

Mobile Work/Life Practices: Experiencing Technologies in Place

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Responding to: “Different Sites of Work”

- Importance of “where” mobile work/life practices occur
- Experience of mobility - grounded in place
- Workers’ decisions regarding where to move are overwhelmingly socially motivated
- However, the “social” is nuanced
- Similarly, moving emerges from the interplay of choice, opportunity and obligation

Place and Mobility

- Complex connection between spatial mobility and a person's role, situations and relationships
- Workplace fluidity – not only work at locations that are not offices, but the office is a fluid environment
- Most research on the role of technology in supporting practices on the move is still overly technology-centred
- Overcome abstracted accounts that lift mobility out of specific contexts (e.g. "everytime, everywhere" assumption)

Studies of Nomadic Work/Life

- NomadS and Nomadic Work/Life Projects. Qualitative data documenting the mobile work practices of sales representatives, high-tech managers, creative entrepreneurs and academics.
- How do digital technologies mediate work and life for these people?
- Study of why they move and how, the places where they work, the technologies they use and how they configure and appropriate them



Themes

- Place making an essential component of social/collaborative work (even when tasks are solitary)
- Place making is expressive of organizational needs and characteristics (e.g. setting up the home office replicating the company office)
- Place making facilitates a blending of work/life strategies and relationships (e.g. “hiding” from connectivity in order to attend to a professional/personal need)



Place as an essential component of social/collaborative work

- “Well the main thing, the reason I came in this morning is I had a teleconference with some folks in Greece and Italy at 10, so. I could have done that at home, but. I don't know, I just come into the office, it's handier. And all my files and stuff is here, the paper. The main thing is to meet, is to meet the team, because like it isn't just me managing the projects. It's about the guys doing the Web site, or software, or hardware, whatever. So it isn't just me”

(Jack, Technical Director, software firm)



Place as an essential component of social/collaborative work

- “I'd go from here early in the morning, but I had the train ride up and the train ride down. And what that meant was that if I was going up to meet you, I'm coming to meet you, you're busy doing all your stuff at your desk because you're at your desk and you're doing, you know, twenty minutes of this and ten minutes of that, and you know, a quarter of an hour of that, and a phone call, and so on. And I had three hours on the train to do absolutely nothing except think about [you], and to focus on the meeting. So I was extremely effective in that time (...) I have nothing else to do except prepare for you.”

(Saul, Software Marketing Manager)

Place as expressive of organizational needs and characteristics

- Places are not only socially significant to individuals, but also to entire organizations
- The relative significance of particular places, whether the company premises or a home office, will depend also on the organizational culture: the place of work is related to the social relationships within the organization.



Place as expressive of organizational needs and characteristics

- “What we have, we call it a sales office in C---, which in reality is now a number with a service office. So if you ring C---, it's answered here. In the city, the software company has a small office [there] which we use, but it - there's nobody permanently based there. So for all intents and purposes (...) we have a sales office in the City, a sales office in C--- , but here is really where everything happens.”


(Jonathan)



Place as expressive of organizational needs and characteristics


- [About working from home] “I find that the advantages outweigh any disadvantages, our client base is everywhere. This means we can provide support for them, not practically 24 hours, but I can respond to support an issue at 11 pm, having the ability to do that. Whereas some people in their office, it is a situation that means that the door is closed at 5pm and stuff like that, and that’s necessary in some instances. But my type of work, I like embedding our work in what we do, so it is fairly seamless and we don’t mind doing it like that”

(Charles, CTO, online services company)



Place as facilitating a blending of work/life strategies and relationships

- “I go to my home office, and use things like email and Skype [...] we also use social media tools like Twitter and LinkedIn to keep in touch with people. And in the office we also use tools like Yammer, collaboration tools like that to share documents and stuff like that. That would be generally the set up. Then I get my children and have lunch. So that’s basically how we work” (Charles)
- “Well, I’d certainly keep the Blackberry out of the bedroom for sure. In that case, you do have to have and set up rules when you don’t let that interfere with your personal relationships” (Charles)



Place as facilitating a blending of work/life strategies and relationships

- “I find what I have to do at home is...I have to say that there's one particular room that's work only. So it's kind of like an office. And when I close that door, it has to be a bit like closing the door here, because the danger is [...] sometimes you will just, you know, you might be doing, you know, something family, and you say, OK, I'll just go in for ten minutes and I'll check email. Now ten minutes becomes an hour and an hour can become, you know, you can get dragged into it” (Angela)



Discussion

- The “office” working space appears in different spatial, social and organisational contexts (company premises; home office; co-working spaces, etc.) but it takes fluid forms, and is constantly reconfigured
- Reconfiguration reflects increased mobility of roles and demands for work and life
- “Office” configurations include technological infrastructure configurations (e.g. connectivity). People carefully consider what to use, how and when. This is constantly and artfully managed depending on work and life demands.

Discussion

- Fluidity of work activities and workspaces is not just about fragmentation of paid labour
- Think for example of personal activities that are not leisure: we are increasingly asked to do things for ourselves (online) where before we used staffed services.
- Technology design is facing a shift in perspective from how to provide the same infrastructure everywhere (we are almost there), to how to enable these customisations and shifts – While “Always on” model is upon us, ways to escape from it and/or bend it to our needs are being devised.