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Defectors from a cell phone nation? Some residents say they can do without the connection

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Kathy Walters admits that she's an oddity in the modern world.

The 47-year-old computer programmer doesn't feel the need to get a cell phone to yak away while she's driving to the grocery store or standing in line for a latte.

She has resisted the cell phonification of society.

"I get annoyed when I see people driving and they're using their cell phone. It's a safety hazard. I guess that's one of the reasons I don't carry one," she said.

She has a brother-in-law who sells cell phones but he has yet to convince her to buy one, she said.

"I have an answering machine at home. Sometimes I leave my house just to escape the phone. Why would I want to take it with me?" said Walters, one of a few dozen people interviewed recently at Hilldale Mall about their cell phone habits.

Nearly 80 percent of people in the U.S. have cell phones, according to Investor's Business Daily. In parts of Europe there is more than 90 percent cell phone penetration.

David Schumann, 28, who works at M&I Bank, is one of those rare people below the age of 30 who doesn't have a cell phone. He also doesn't have a problem with them.

"I haven't needed one yet," he shrugged. "It's not a big deal."

His wife has a cell phone and if he needs to use one he borrows hers. He has a land line at home and has no need for a cell phone when he's at work, he said.

Workplace expert Patricia Mullins, a UW-Madison lecturer and co-author of "The Best Work of Your Life," said that the cell phonification of America is "very similar to the ubiquitousness of e-mail. There are always people who like to be connected."

She compares it to a time before telephones were common, when there were people who wrote personal letters every day. Telephones replaced

letters to some degree, and e-mail and cell phones are replacing the connectedness people felt when land lines first became common, she said.

Besides the group of people who feel the need to be connected, there is a group that really loves gadgets and needs to have the newest technology, Mullins said.

People who don't fall into either camp are the people who are not interested in cell phones. Many of those people are probably not interested in e-mail either, she said.

Freed from the cell: Nora Montgomery, 49, a schoolteacher in the Middleton-Cross Plains School District, said she has had a cell phone for about a year but always forgets to charge it.

"I don't really like to be disturbed. I like peace and quiet," she said.

The rest of her family gets angry with her because she never has her cell phone with her, "which is another reason I don't like it," Montgomery said.

Cell phones are distracting, she said, adding that people generally don't show good manners on their phones.

Another drawback of the cell phone is that it's complicated, Montgomery said. "I don't like anything that's complicated. You have to learn how to use it properly."

However, she admits that cell phones are important for many people.

"It's a good social network for the kids. My kids love them. They wouldn't have a social life without them."

Chris Cecchini, 48, said he was a cell phone holdout for a long time and figured he'd be one of the last people without one. Then, a couple of years ago, his employer made him take one.

"I could do without it," said Cecchini, who is employed by the University of Washington in Seattle, but was visiting Madison, where he grew up, last week.

A change in position necessitated that his co-workers needed to be able to contact him whenever they needed him, so they gave him a cell phone. Then they decided he needed Web access, said Cecchini, pulling out a personal digital assistant (PDA), and announcing, "your basic Blackberry."

It's totally unnecessary, he said.

"I can find a phone whenever, wherever I want. I never talk when I'm driving. Once you have them you start depending on them."

Gordon Harwell-Spaulling, 69, of Madison, said he used to have a cell phone 10 years ago through work. He carried it around for two or three months but got tired of people calling him and left it in his desk.

"People had a bad habit of calling me at home about business. When I'm out of the office, I'm out of the office," said Harwell-Spaulling, who is

semi-retired and dabbles in real estate.

He said he "went totally e-mail after that."

"People waste time calling you and bothering you," he said.

Marcela Morrow, 63, is an artist and a homemaker. "I am always home. I have the phone at home and that's all I need," she said.

Morrow said her husband owns a cell phone but she wants no part of it.

"Myself, I don't like to talk in the car or on the street. I find it very annoying to be in a restaurant and someone's phone rings."

Hold the phone: Lori Silverman, owner of the management consulting business Partners for Progress, would put herself in the anti-cell phone group, although she was speaking via cell phone for this story since she made a cross-country move from Madison to Mesa, Arizona last week.

"I'm not a person who readily gives out my number at all. I really protect my own privacy," Silverman said, adding that she primarily uses her cell phone for emergencies and travel.

"I'll make some calls that way but I will ask people not to necessarily leave messages for me on this system," she said.

For her business she has a toll-free 800 number and said she likes to give people the opportunity to reach her that way.

"I don't like the ability of people to be able to contact me all the time," Silverman said.

Cell phones have gone from being tools that people use for crisis management, for instance if a child were sick or a parent were in the hospital, or if a car breaks down by the side of the highway, "to actually being the modus operandi for connecting with people," she said.

Personally, Silverman said, she prefers land lines to cell phones because of the higher level of clarity. With a land line, she can hear the other person better and doesn't have to worry about dropped calls.

"For example, as I was traveling by car over the past week, it's very disturbing to me to continually lose calls because I'm coming in and out of zones. I guess, for me, I have this dilemma over what really is the purpose of a cell phone -- what was its intended purpose and how has it morphed?"

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