

# The Age of Peak Mobility

How we can realise huge productivity gains for mobile workers

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## FOREWORD

**Technological revolution is driving the digital economy and transforming society. The rapid commercialisation of Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and other advanced automation approaches is bringing promises of increased productivity, efficiency, and quality.**

However, it also raises many questions with respect to jobs, skills, investment, and our vision for society. With a backdrop of political uncertainty and substantial risk to UK stability, increasing our understanding of the future of work is today at the top of government and corporate agendas.

This report offers illuminating insight into the effect of technology on the mobile workforce, with wide ranging implications. Understanding the mobile workforce is essential: they are an important bellwether for the impact of the digital economy on the future of work. Furthermore, the focus on productivity aligns closely with the UK's widely reported productivity crisis, that is, national productivity is now 20% below the trend line before the financial crisis of 2008. This extraordinary statistic is concerning industry leaders, policy makers, government agencies and is replicated here in microcosm across mobile workers.

However, understanding productivity in the mobile workforce is far from straightforward. For example, as the world of work becomes more complex one consequence is that mobile workers are having to do more and more diagnostic work (with unknown durations) rather than simple routine tasks. In healthcare, leading companies are using digitisation of the patient and supporting equipment, alongside sophisticated predictive algorithms, to streamline solution delivery prior to attendance.

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The impact these technologies are having is currently limited, but will be an intriguing topic for further study with significant implications for job redesign.

Similarly, productivity must not be seen purely in terms of outputs but also be addressed from the perspective of the client of a service, and in particular in terms of what the client thinks of the service they've received. This tension between output and outcome is always a big one for service companies, often simplistically expressed as a trade-off between completing the transaction and developing a high level of customer engagement and service.

In this regard, this report adds an important contribution to the dialogue on enhancing 'trust' between customer and firm. In an online environment this concept has changed hugely, but in the world of the mobile worker there is still the potential to develop richer, deeper, and more meaningful customer relationships that lead to customer loyalty. Again, the leading firms are using digital technology to enhance service and productivity, an area in which the mobile workforce plays an increasingly critical role.

Throughout the report there is a particular emphasis on achieving peak mobility in a constantly changing environment. One consequence is that mobile workers may get to engage with their mobile device far more than with their manager and this risks de-humanising management into a series of tasks or transactions. This casualisation may be contributing to the productivity challenge as employees need to self-manage workloads, schedules, skill development, etc. As this trend continues employees will need their own knowledge-based 'managers' that recognise their needs.

We expect to see continued experimentation by individual consumers in their use of digital technology. The consequences for a generation of workers and consumers who have "grown up digital" is a very different set of expectations, working practices, value models, etc. This report shines a welcome light on consumers and users of such technologies, and brings important additional insights into the flexibility and freedoms they enable for the mobile workforce.

- Professor Alan Brown
- Professor Roger Maull

*Surrey Centre for the Digital Economy (CoDE) University of Surrey, UK*

## THE PUZZLE OF PRODUCTIVITY

**In the autumn of 2017, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond MP introduced ambitious budget measures focused on unlocking billions to help businesses scale, and on upgrading our economic infrastructure. It was the latest attempt to boost productivity in Britain, which experienced a sharp decline around the time of the global financial crisis of 2008 and has been low since – with many experts going so far as to suggest that the UK's figures are the worst in the G7.**

No single cause can be found that explains what the Bank of England's Chief Economist, Andy Haldane, terms 'the productivity puzzle'. And the problem is not new. But despite the almost endless hours dedicated to it by politicians, economists and commentators, it's not going away. Indeed more bad news came as recently as January 2018, when small businesses suggested that there was no easy way out of the crisis; with the knock on effects of low productivity (poor growth and slow wage growth) continuing well into this year.

Many have suggested ways out of the productivity crisis. But, so far, little is working and a rethink is required. It's no use trying to get more out of already squeezed workers. Instead, solutions should be found in changing what they do day-to-day, removing some of the barriers that impede greater productivity.

