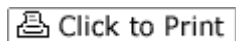


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Phoney excuses at touch of a button

By Rhymer Rigby

FT.com site; Oct 05, 2004

It is 10.30am and Smith, a member of your project team, still has not arrived at his desk. Frustrated, you call him on his mobile. "John," you say, "where are you? You were supposed to be presenting at a 9.30 meeting."

"I'm really sorry," Smith replies, "but the traffic is the worst I've ever seen. I've been stuck on the motorway since 7.30." Sure enough, you can hear engines running and the occasional car horn honking in the background. Somewhat mollified, you tell him to be as quick as he can and think nothing of it. As for Smith, he hangs up, sets his alarm for 11.30 and goes back to sleep.

A week earlier he had downloaded a piece of software that runs on Nokia mobile phones. Now, whenever he receives or places a call, a window pops up asking whether he would like a sound to play in the background during the call. There are nine sounds, ranging from the useful, such as traffic or heavy machinery, to the more bucolic, such as birdsong or a thunderstorm.

"They sound very genuine and they give you the potential to pretend you're in a different place," says Liviu Tofan, founder of German company Simedia, which developed the software. "We also give you a function which plays a telephone ring after 15 or 30 seconds, so you can say you need to get another call."

Mr Tofan says that the application was originally written "more for fun and as a technical challenge than anything else". Since its launch in February, however, it has been a runaway success. Simedia now has distribution partners in both the US and China and a new cross-platform version of the software planned soon.

The company is well aware of the uses to which its products might be put. "Certainly," says Mr Tofan, "people do use it to give plausibility to their excuses - both for work and in relationships."

Software is not the only technological aid available to corporate laggards or cheating spouses. In California a company called SMS.ac, which boasts the largest mobile phone user community in the world, hosts 150,000 user-created "sms clubs". One is the unambiguously titled "alibi and excuse club".

Users looking for a get-out clause send a text out to fellow club members (who number about 7,000) saying, for example: "I'd like to watch tonight's football match. Please give me an excuse." Recipients then respond with offers of help and, naturally enough, 7,000 heads are better than one.

"It was started by a flight attendant who didn't want to go out on a blind date," explains SMS.ac co-founder Greg Wilfahrt. "She got the idea from a [now defunct] club she'd seen in Germany." The most popular requests the club receives are from people who want to get out of work and relationship commitments.

"One man went to a party until four in the morning," continues Mr Wilfahrt. "He couldn't go into work the next day so he solicited responses from the club. Eventually he got a female club member to pose as his wife and say that he was ill." His boss bought the tale - even though the man in question was unmarried.

"Of course, this sort of thing has always happened," says Jakob Nielsen, a consultant on IT usability at the US-based Norman Nielsen Group. "But with alibi clubs you have access to a whole world to back you up."

Moreover, continues Mr Nielsen, not only can users draw from a deeper pool of excuses, but people are also far less likely to have a problem lying to strangers; in fact they may even find it rather fun. "You don't know who you're covering for and the social constraints break down. We've seen a lot of this already with e-mail. People are far more likely to be rude because it's less personal," says Mr Nielsen.

James Woodhuysen, professor of forecasting and innovation at De Montfort University, takes a similar line: "No doubt mobiles create the opportunity for this sort of thing, but the real problem is in the collapse of trust between employer and employee and in relationships [at work]."

Since the downsizing culls of the 1980s, adds Prof Woodhuysen, many employers have suffered from a "legitimacy crisis" - exacerbated more recently by corporate scandals at Enron, WorldCom and Parmalat.

Nonetheless, he says he is not pessimistic. "I think fear and hype about this sort of thing move faster than reality and that even with 3G the paranoia is overdone."

Indeed, third-generation mobile technology offers an insight into how employers might fight back. 3G already offers location-based services.

In Japan, for example, users can set their phones to alert them when

someone on their "buddy list" is in the vicinity. Using such a system, Smith's boss could run a check on the mobile's location to verify exactly where Smith was at the time of the call.

Sophisticated technology users, though, will always be one step ahead. In the US a service - popular with telemarketers - can mask a caller's identity. And savvy users of 3G could use proxy services to hide their whereabouts.

In Germany, meanwhile, another business founded on the provision of excuses is tailored to both technophiles and technophobes. Perfektes Alibi will arrange any excuse for any occasion. To this end, says Tanja Haas, client manager, the company's services start at text messages and go as far as "providing a dedicated phone line for clients for a certain length of time".

Perfektes Alibi will even print fake conference invitations that can be left lying around the home or office - for those who need to organise a truly convincing deception.

COMING SOON: TECHNO-DISGUISE ON VIDEO CALLS

The next arena for faking it, says Jakob Nielsen, a consultant on IT usability with US-based Nielsen Norman Group, is likely to be videophones. It is often asserted that the reason the videophone has never taken off is because people like the option of answering the phone in their underwear. But what if you could answer the phone in your underwear and appear to be wearing a suit?

"Looking ahead", says Mr Nielsen, "you'll have a visual version of the fake background noise you can buy today for your mobile calls. You'll have software that gives you a shave, better hair, a suit - or fakes the background." The beginnings of this technology are here already - many television stations spoof the backdrop to newscasts. The news is read in front of a blue screen and the studio is digitally added in later.


Companies may also emerge to thwart such deception, such as third-party verification services that certify that the information broadcast is just as was originally captured.

"You'll get twists within the twists," says Mr Nielsen. "The reason we're starting to see this sort of thing is that until now we've had a thin and impoverished virtual world. But as it becomes richer and more complex it becomes increasingly like the real world. Most of the people who design this sort of software don't think about how it will interact with human nature."

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