**

(% respondents)



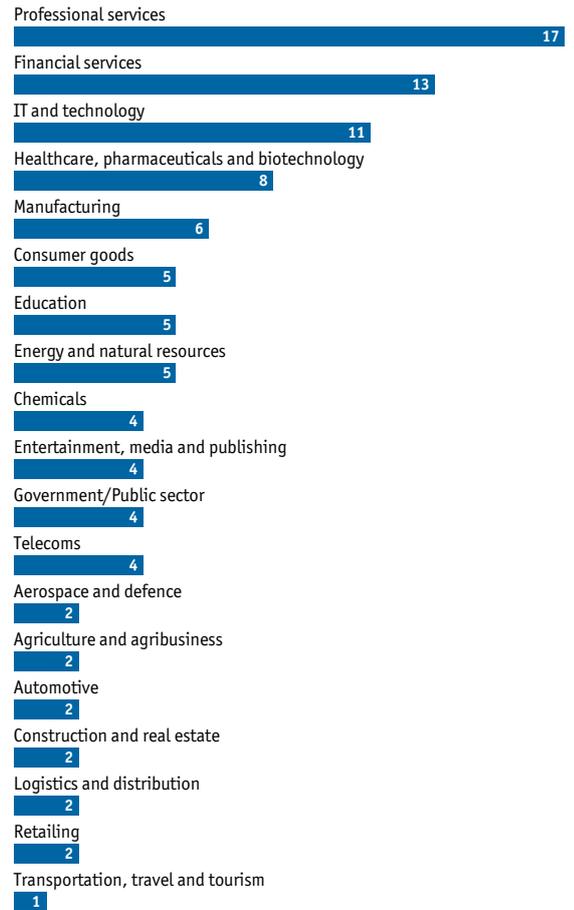
**What are your company's global annual revenues in US dollars?**

(% respondents)



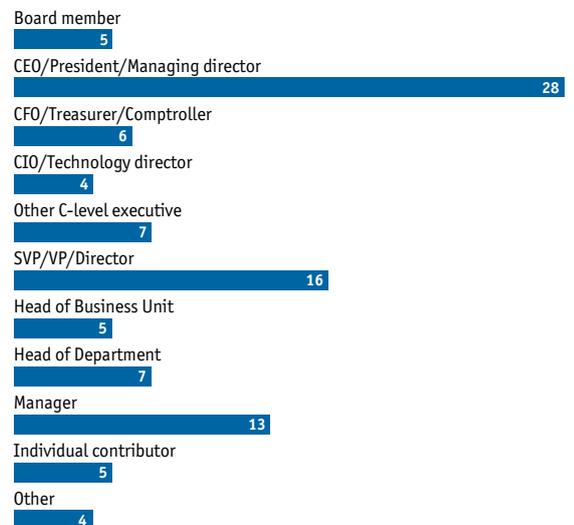
**What is your primary industry?**

(% respondents)



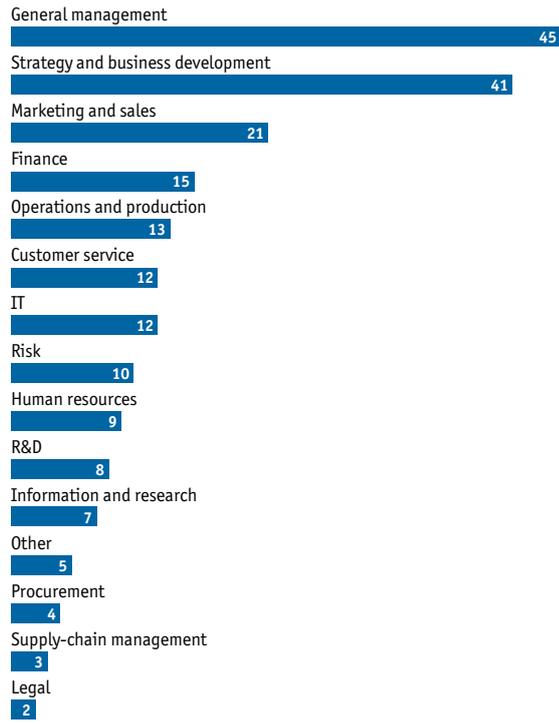
**Which of the following best describes your title?**

(% respondents)



**What are your main functional roles?**

Select no more than three.  
(% respondents)



**How old are you?**

(% respondents)



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