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**What goes around comes around**

BT aims for 'net' gain at London 2012

## What goes around comes around – now even faster

*By Tanya Goldhaber & Jeff Patmore*

We live in a shrinking world. At a coffee bar in the Cambridge University Computer Lab recently, I talked with a colleague visiting from the US while a colleague in Beijing joined the meeting real-time via Skype. We even shared a meal as we discussed our latest research plans, although for me it was breakfast and for her it was afternoon tea. This type of meeting is no longer rare, either at work or at home. Nonetheless, it remains incredible that instant connections like this are available with people literally halfway around the world.



### Normal behaviour

Last time I visited the US, a colleague at MIT shared some cutting-edge research with me during a meeting. Without even blinking, I instantly passed it on via e-mail to my colleagues in the UK and had some of their comments back before the end of the conversation. A few years ago, it would have been considered rude to be typing on a laptop during a meeting.



No longer is that the case. In fact, it seemed completely normal to be exchanging information both with each other and with remote co-workers while still maintaining an engaging face-to-face conversation. While it used to be the case that those who could not be separated from their devices were seen as an annoying anomaly, those who arrive to meetings without one are now seen in much the same light.

Because of my ability to rapidly exchange information, my meeting at MIT was both more effective and more efficient. With the additional electronic input from colleagues, our decisions and conclusions were better informed and made with more confidence, and, in addition, much of our "to-do list" for after the meeting had already been taken care of.

Of course, one of the main drivers of this evolution of work style is the ever-growing availability of wi-fi networks. The idea of being able to tap in to the vast resources of the internet from almost anywhere has inspired people to carry their connection devices with them at all times.

### On the train

I wrote this article on the train from Ipswich to Cambridge, where there is no wi-fi access. The journey was made bearable, however, by the presence of wi-fi networks at both train stations, where I could go online again.

As I wrote, it was interesting to watch other people. A girl sat down next to me and her first task was to get out her mobile phone and start checking messages, news and chat with friends.

Such device obsession and dependence is no longer associated with "geekiness" or technical skill. In fact, the opposite has become true. In almost every situation I encounter, people of all ages and backgrounds are either typing away on laptops or exchanging information via smartphone.

### Getting the balance right

Our world has become so rich in so many different modes of communication, and with this novelty comes the strong desire to indulge. Are there limits, however, to how much use of these new technologies can be seen as purely beneficial? Is there potential for cognitive harm? This is a salient area of research, and BT is of course actively contributing. Specifically, we are trying to determine where the right balance lies between new and traditional methods of communication, and how people can live more fulfilled and productive lives by maintaining that balance.

Our new research in this area is centred in the UK, US, and China and is working with research teams at the University of Cambridge, MIT and Tsinghua University. The team is made up of usability specialists, anthropologists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, media researchers, and experts in new technology. They will be conducting research into this evolution over the next six months, looking at how people perceive and react to technological change and these changes will affect the productivity and well-being not only of individuals, but also society as a whole.

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