Of course, technology has a huge part to play here in redesigning our activities and processes. We see from our everyday lives that apps, tools and innovative solutions are out there to make it easier to be more productive, whether that means having dinner delivered to your door, calling a cab with the click of a button or checking in to a flight with a wave of your phone. All are innovations that centre on making various parts of our lives easier, thereby freeing up time we can better use elsewhere. But how much of this technology is making its way into the world of work? Unfortunately, very little.

Many mobile workers who could really use a solution that takes care of time-consuming admin, journey planning and paperwork are instead relying on the same tools they did years ago. At the same time, they're faced with bigger job lists, more to do in a day, and more to report on for every interaction. The unfortunate result of which is that, according to our new findings, many mobile workers spend as little as 30% of their time on client work, with the remaining 70% taken up with tasks that might be considered supplementary to the job they're employed to do.

Clearly, we need a way out. This new report from Totalmobile is based on extensive research into mobile worker productivity, carried out in conjunction with the London-based research agency, Loudhouse. It explores what's driving the productivity crisis amongst mobile workers, the root of these problems and how new, productivity driving solutions can offer us a way out – finally realising the promise of peak mobility, whereby the effectiveness of mobile workers is optimised through technology. >

## WHAT IS PEAK MOBILITY?

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Our definition of 'peak mobility' is a mobile workforce performing at its maximum potential for productivity. Consumers have reaped huge productivity gains from mobility through the use of smartphones, apps, GPS, and much more. But these gains – and the new thinking, technology and techniques that sit behind them – are yet to be replicated on the front line of key industries and workforces across the UK.

At the moment, there's a gap to be closed before we reach peak mobility. This might just be the forgotten vector of the productivity puzzle. A state of peak mobility sees mobile workforces working with efficient, streamlined processes that enable them to deliver quality service in an effective and efficient manner. This benefits both the customer and organisation the mobile worker is serving.



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**The thing to consider here is, of course, variety. The greater the variety of work the mobile worker is doing, the less efficient they are because there is a diagnosis or setup task, which is usually of an indeterminate length and not normally distributed.**

— Professor Roger Maull,  
Surrey Centre for the Digital Economy (CoDE), University of Surrey

## Who are our mobile workers?

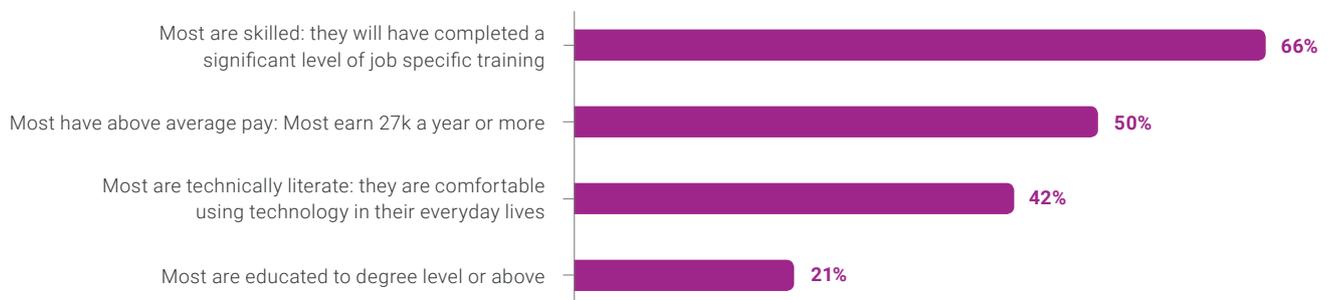
Mobile workers are defined as job-based and care-based employees, whose work requires them to be out in the field for the majority of their time. The core element of a mobile worker's job consists of the delivery of service at different locations, and while they will often be based out of an 'office', this will not be where the bulk of their 'work' is undertaken.

