

Mobility and Connectivity: On the character of mobile professional work

Antonis Demetriou and Victor M. Gonzalez

Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, UK

antonis.demetriou@student.manchester.ac.uk; vmgonz@manchester.ac.uk

Chapter Proposal

Based on an ethnographic investigation of the experiences of mobile professional workers in a multi-national accountancy company (ABC), this chapter will discuss some of the characteristics defining the character of modern knowledge work with regards mobility and connectivity while operating outside the workplace. We reflect on the contributions of our analyses to the understanding of the character of mobile professional work and point to the implications for the design or adoption of information and communication technologies to support these practices. We present here some of the core ideas that will be discussed in detail in our proposed chapter.

Context of the Study

We employed ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with highly mobile professional workers, that helped us to explore and understand mobile work practices. We studied two distinct groups of professional workers. Firstly, we 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. Secondly, we studied

highly mobile professional workers in New York City, 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.

Mobilization

While mobile professional workers know approximately what type of engagement and situation they could bump into while working away in the field, they cannot anticipate fully what is exactly anticipated for them to do and thus what resources they truly need to have available. They have to be proactive and plan around the engagement requirements by using judgmental reasoning and past experience to identify what technologies, documents and other resources might be useful while they are away: “*Basically the strategy is to plan ahead, know when each deadline is due and organize backwards*” (Participant A). This activity is defined by Perry and colleagues as ‘*planful opportunism*’ (Perry et al., 2001), distinctively different from ‘*opportunistic planning*’ (Hayes-Roth and Hayes-Roth, 1979). That is, professional workers create ad-hoc plans always reacting to situations as they are unfolded. Planful opportunism on the other hand emphasizes on ensuring that information artifacts both electronic and paper based would be readily accessible in the required type. These practices were observed in our study as participants kept files in their cars and homes to have them ready for the next day.

Perry notes that bulk of the investigation on collaboration and coordination within this context is often the examination of multi-person interactions and behaviors, and not so much in the organization of their personal activities (Perry, 2007). We second Perry’s arguments and notice that instead much of our pre-trip planning behavior observed centered on the individual and self-centric directives; participants finding various documents for an engagement or creating files depending on the client meetings. Documents on particular engagements (client records and other client related material) were normally collected from filing cabinets, printed and duplicated. Keeping the material in paper form, permitted the mobile workers to access them at any time as well as configure them depending on the situation demands. Mobile workers need to be prepared for such ad-hoc situations as new plans may be needed or existing ones need to be edited due to ad hoc client requests. Being able to react to such requirements is one of the fundamental differences that make mobile work viable and productive in remote locations.

Connectivity and Work Visibility

Even though the face-to-face interactions preserved the crucial significance in their day to day work, we observed that mobile workers understand the importance of information and communication technologies to the nature of their work. Most of their indirect communications was via the less materialized form of SMS, voice mail and email. Secure connections was a major issue for the organisation the participants were working and was repeatedly recognised by a number of participants. Most files for their work were swapped over the network, instead of face-to-face through desktop tools like the Groof and IM. Much of this is attributed to organisational initiatives for shifting from paper-based to electronic-based storage. Smart phones were also used to provide a level of secure connections with the office and their colleagues.

Particularly, one of the main issues that mobile work created was the need to sustain a constant connectedness with colleagues due to the high dependence this type of connectivity has on work. Divitini and Morken identified *“connectedness as an important aspect of nomadic work, which they believe impacts not only on workers well being from a social point of view, but also on their capability to work with others”* (Divitini and Morken, 2007). Yet through the observations and interviews it has been identified that in many ways mobile work did not lose its corporate characteristics even if participants were located at remote locations. Participants still had meetings nearly every day, they used technologies like mobile phones, emails and instant messages and web conferences to communicate with other people.

Such remote communications can easily be achieved if one takes into consideration one of the most significant apparatus of the modern professional, the smart-phone. During the observations, mobile professional workers used their phones for their basic functions like calling, texting and email. Furthermore they use it to look at coworkers schedule so they can organise and carry out activities. Mobile professional workers, before the invention of devices like the smart-phone, were *“dependent on fixed aspects of the office-place by proxy - they required other people there in order to facilitate their own decorporalisation”* (Brown and O’Hara, 2003). Technologies such as these organized the relations among persons and thus enabling nomadic work. On the other hand absence of such communication devices as identified by mobile workers: *“not everybody has an AirCard, so the team will struggle sometimes to get connected to the network, and sometimes there’s one network card for two people and they have to share back and forth, so that’s not uncommon to be at the client site and the staff can have trouble connecting because they don’t have AirCards”*. could leave people unreachable, which in terms extends the notion observed by Morken et al. in

relation to the potential limitations nomadic workers may phase away from friendly surroundings like: “*limited possibilities for information and experience sharing with peers, difficulties in coordinating activities and reduced help from their supervising staff*” (Morken et al, 2007)

Closing Remarks

Our study highlights that fact that these mobile professionals have substantially less corporal work certainty in relation to conventional non-mobile professional workers, they employ practices essential to them. Consequently, when mobile professional workers go to work, they proactively plan how they will tackle the specific work, taking into consideration the pressure of both the time and task management.

A limited amount of research has been undertaken on how individuals work in different remote locations and how these locations have an impact on them. Therefore, our work presents itself as a contribution to the understanding of the character of mobile professional work. In this work we focus specifically on professional workers practices in relation to location and the various technologies. These issues have stimulated our empirical study of mobile work, focussing on mobility as a reality of mobile workers lives, instead of considering it as a social theoretical concept. In this approach, we build on other related studies on mobility and work practices, as well as the various interactions between professional workers, technology and location.

References

Brown, B., O'Hara, K., 2003, Place as a Practical Concern of Mobile Workers. In *Environment and Planning*, 35, 1565-1578.

Divitini, M. and E. M. Morken (2007). Connectedness in nomadic work: the case of practice based education. ECSCW 2007 Workshop: Beyond Mobility: Studying Nomadic Work.

Hayes-Roth, B. and Hayes-Roth, F. (1979) A cognitive model of planning, *Cognitive Science*, 3, 275-310.

Perry, M. (2007). Enabling nomadic work: developing the concept of ‘Mobilisation Work’. ECSCW 2007 Workshop: Beyond Mobility: Studying Nomadic Work, . Limerick, Ireland.

Perry, M., K. O'hara, et al. (2001). "Dealing with Mobility: Understanding Access Anytime, Anywhere." *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 8(4): 323-347.