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Sony SmartBand SWR10 review: Sony SmartBand tries to be too smart for its own good

Sony's SmartBand promises to log your whole day. All the data is there, but the experience is lacking.

Nic Healey
June 13, 2014 1:50 p.m. PT

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When Sony first unveiled its SWR-10 SmartBand at CES 2014, I confess I had a bit of a "whiskey tango foxtrot" moment.

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Sony SmartBand SWR10

$79 at Amazon

THE GOOD

Sony's SmartBand is a lightweight simple device that's easy to set up and has a companion app that's packed with features. It's dust and water proof and has a great battery life.

THE BAD

Some tracking results didn't seem overly accurate and some of the features weren't very useful. The design is also a bit bland, and its not great for real fitness junkies.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The SmartBand is an ambitious recipe that needs a little more time in the oven. There are better trackers on the market.

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While what Sony was showing off looked like a pretty standard fitness tracker, according to CEO Kunimasa Suzuki this was "smartwear", and it would combine with the Lifelog app to help people with "entertainment, communications, ideas and recommendations."

To be honest, it all came across a little confusing. After using the SmartBand and the Lifelog app for a couple of weeks, I'm a little less confused -- but not by much.

While the wrist-mounted device certainly includes some fitness tracking capabilities, Sony's overall goal with the SmartBand is a little more ambitious than just competing with the Fitbits and Jawbones of the world. Combined with the Lifelog app, Sony's aiming for a device that, well, logs your entire life.

The SmartBand is out now in Australia and the UK for AU$159 and £79.99 respectively. In the US you'll pay $99.99.

Design

At the heart of Sony's SmartBand is the Core, a tiny tracker roughly the size of a USB drive and weighing just 6g. It fits neatly into the silicon wristband, a bit like the Fitbit Flex. The design of the Core is quite simplistic. It's a slightly curved bit of white plastic with a Micro USB port on one end for charging, a single button on the side, and three tiny white LED lights beside the button.

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The Core of the Sony SmartBand
Dave Cheng/CNET

The silicon wristband has a little bulge for the Core's button, plus three pinholes that let the lights shine through the band. The stretchy silicon means that it's quite easy to put the Core in the wrong way, so it's worth watching out for that.

The button is how the SmartBand switches between day and night modes, with the lights flashing in a specific way to let you know which is which. Double-tapping the button lets you add a Life Bookmark, which we'll get to a bit later.

The band fastens using a pair of metal pegs attached to a round buckle bearing the Sony logo. Sadly, the buckle the classiest thing about the band, which is otherwise a fairly boring rubber strap. It looks like you can only get the SmartBand in black in Australia, although we've seen examples of other colours -- purple, yellow, red, pink, white, and 'Brazil' green and yellow -- overseas. A pack of three will set you back $24.00.

Dave Cheng/CNET

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In a nice touch, the SmartBand ships with two sizes of bands. Unlike the Jawbone Up and Up24, where you'll need to buy the correct size, Sony's including small and large options right out of the box.

The SmartBand is waterproof -- by that we mean the Core itself, not just when it's in the band, which is surprising, given the open Mirco USB port. It's IP58 rated, meaning its "dust protected" and can handle being submerged in over one metre of water for long periods of time.

Finally, the top of the SmartBand is tap-sensitive. You can assign different apps to the tap function, such as a 'find my phone' to make your smartphone ring on command, or changing songs on your media player.

Sony SmartBand SWR-10 Gallery

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Set up

First and foremost, the SmartBand requires two apps to be installed on a paired device. These apps only work with Android 4.4 or later, and require Bluetooth 4 Low Energy. If you don't meet those requirements, then the SmartBand will just be a fairly bland bracelet for you.

The two apps are Sony's SWR-10 connect app and Lifelog. The latter provides all of the functionality of the SmartBand, but it's the SWR-10 app where you'll find all the settings for the SmartBand, so both are definitely required. (Of course, Lifelog is where you put your personal settings, such as height and weight, just to be a little confusing.)