### JOB-BASED:

Job-based mobile workers tend to be employed for the installation or repair of equipment in homes, business premises, or outdoors – for telecoms, white goods, heating, and computing, for example. Or to carry out inspections or reports for security purposes, insurance claims, and health and safety.

### CARE-BASED:

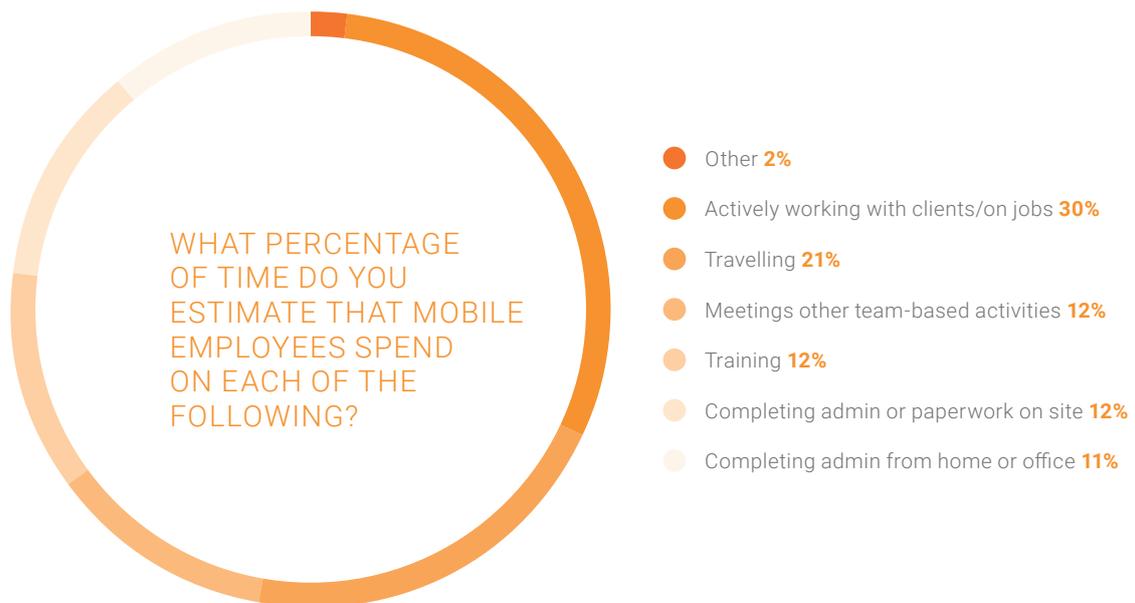
Care-based mobile workers are predominantly nurses, social workers, community midwives, home helpers, or community and health case workers. All mobile workers rely on ready access to customer data, specialist support, case histories, notes and journey maps. When in the field, most have access to smartphones, tablets and laptops. The below graph lists some of the other key characteristics of the mobile worker.



## PRODUCTIVITY IN CRISIS

When a mobile worker is hired to do a job, their employer is looking for a set of key skills. For job-based workers, these may be practical skills and abilities – fixing and repairing, or perhaps having the knowledge base to make assessments or surveys. For care based workers it might be something like a midwifery qualification, or a background in providing home help. Whatever the quality they're being hired for, it's certainly not admin, paperwork or travelling – which makes one of the key findings from this research all the more troubling.

As we can see from Fig.1, today's mobile workers are spending as little as 1.5 days a week on the core aspects of their jobs – with the remaining time spent on admin, travelling, meetings and training. (Care-based workers actually under index, spending just over a quarter [27%] of their time on the job.)



Just dwell on that for a second. The stats indicate that a boiler repair person, to take just one example, spends almost three-quarters of their week on everything except boiler repairs. Considering this, it's unsurprising that 59% of businesses believe that mobile workers find it difficult to complete the volume of work they're assigned, and 63% believe their mobile employees waste time completing admin at the office or home. >

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## Action on inaction

For managers who have an eye on productivity, these statistics should be very worrying. And they really bring home the scale of the productivity crisis we're living through, as well as the topline factors behind it.

