

Chapter 77

Mobility and Connectivity: On the Character of Mobile Information Work

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ABSTRACT

Mobile information work, an extreme type of information work, is progressively becoming commonplace in various corporations. The availability of cheap and portable information technologies as well as the development of pervasive communication infrastructure in some parts of the world is creating scenarios where people can work from almost anyplace. Nevertheless up to now there has not been sufficient research on the particular work practices and strategies these professional workers use to be productive as they face the particular challenges of being mobile. Based on an ethnographic investigation of the experiences of mobile professional workers in a multi-national accountancy company (Bengo), this chapter discusses some characteristics defining the character of modern information work with regards mobility and connectivity while operating outside the workplace. Our study highlights the importance of: location in terms of providing an adequate atmosphere and infrastructure to conduct work; regularity in terms of giving workers flexibility to connect and reconnect whenever it was more convenient for them; space in terms of letting people preserve and reconstruct their information workspaces; and balance while juggling between personal and work related commitments. The findings presented can be useful for defining the processes and technological tools supporting mobile professional workers.

INTRODUCTION

Information Technology (IT) has experienced rapid developments and as a consequence this has significantly changed the spectrum of organiza-

tional computing. These radical innovations have allowed mobile behaviours to evolve. The computing devices have continued to miniaturize and new concepts have appeared, such as pervasive or ubiquitous computing. These have been the result of dramatic developments which can be seen in various wireless and technologies that form part

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of the mobile communication realm. Examples of these are the Bluetooth and WAP, and the 3G mobile phones. (Cerf 2001, Kleinrock, 2001). In reference to mobility as has been referred by Kleinrock (2001) through the evolution in IT, a range of systems provide support to professional workers through a broad spectrum of communication and computing services, as they move in a manner that is considered convenient, adaptive and transparent.

The interactions between mobility and information technologies hoist interesting questions which are defined and redefined as these technologies become adopted and naturally integrated into the routines of people. As argued by Brown and O'Hara, "*While new technologies quickly become old, or move from the eclectic to the mundane, these interactions continue to play out in new ways*" Brown and O'Hara (2003). In this chapter we investigate these interactions and present the results of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with highly mobile professional workers. The particular emphasis of our investigation is re-examining a scenario and phenomenon at the point when technology becomes mundane and really integrated into people's practices. In other words, we analyze the practices of people who have been mobile and used information technologies to support their mobility for some time. With this aim, our study encompasses two distinct groups of professional workers from Bengo¹ a major international accountancy company. We first studied professional workers from Cyprus who are part of an IT department and need to travel frequently for their job, but at the same time maintain the traditional office, that is, the fixed 'home office' location. The professional workers under study typically hop between various sites each day, quite often they travel long distances with the main objective to have the face to face interaction both with clients as well as other staff. These professionals use their conventional office-desk setup at their organisation for more administrative tasks. Secondly, we studied highly

mobile professional workers from Bengo based in the USA, office professional workers who due to the nature of their job, they neither have a fixed desk nor a location like their counterparts in Cyprus. These professional quite possibly may work at a different office or cubicle each day. Their work location can thus potentially take place in numerous locations, one day they can work at a desk of another organisation and the next day in an office within their own organisation.

Our main research objective can be defined in the following way: we aim to understand and further research within other contexts some of the work practices related to location which accompany mobile information work. Thus, we aim to understand the ways in which people manage to work while mobile and in different locations. Furthermore we aim to understand how they use technology to connect to their office and colleagues as well as how they plan ahead and schedule their work as well as other activities related to mobility. Finally we aim to study the way people (re)create temporal information spaces as well as the way people juggle between personal and work related activities while mobile.

The rest of this chapter is organized in the following way. Firstly we present a background section where we briefly examine some of the concepts defining our study as described by previous investigations. We then present a section defining the research methodology and general characteristics of our case study. Results are presented and discussed next. Finally we present our conclusions and future work.

BACKGROUND

People and organisations have increasingly enabled work on the move, away from office, through the fast pace and the transition towards the usage and extensive implementation of mobile technologies. These new technologies enabled new ways of working through which people and

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