The devices uses Bluetooth for connectivity and has NFC. Turning it on and tapping it against a NFC enabled phone should take you directly to the Google Play store to download the Smart Connect app and get you started.

In addition to the tap-based controls, the SmartBand also has a few other cute features: a vibrating silent alarm (similar to Jawbone and Fitbit) and an optional out-of-range alert that has the band vibrating when it loses Bluetooth connectivity with your phone -- the idea being

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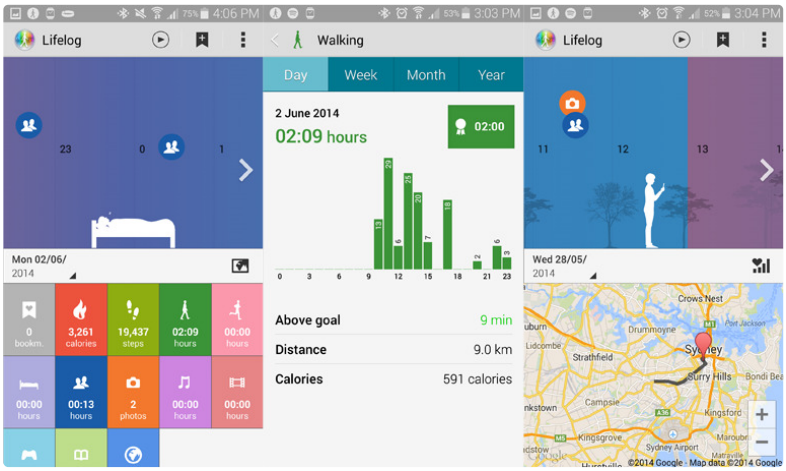
that it stops you from leaving your phone behind. Finally you can get call and app alerts sent to your SmartBand. Without a display, this means the band vibrates whenever something needs your attention, so I'd recommend just setting this up for one or two important alerts and not the full monty.

Once Lifelog is installed you can make a profile up and start logging your entire life. This is a quite simple process, requiring just a few key details such as age, height, weight and gender. You can manually set walking and running stride lengths, but the app is happy to automatically generate those for you.

Lifelog

So what does Lifelog do? Well, quite a bit. There's the now bog-standard sleep and step tracking, of course -- these are the bread and butter of the fitness tracking. Lifelog also tracks running and burnt calories. But that's where the app stops relying on just the SmartBand device and starts tracking other things as well.

The Lifelog app will, once installed, monitor and record the following categories: Communication, Camera, Music, Movie/TV, Games, Books and Browsing.



Three screengrabs of the Lifelog app, showing the main screen, a breakdown of steps and the map tracking.

Nic Healey/CNET

You not only end up with summary of how long you spent on each of these activities but you also get a far more detailed breakdown. Photos will tell you how many photos you took and show them to you as well. Communication will tell you how much time you wasted on email, Facebook, Twitter or any other communication app -- thankfully it doesn't break it down by the individual contact, which might be pushing it a little. The others monitor activities in similar ways.

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You can get these summaries organised by day, week, month or -- gulp -- year. Or, you can hit play on a particular day and see an animation of a figure walking through the 24 hours with your activities popping up as they occurred during the day. You can even get a full Google map rundown of everywhere you've been, assuming you've turned your phone's GPS on.

Finally, you can add Life Bookmarks by double-pressing the button on the band. These log your GPS data, your type of activity and, strangely, the weather at any given time. You can then add notes about what you were doing at the time.

It's all impressively detailed and, as I noted before, well beyond the scope of a mere fitness tracker. The question is, what do you do with it all?

Living with the Sony SmartBand

I've been wearing the SmartBand since the end of May, using my Jawbone Up24 as a comparison device. In terms of pure 'anecdata', I've always found the Up24 to be a very accurate device, especially in terms of my sleep. As someone with poor sleep patterns and a cat with a bad attitude, I'm almost obsessive about tracking my nocturnal hours.