Yet, it's not as if employers have passively observed this happening and done nothing about it. Over the past few years new technologies and efficiency processes have been introduced. However, their impact has not been exactly as planned.

Almost two-thirds (61%) agree that employees make more job visits than they did two years ago. At first glance, this suggests that those visits are being handled more efficiently, making room for more work, but with only 47% of the belief that active working time has increased, it's clear that additional job visits are not yielding better or more work. Instead, it may be the case that the increase in jobs is actually down to revisits and poor outcomes, both things that severely dent mobile worker productivity. Could it be that cost-cutting measures designed to get jobs done quicker are backfiring?

**A key consideration is what people mean by 'active working time'. It could be spending more time diagnosing a problem. Or it could be that they are on site but spending lots of time doing admin tasks.**

— Professor Roger Maul

## Productivity problems remain

Clearly, the efficiency drives planned by many organisations have not actually translated into real productivity gains. More visits by mobile workers does not necessarily translate into an improvement in service or improved ways of working.

With big challenges still standing in the way of effective, productive mobile working, it's unsurprising that the overriding sentiment from 61% is that something more radical needs to be done to properly maximise productivity. Collectively, we need to look at the technology mobile workers use, the features they need, and provide an adequate sweetspot solution that enables greater productivity.



## WORKER SENTIMENT

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With such low numbers for active client work, it stands to reason that mobile employees need to be more productive. Our figures show that there is significant scope for a productivity increase, with the average increase considered achievable sat at a healthy 28%.

## THE ROOT OF THE PRODUCTIVITY PROBLEM

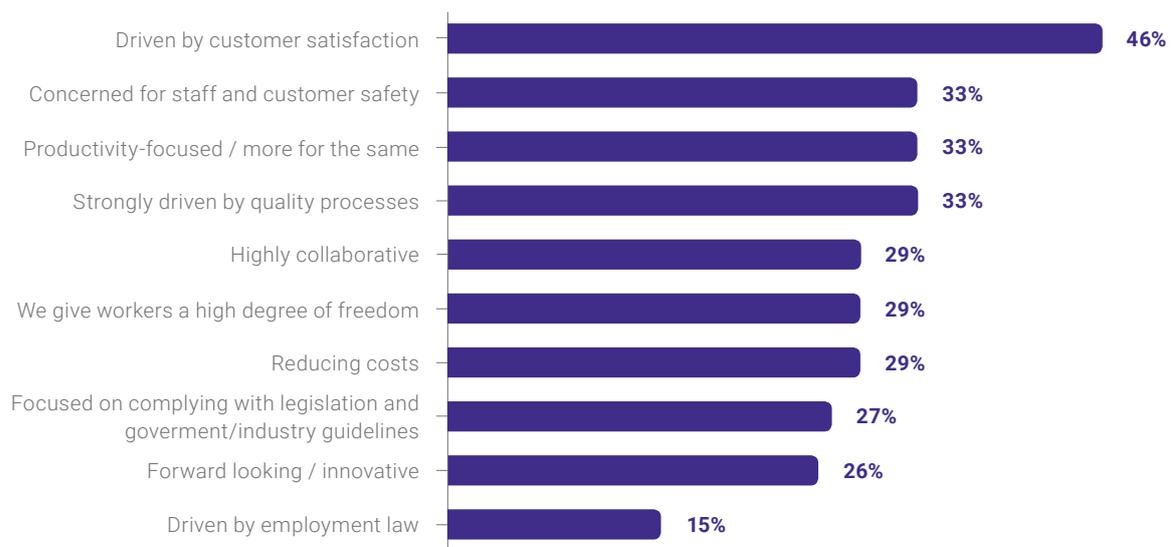
The productivity puzzle has been well-documented for some years now, The Times recently describing it as 'almost unprecedented in UK history'. And it's not right to think that employers or managers have been ignoring it and carrying on regardless. Instead, what seems to be behind the problem (at least in part) is a series of tensions between time, the quality of service and care they want to deliver, and how this affects productivity.

