

Apple Watch as Phone

Replace your smartphone with a smartwatch

Willem L. Middelkoop

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Imagine a week without your smartphone, replaced solely by the sleek simplicity of a smartwatch. This week I did this, leaving my smartphone behind and letting an Apple Watch take the helm. Many hail this as a liberating escape from our attention-seeking digital sidekicks, but does it truly live up to the hype? Join me on this intriguing journey, where technology meets minimalism, and discover whether less really can be more.

Apple Watch Ultra with Cellular

For this experiment I selected the Apple Watch Ultra 2 with cellular network connectivity. This enables it to function independently from the iPhone, communicating by itself using its own antennas.

Compared to many other watches, including classic timepieces like the [Rolex DateJust 36MM](#), the Apple Watch Ultra is big. Yet, for its purpose it is fitting as the larger size allows for a bigger battery and more screen real-estate. More than any other smartwatch, I think this [Apple Watch is a modern tool watch](#), purpose built and packed with technology.



Comparing Apple Watch Ultra 2 with a Rolex DateJust 36MM



The Apple Watch Ultra is a precision crafted piece of modern technology - whatever you think of smartwatches one has to applaud the effort of miniaturisation that went into this wearable wrist computer

Special cellular plan: acting as one with your phone

You should check out your mobile network operator for exact details, but in general the cellular variants of Apple Watch require you to have an additional subscription. For the Dutch Vodafone network there is "[OneNumber](#)", which is a fitting name for what this service essentially does: having two devices (your smartphone and your smartwatch) working simultaneously with the same phone number. It is as simple as being able to answer any call from either device (independently).



Feeling connected... Apple Watch Ultra 2 with Vodafone NL

Going phoneless

Over the years I have [experimented thoroughly with smartwatches](#), but most of them required me to be within Bluetooth range of my smartphone; meaning that I had to carry two devices in order to make it work. This time around I was particularly interested in the phenomenon described by others as a liberating feeling you get once you leave your smartphone home.

You should check out [this classic review of the first Apple Watch with LTE support](#) by Benjamin Clymer from Hodinkee, a well respected watch blog. In his 'week on the wrist', Ben notes that you'll get a long way with just a watch and a single (!) AirPods as every day carry (EDC).



Phoneless EDC with an Apple Watch and an AirPods (by Benjamin Clymer, Hodinkee)

Need to be online

For me the smartphone is an essential piece of equipment as it is my primary gateway to the online world where I [make most of my money](#). For my work I switch between states of easy and deep work, where the latter requires a level of [focus](#) that is easily disrupted by a connected device like a modern smartphone.

Although it would do wonders for my focus, I do not want to switch my smartphone off entirely. In addition to my responsibilities with [cloud infrastructure](#), I am a [parent of two young kids](#) and you never quite know when "the world needs me". Even though I realise it is just "a feeling", disconnecting myself *entirely*, almost immediately gives me anxiety. Earlier I tried [using a simple dumbphone](#) that could only call or send simple text messages.



Designed to offer you a better balance between being connected and being disturbed, the Punkt MP01 mobile phone featured in my experiment using a "dumb phone" to foster creativity

A limited dumbphone sort of works, but you'll fall short once you do need modern connectivity, like for [fixing cloud stuff](#) or when taking and sending a photo. So instead of killing my smartphone, I took great effort to set it up to [very selectively deliver only some notifications](#), it is something I continue to finetune. I feel there is room for further improvement and this is why I love experimenting with different devices, such as [reMarkable](#), to enhance my deep work performance; aiming to strike a powerful balance between connectivity and solitude.

The experiment and my Experience

So, once I had setup everything I put away my smartphone in a bag and set out to do my things with just my Apple Watch. During my day to day activities I limited smartphone screen time to an absolute minimum. During my experiment I had days as daddy and some work days that involved some travelling, too. Just a normal mix of ["Willem Life"](#).

In and around the home I found Apple Watch particularly strong as it really kills any habit you might have formed in (automatically) picking up the phone to see if something "is new". You know, the habit of checking it for the sake of checking it. When you can no longer reach it within arms length, you'll notice how ingrained this "reflex" has become. Without me jumping into the digital realm, I felt much more into the "here and now". That makes a difference!

