



Chapter IX

Updating Ethnography to Investigate Contemporary Organizational Forms

Julie Rennecker
Case Western Reserve University, USA

ABSTRACT

The emergence of innovative organizational configurations enabled by recent advances in information and communication technology represent new and expanding venues for information systems research. At the same time, the distributed, dynamic nature of these new work forms challenge the premises and practices of traditional information systems research approaches. In this chapter, I advocate ethnography as a somewhat counterintuitive but valuable approach to the study of virtual work groups or, more specifically, virtual project teams. While the speed, fluidity, and physical distribution of virtual project teams pose unique challenges to ethnographic inquiry, it is these very characteristics that beg for the in situ scrutiny that only ethnography can provide. The mission of this chapter is three-fold: I intend to contribute to prior efforts to demystify ethnographic research generally, to illustrate its applicability to emerging venues of IS research, and to advocate for more ethnographic studies of virtual project teams as an essential step in understanding the socio-technical infrastructure needed to

support them. Topics covered include the rationale for adopting an ethnographic approach to the study of virtual project groups, modifications to traditional practice, and the challenges, risks, and benefits one can expect to meet along the way. In addition, the chapter discusses different models for conducting multi-site studies and their advantages and limitations with respect to studying virtual project teams.

INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence of technology-mediated, geographically distributed work configurations in contemporary organizations challenges the premises and practices of many revered methods for studying organizational phenomena. Today's professionals may work more closely with coworkers they rarely see than with the occupant of an adjacent desk. Their daily activities may be paced by circumstances, demands, and events external to their own particular work location (Ruhleder, 2000) yet simultaneously influenced by local practical and social conditions undisclosed and invisible to remote collaborators (Cramton, 2001; Rennecker, 2001). As work bridges more, and more diverse, contexts, it becomes increasingly important to understand how the nature of these contexts shapes the work that results. In the case of distributed, technology-mediated work forms, comprehension of the work practices of either an individual worker or a technology-mediated collective requires methods that take into account both contextual levels—the material and the virtual (see chapter 10)—and the tensions between them (Boland, 2002; House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995).

Using virtual teams as the focal example, this chapter illustrates the efficacy of ethnography, with minor modifications in practice, as a viable and valuable approach to the study of these technology-enabled work configurations. While the speed, fluidity, and physical distribution of virtual project teams pose unique challenges to ethnographic inquiry (Hine, 2000; see also chapter 10), it is these very characteristics that beg for the in situ scrutiny that only ethnography can provide (Jordan, 1996; Rennecker, 2001; Ruhleder, 2000).

The chapter begins with an explication of the features of virtual work arrangements that make them ripe candidates for ethnographic exploration. Then a sketch of the distinguishing features of traditional ethnographic practice serves as backdrop for describing the tactical modifications called for in the study of distributed work environments (Van Maanen, 1988; Hine, 2000). Examples from a 23-month participant-observation study of a multi-organizational virtual team in the automotive industry illustrate the unanticipated challenges, benefits, and inherent limitations of taking this approach. Next I outline alternative models for conducting multisite field research represented in the literature and discuss their advantages and limitations for ethnographic studies of virtual project teams. Finally, I close with words of both caution and optimism.

Despite the number of texts written on the subject, ethnographers, as a lot, are typically averse to providing procedural direction for doing ethnographic research (Hine, 2000). The ethnographic approach is characterized by an ethos of opportunism and openness to emergent circumstances. Though this chapter explores the challenges and opportunities of both macro and micro design choices in the study of virtual project teams, it is not intended as a recipe to replace researcher judgment, resourcefulness, or improvisation. Rather, I hope that it evokes continued thought, debate, and experimen-

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