The research reveals that over a third (39%) of organisations surveyed are focused on seeing more clients every day and reducing service wait times. While 40% are more balanced in their approach – focused on improving outcomes, but only if there is no impact on the number of jobs they're able to carry out. Fig.2 goes further into these attitudes, demonstrating how the priority for many is weighted in favour of what the client thinks of the service they've received.

**It's no use just seeing people for the sake of it. I have seen it happen where visits and calls increased, and complaints increased with them. This led to far lower levels of customer satisfaction and subsequently customer loyalty. Meaning sales had to work far harder to get product orders.**

— Professor Roger Maul

### Which THREE of the following best describe your organisation's style and way of working when it comes to your mobile workforce?



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## How to think of productivity

These numbers highlight an important point about what we consider productivity to be when it comes to mobile workers. One view is that it's the number of jobs or visits a mobile worker is able to carry out in a day. But this is a slightly blunt instrument. In that if a call is not carried out to the client's satisfaction it will have to be redone – hitting productivity in the process.

It's therefore more accurate to consider quality as much as quantity when thinking about productivity. A client call done well means a job ticked off the list, no revisit required and quite possibly less paperwork at the other end of the process – all things that represent a boost to productivity.

However, it's unfortunately the case that all too often mobile workers lack the information, support and applications that will actually enable them to deliver better service, giving rise to the two factors that are affecting productivity.

The first is around time, the second around quality. And both are contributing to that 70% of mobile worker time spent doing everything except their jobs. >

**There's a big difference between stable and unstable environments, where one is optimised towards regularity, and the other to flexibility. The approach to management is entirely different for each category. Think about the vast difference in examples such as parcel delivery, emergency plumbers, police forces and home help.**

— Professor Alan Brown

*Surrey Centre for the Digital Economy (CoDE) University of Surrey, UK*



## THE TIME PROBLEM

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Almost two thirds (64%) of the organisations surveyed by The Age of Peak Mobility admit that they could manage their mobile workers' days more effectively with better planning. Suggesting that workers are being sent out into the field with little – or at least not enough – strategic thinking about how their time is managed.

Other statistics back this assertion up. For instance, time spent travelling accounts for 21% of the mobile worker's day. Yet fewer than half of all mobile workers (30% in small organisations, 42% in large) are able to use journey-mapping functionality. Similarly, 13% of the mobile worker's day is taken up with admin and paperwork – time which could be significantly reduced through electronic means. These are just some of the ways in which organisations are experiencing a productivity drain, can see the solution to it, but aren't yet doing anything strategic about it.

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## The quality problem

According to **69%** of respondents to The Age of Peak Mobility, work is becoming more complex, and mobile employees need to be able to get access to expert support when they are out with clients. Yet **48%** say they have 'very little' idea of how effective their employees are able to be when they're in the field. Pointing to the idea that mobile workers are not equipped with the right tools to do their jobs well when they're on the road.

Again, other statistics in the research support this idea. Just **45%** of organisations with mobile workers use workforce management tools. While fewer than half of all mobile workers (**30%** in small organisations, **43%** in large) have access to guides and best practice at the point of service; and far too few (**37%** in small organisations, **55%** in large) have access to technical or support staff to help with problem solving and diagnosis.

As with time, the productivity problem is clear, as is the solution (interestingly, **69%** think that better connections to managers and colleagues could help mobile workers). But action is yet to be taken. >

**The issue of complexity is interesting. Simple, routine tasks can be better planned, managed, and, in some cases, automated. Reducing variety in service delivery allows people to optimise and specialise.**

