

# The wearable workplace might be closer than you think

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Think back eight years to the launch of the original Apple iPhone - a device that seemed at the time like an expensive toy for the wealthy. Today, smartphones with fast LTE connections are pervasive in the workforce and we simply take it for granted that we will have access to documents, email, and company data wherever we are.



In much the same way, we're only just seeing the wearable computing trend start to take root in South Africa, starting with the wealthier consumer. Many fitness fanatics track their runs, cycle rides and gym workouts with fitness bands such as the Fitbit and some early adopters are walking around with Apple Watches on their wrists.

Workplace adoption seems slow so far. Yet with more and more people relying on wearables in their personal lives, can it be long before these devices start creeping into business environments? Tech-savvy workers drove the 'bring your own device' (BYOD) trend when they started bringing smartphones to work; we should not be surprised if they bring about the rise of 'wear your own device', too.

## **Wearables in the office**

For now, wearables face a range of barriers. Battery life for smartwatches and other wearables is poor, and the devices remain pricy compared to smartphones and tablets. Even more importantly, outside niches such as health and fitness, there isn't a killer app for smart wearables to justify their cost.

Sure, it's useful to get urgent messages on your smartwatch while you're in a meeting, but is it worth paying upwards of R7,000 for this functionality? Yet we can expect many of these obstacles to mainstream adoption to rapidly fall away. Remember how primitive, expensive and limited the first-generation iPhone really was?

In much the same way, wearable devices will get better and less expensive. Connections will become faster and more stable – you only have to compare the speeds of 3G and 4G to see how quickly the mobile world moves. And as prices fall and more people start using wearables, we'll begin to see new apps and business cases emerge.

## **What this means for the entrepreneur**

Business owners should be keeping a watchful eye on the wearables market to see how it evolves. From smart glasses and smartwatches, we can expect some interesting use cases to emerge in the next few years. Imagine, for example, the potential benefits of hands-free computing in businesses such as manufacturing or field service.

As prices of wearables fall, businesses may find that simple functions such as the unobtrusive alert of a smartwatch offer productivity, collaboration and efficiency boosts that justify their costs. For example, workers could have access to emails, calls, text messages and alerts with a quick glance.

Another potential spin-off comes from the range of location and contextual data businesses could collect from wearable computers. They could, for example, use this data to optimise their deployment of their mobile field sales and services teams or to track drivers who need to venture into dangerous areas.

## **Changing the way we work and how consumers behave**

Though this may sound dystopian to some, using such data wisely can improve both business processes and working conditions. Research from PwC shows that more than three-quarters of South African employees would consider using a wearable device if their employer used the data to improve their conditions in the workplace.

Of course, small business owners should also be keenly watching their customers use wearable devices. Some life and health insurers are already taking note, offering people they insure incentives to wear fitness trackers and share their data. In time, smartwatches and other wearables could serve as electronic keys, digital wallets, and more.

For now, it might seem hard to imagine wearables as making the same impact as smartphones – but then again when we were texting and calling with the first mobile phones, could we have imagined the progression of technology to create what we have now?

At Sage, we believe the future is mobile. We see wearable computing as one of the most exciting developments in this time of seismic technological change and digital invention.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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