Occasionally a notification came in that required immediate action. For instance, I had one failing web service that triggered an [uptime alarm](#). These outages are rare, but I did find it very nice that I was notified of this problem without any delay. After receiving the notification I walked to my iPad and set out to address the issue, in a very deliberate manner. This is another effect of the Apple Watch as primary device: you will use your other devices with a greater determination - you set out to do something specific instead

of just glancing around. I love this, too.

During work the Apple Watch does not offer me that much extra, it is just another screen when I am already surrounded with other screens. I guess that it is nice when it alerts you of an upcoming calendar event or a thing on your todo list, but for me it doesn't change the way I work all that much. When I work I am already well connected because of the [nature of my work](#). But of course, Apple Watch's impact on your work can be different. You might enjoy this crazy experiment I did earlier: [programming on Apple Watch](#).

With two curious kids I am often bombarded with "the questions of life", many of which I can answer but some require looking up some trivia. I figured that this is where Siri on the Apple Watch really shines. Instead of reaching for your phone to look something up, you can simply ask Siri a question. The trick here is to know how to ask (or prompt) Siri to get you the right results. When my son asked me about the biggest volcano in the solar system, I knew it was on Mars but my knowledge lacked any juicy details. "Hey Siri, look on wikipedia for the volcano on Mars" will yield you results within seconds, saving you a trip through search engine advertising wonderland. Powerful stuff, once you've memorised a few of these prompts.

Creativity sparks when I am in a focussed state of mind, often when being left alone with my thoughts. I never quite know when and where novel ideas hit me. Sometimes I sit down and use my [reMarkable paper tablet](#) to cultivate and capture my thoughts. But, there are times when I don't have it around, like when I am going out for a [walk through the countryside](#). I discovered the voice recorder to be an amazing and friction free, natural way to capture my thoughts. The Apple Watch does an amazing job filtering out any (ambient) noise from the recordings. I found that listening back to these recordings was a very rich way to reflect and journal as there is so much detail in the tone of voice in addition to the actual words.



Voice Memo on Apple Watch is surprisingly effective capturing creative ideas - syncing seamlessly with your other devices for reviewing later - wherever you are

Broken perfection

When it works I experienced magic, but I found the experience to break down every now and then. The Watch requires its own management, in addition to your smartphone. It can mirror much of the iPhone's setup, but not completely.

I was surprised and annoyingly interrupted when it started buzzing on my wrist warning me of loud environmental noise exposure - while riding [my road bike](#) through a strong head wind. Or, when it reminds you to stand up... while riding a car. Or, offering you "tips" on how to use the watch - when you just need it to get out of your way. Or numerous request, per individual app, for approval to use location services. Super annoying and redundant, especially when you already gave apps certain permission on your phone (like who does **not** want to allow usage of the GPS in the Maps app?)

But a more fundamental issue I experienced is that the Apple Watch is not a continuous experience. You need to take it off your wrist when its battery is empty. Unlike a smartphone which you can continue to use while charging, the Apple Watch disconnects and stops functioning while on the charger. It won't notify you of incoming calls or (important) notifications. As the Apple Watch requires regular charging this means that you *still* need to use your smartphone on a near daily basis.

It kind of defeats the purpose of a phoneless experience, as the hassling between different devices requires a certain mental effort, too. You have to plan ahead (e.g. "do I have enough battery power available for the night or not?"). I could not find a natural routine to keep the things going.

I know that some folks charge the Apple Watch at night, when their phone is on their nightstand. But this means that you cannot use the Watch's silent alarm clock or notification system - powerful features when you share your bed with a partner. (Or any of the Watch's abilities to track your sleep habits, for that matter.).

Other folks charge the Apple Watch while taking a shower in the morning. Between 30 and 60 minutes of fast charging, you'll be able to fill the battery up to 80%. Perhaps, I am too fast or efficient for the watch, but my morning routine is under 15 minutes with just a [cold shower](#) and a cup of coffee.

I tried using two Apple Watches, switching them between my wrist and the charger. That maximises "watch time on the wrist" but is ridiculously redundant, requiring even more devices, money, subscriptions and management. It goes against my appreciation for [less is more](#). This lead me to the conclusion that perhaps the best smartwatch is no smartwatch at all.



Guess what's better than two smartwatches? ... none at all!

Conclusion

How we interact with technology is fundamentally still a human decision, you determine what you do, requiring determination and discipline. My experiment with going phoneless served as a confrontation that all I needed was *less* not *more* technology to get where I really want to be: in the here and now!