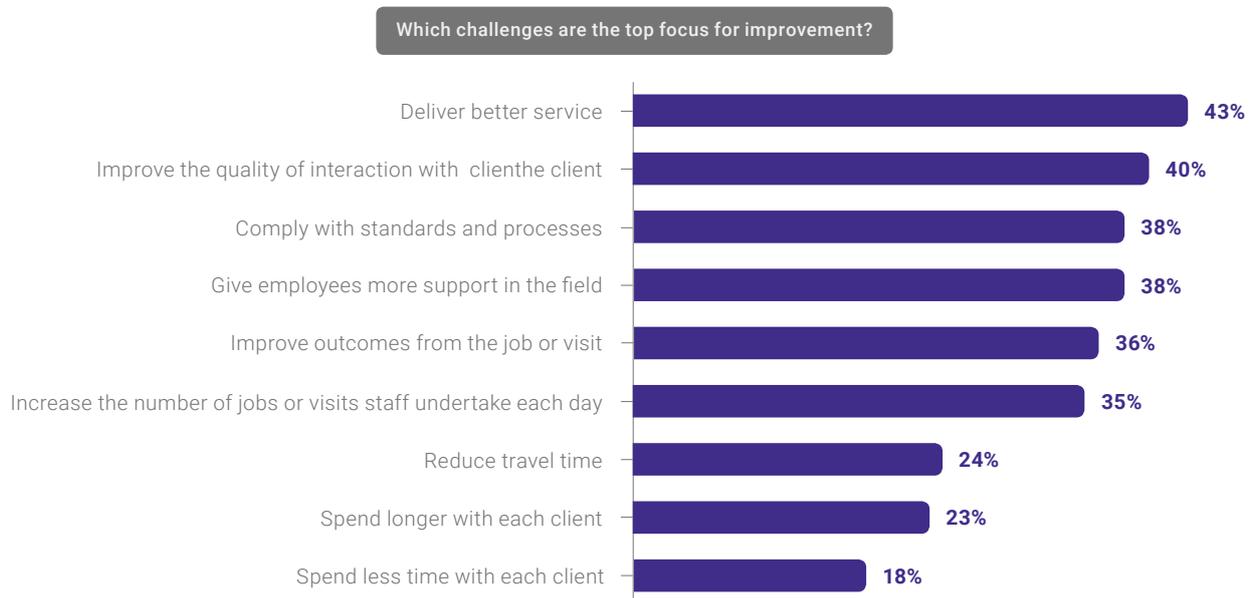
— Professor Alan Brown

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## A route to improvement

With broad recognition that something needs to change for mobile workers, organisations and businesses are focusing their efforts for improvement on the areas listed in Fig.3.

### Thinking about the challenges of managing a team of field-based employees, which of the following are the main focus for your organisation right now?



Each focus area is clearly aligned to a particular aspect of mobile working that can improve productivity. Whether it's reducing travel time, or offering more support in the field (which could cut down on the huge admin burden many face). What's key, however, is that organisations employing mobile workers are able to draw on a holistic technological solution that offers numerous benefits to their organisations and workers at once; and that doesn't require too much of a technological leap.

Our research shows that 95% of organisations think that technology will play an important role in improving productivity. The only question is what form will that technology will take?

