

Shoe gadget could open secret texting world

By Drake Bennett, Bloomberg

Technology and etiquette don't move in lockstep. Just because it's possible to whip out your smart phone and connect from anywhere doesn't mean you should.

Text during a meeting and you risk offending your boss, e-mail during family dinner and you risk displeasing your spouse, peruse your MP3 collection during church and you risk disappointing your pastor (and any supernatural arbiter whose ear he may have).

A device being developed by engineers in Germany, however, promises to liberate smart-phone addicts from the strictures of social opprobrium, making it easier to work their devices sneakily under the noses of those who might judge them for it. The gadget is called ShoeSense. It's a motion sensor that, indeed, mounts on a shoe.

Facing upward, it allows a user to control his phone through hand gestures performed at midriff level, even when the phone is still stored away in his pocket. Pinch index finger and thumb together and move your hand slightly forward to answer the phone or hang up, touch one hand to the other forearm to send a prewritten text, hold out a number of fingers to communicate whom on your speed-dial list to send it to. A person using ShoeSense looks a bit like a theremin player.

If the ShoeSense user is sitting at a desk, however, or a conference table, he looks as if he's not doing anything at all and instead paying you his undivided attention – even as, sub rosa, he's semaphoring his phone to send out a text about happy hour.

“It is quite discreet,” says Gilles Bailly, a computer scientist at Technische Universität Berlin and Deutsche Telekom who is one of ShoeSense’s creators. “Say you are in a meeting, you want to indicate that you are going to be late. You’ve already defined the gesture for this, and you perform the gesture under the table. The system on your shoe can recognize it, and nobody at the meeting knows that you performed the gesture.”

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