Similarly, the Up24 has always been quite good at recording my daily steps. When I was comparing it to the Fitbit Force (before the recall that meant it was never launched in Australia) the two gave quite similar results.

That hasn't really been the case with the SmartBand, which often differs quite significantly from the Up24. On the 27 May, just to pick a random day, the Jawbone recorded 14,276 steps, versus a mammoth 21,854 on the SmartBand.

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The SmartBand step count versus the Jawbone Up24.

Nic Healey/CNET

As another example one particular evening's sleep was recorded as 7 hours and 29 minutes on the Up24 and 4 hours 28 minutes by the Sony.

I also use the Jawbone to record gym workouts and outside exercise, such as running. For the most part, the SmartBand was pretty accurate when it came to automatically recording any running when I actually was running. On the other hand, it would also occasionally record me as having gone for a jog on days when I didn't manage more than a slow shuffle around the office. On the day I spent mostly seated and writing this review, Lifelog told me I'd walked just under 30,000 steps and run for an hour. I'd actually done nothing more strenuous then a half hour of weights at lunchtime.

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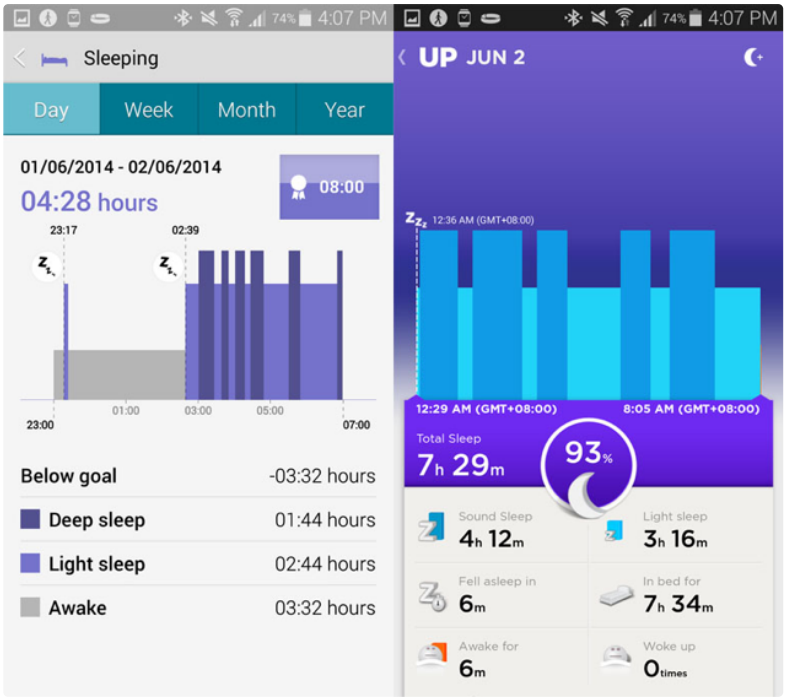

The Smartband sleep tracker versus the Jawbone Up24.

Nic Healey/CNET

Speaking of weights, there's no way to add in other exercises, such as weightlifting, or even a team sport unless you're using a Bookmark. It makes tracking these extra activities quite difficult. I also found that the silicon band was a bit of a sweat trap during workouts and often needed a rinse after the fact.

Of course, these are just the fitness elements of the SmartBand -- as we've been talking about, it's intended to be much more than that. So how does everything else stack up?

In terms of photos, communication and browsing, it's hard to fault. They all seemed as accurate as could be imagined. Photos are actually particularly good, showing you the individual snaps you took -- including any screen grabs.

Music was less accurate. I use the Spotify app, and while Lifelog would show the time that listening sessions began -- and the fact I was using Spotify -- it would always record these sessions as being under a minute, even if they were actually for the duration of my 25 minute commute to and from the office.

Games also throw a bit of a spanner in the works, telling me I'd had a four minutes gaming session on 11 June, but recording the game I played as "IMDB Movies and TV"...