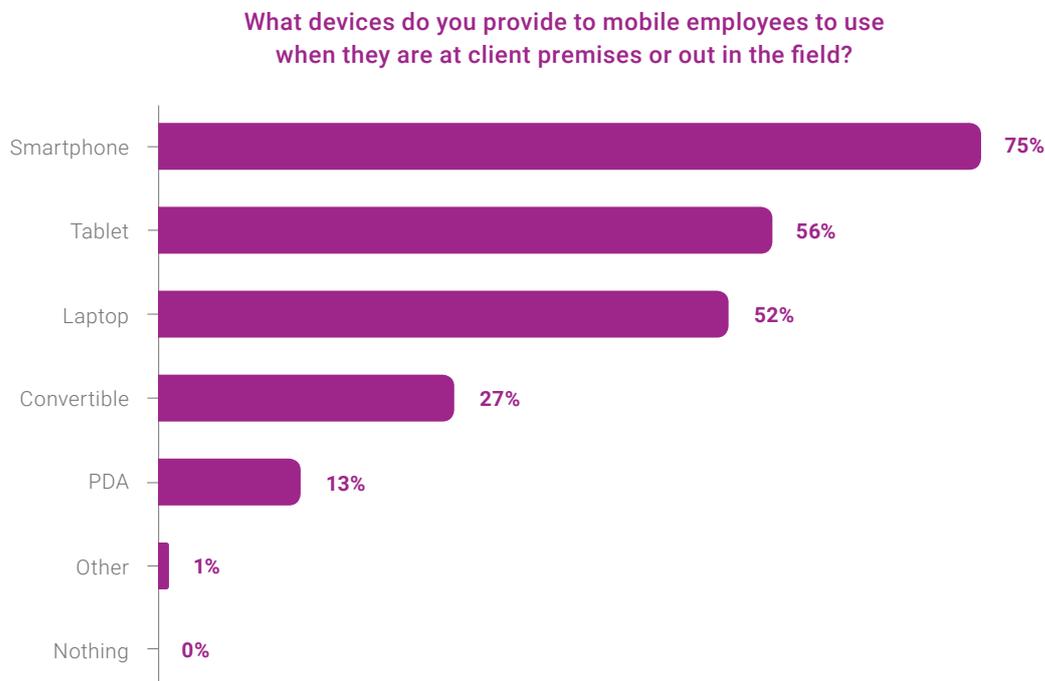
## FROM PEAK MOBILE TO PEAK MOBILITY

This new research has shown that mobile worker productivity is an issue for many organisations. Varying priorities about targets to hit, and differing blockers to productivity, are muddying the waters. Meaning that answering the question 'how do we accomplish more with the same human resources?' is becoming increasingly complex.

The route out of this, however, need not be so difficult. Instead of looking at ways to add more in the way of calls and visits, it instead makes sense to return to Fig.1, to look at the tasks mobile workers are doing instead of the critical function of their jobs, and to examine how that can be changed.

## Existing tech, new solution

Fig.4 looks at the technology mobile workers already have on them when they go out to work. Unsurprisingly, smartphones are near ubiquitous. With tablets and laptops also popular amongst mobile workers. >



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When seeking productivity gains for mobile workers, it makes sense to start the journey here. But organisations also need to think beyond this to get to where they want to be in terms of peak mobility for mobile employees.

People are already using modern tech and accessing modern (consumer?) apps out in the field. But, as has been explored, most mobile workers lack the mobile functionality that might enable them to access the journey, job and client information they need to get in, do the job and move on effectively, with as little admin as possible. Their technology works for consumer applications (van drivers almost certainly use a sat nav or Google Maps type solution). But they're not being offered equivalent convenience and functionality by their employers.

There is a clear opportunity here for organisations to enact a swift change and dramatically increase the 1.5 days a week spent on jobs or care. With new, modernised and easy-to-use workforce management tools, organisations can provide their mobile workers with the tools and solutions (and therefore ability) to reduce the 23% of time spent on admin after client visits, and more time on providing excellent service at the visit itself. Likewise, journey planning and mapping facilities will reduce the 21% of time spent travelling, making room for more important tasks with clients. And backing mobile workers up with the best in contemporary connectivity and AI solutions has the power to drastically change how they work in the field, meaning that one mobile worker salary goes further, simply because they're doing more actual work without working longer hours.

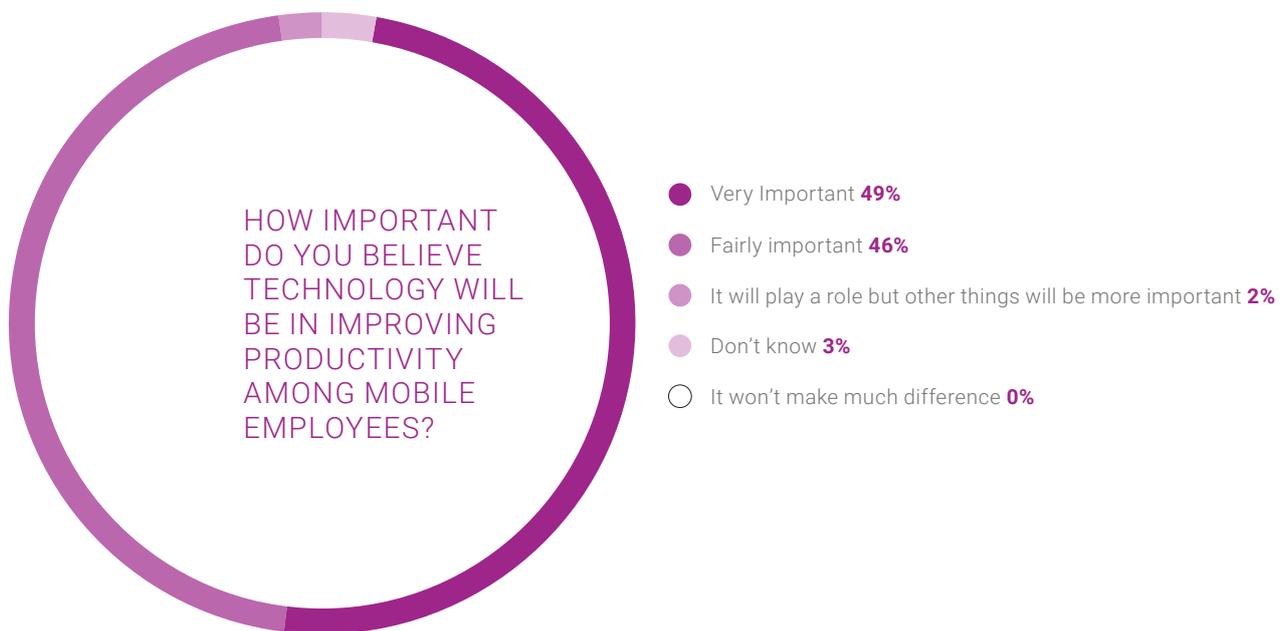
**I think everyone knows that better planning and management would bring benefits. A better question is: why is this not happening?**

— Professor Alan Brown

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## Workforce managed, productivity managed

Our research reveals that 68% believe that mobile workforce management tools are an essential means of increasing productivity. And Fig.5 shows us that technology will be hugely important in driving mobile worker productivity.



Regardless of industry or the challenge to productivity, it's clear that drawing on the capabilities of workers and the handheld hardware they already use is an ideal solution. Eliciting the kind of change that has potentially huge ramifications for productivity – helping to realise that crucial 28% boost that many believe mobile workers can achieve.



## CONCLUSION

Productivity is a complex thing. The puzzle that Andy Haldane brought to our collective attention years ago is as difficult to solve now as it has ever been. And despite endless articles full of opinion and analysis, Britain in particular remains in a mire that reached its nadir in 2008 and hasn't recovered since.

But the thing is that improving productivity is absolutely crucial to our national prosperity and economic growth. This is why it continues to be such a key topic for businesses everywhere.

This research has sought to explore the things that really impact some of the most important employees we have: mobile workers. In doing so, it has unearthed a series of problems with extraneous tasks that impact the quality of work – many of which can be addressed with new, innovative technologies that keep mobile workers focused on the job at hand.

Improving productivity is difficult. But by finding gains in technology, businesses around the UK can get their productivity figures moving in the right direction.

## About Totalmobile

Totalmobile create mobile workforce solutions that release the potential of your workforce.

We do this by providing organisations with the ability to improve how they mobilise, schedule and analyse their workforce.

This enables our customers to experience significant increases in workforce capacity and cost savings, while also ensuring compliance and driving levels of service consistency.

We will transform how your organisation works and help your people do more of the work that really matters.



**For more information:**

Email: [info@totalmobile.co.uk](mailto:info@totalmobile.co.uk)

Phone: 028 9033 0111

Website: [www.totalmobile.co.uk](http://www.totalmobile.co.uk)