For the tap-controls, I was using the find-my-phone feature which was a single tap to start the phone ringing and two to turn it off again. For the most part it didn't acknowledge me doing a single tap. Other times

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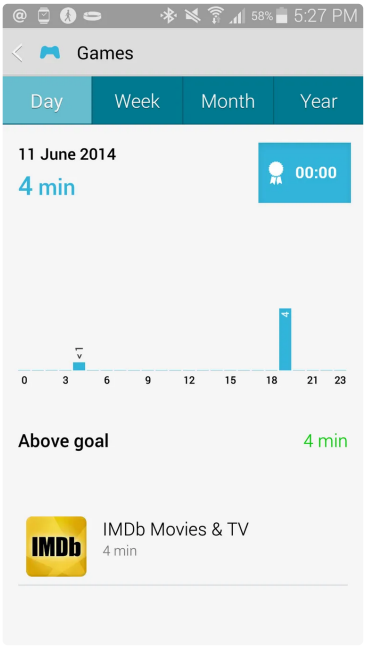
accidentally knocking the SmartBand would start the phone ringing, but I'd have to stop it manually on the phone because the double tap to turn it off wouldn't register.

Finally, when I first started using the SmartBand it would disconnect quite regularly from the Galaxy S5 I was using. There were a few firmware updates during the testing period and this problem mostly disappeared. When it did disconnect though, reconnecting via NFC was a bit random -- it was often quicker to turn off Bluetooth on my phone and turn it back on again.



Nic Healey/CNET

Conclusion

The hard thing about reviewing a device like the SmartBand is that you're really reviewing two products -- the hardware that you're wearing and the software that's giving it its functionality.

Hardware wise, the SmartBand seemed a little oversensitive at recording some things and undersensitive for others. As with all tracking devices, your mileage may vary, but it shouldn't vary this much.

While it's comfortable enough to wear, as I said before the band gets a little sweaty and if you're wearing it in the shower water has a tendency to get trapped between the Core and band. Overall as a fitness de

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Dave Cheng/CNET

In terms of 'life logging' apart from the slight issues I noted before, that all seems to work, I'm just still not sure what you'd do with the data. While I can imagine you might, for example, want to limit how much time you spend on social media, Lifelog isn't really set up to help with that. You can, rather bizarrely, set goals on any of the activities being tracked, but Lifelog doesn't notify you when you hit those goals. And surely, in the scenario we're going with here, you'd want to set a limit on how much time you spend 'communicating' -- not a goal to reach?

It's also not a truly accurate representation of your day -- it's just what you're doing on your phone or tablet. If Lifelog wants to be a genuine daily log of your on- and offline life, then where's the desktop app as well?

Then there's the fact that you're giving Sony Mobile a lot of personal data. Sony says that the Lifelog app will "collect detailed data about your location, physical activities, app usage, content consumed and your Google profile". This data, says Sony, will be handled according to its Privacy Policy.

Check out the Privacy Policy and you'll find this: "Sony Mobile always reserves the right to use and disclose Personal Data for the purpose of conducting direct marketing".

So, yeah.

Of course, it's also early days for this product. Sony Australia said there was a major update to the Lifelog app 'coming soon' and this could conceivably significantly change the experience of using the SmartBand -- if it does we'll come back to this review and adjust accordingly.

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Sony also seems to have some big plans in place for its smartwear range. While the SmartBand is the first iteration of this, Sony has said that the Core can be worn and used in many ways. What the company is working on isn't clear, but we've seen a wearable camera that works with Lifelog at MWC.

So perhaps, down the road, Sony will show off some other usage scenarios for the Core that play to its strengths a little more. Until then, unless you're after a device specifically to help you manage the way you communicate and consume content on a mobile device, the SmartBand seems a little short on usefulness.

6.8

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SCORE BREAKDOWN

Style	6
Features	7.5
Ease of use	7

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