Chapter I
Gains and Losses in the Rhetoric of Virtual Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

Virtual workplaces are constructed of people using technology to work at a distance, with the goal of transferring knowledge (both explicit and implicit) toward specific purposes. What are the communication gains and losses most experienced in virtual workplaces? Using an economic frame, this chapter seeks to review literature on virtual workplaces from across professional fields in order to suggest methods for maximizing communication utility and minimizing losses in virtual workplaces. With rhetoric as the primary unit of exchange, what steps can be taken to ensure its effectiveness? Current research points to planning, face-to-face opportunities, mixed media, boundaries, and meta-communication as most important as well as the ability to adapt them to the characteristics of virtual workplaces.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual workplaces provide utility—benefit. They offer unparalleled opportunity for organizations, individuals, and the marketplace. This relatively new paradigm is fast-becoming the norm because of the opportunities it offers to save time and money while crossing boundaries of space, time, and organizations to assemble highly effective teams. Research into virtual workplaces is being done across professional boundaries including technical communication, psychology, anthropology, business, instructional systems, sociology, and others—an indicator of the importance of this model. Because of the importance of virtual workplaces and their potential to contribute to present and future economies, much benefit can be derived from considering the most significant gains and losses experienced in virtual workplaces as compared to the older paradigm of the colocated workplace. Such an economic lens allows us to review the previous literature and ask important questions about the future.
Defining Virtual Workplaces

In his book *The Economics of Attention* (1996), Richard Lanham posits that we live in an age of information. Both he and Drucker (2001) identify our society as one of knowledge—where knowledge of the right information is a key resource. Knowledge, according to Sarker (2005) is made up of both explicit knowing, such as “technical know-how,” and implicit knowing, such as management techniques. Within this knowledge society, virtual workplaces are constructed of people using technology to work at a distance, with the goal of transferring knowledge (both explicit and implicit) toward specific purposes. Such purposes might be the exchange of knowledge in order to edit a technical document, to develop a piece of software, or to accomplish any workplace goal. The people participating are workers who might themselves be software engineers, technical communicators, or managers. Communication is conducted almost exclusively via computer or phone with occasional face-to-face meetings.

Consider, for example, the software corporation whose engineers primarily reside in India while the writing and training staff resides in the U.S., and upper management resides primarily in the U.K. At a distance, these co-workers must work intimately and effectively together using technology. Or consider educational institutions who offer online degree programs. A program comprises administrators, educators, and students who conduct day-to-day communication online toward the goal of educating students. Students, and perhaps educators, are dispersed across the globe. The technologies used might be synchronous and asynchronous with a goal of supporting effective learning to the same or greater degree of effectiveness as a face-to-face program. At a distance, students must meet in forums with other students to discuss concepts, they must meet privately with professors to ask questions and receive evaluation, and they must submit projects and receive feedback. When people collaborate in these virtual workplaces, they are often referred to as virtual teams. Teams may work together for a few days or years as their purpose in working together requires.

A number of terms are used when referring to virtual workplaces including “virtual office” (Kishimoto & Suzuki, 1993; Chung, 1995; St. Amant, 2003), “computer-mediated communication” (CMC), “online communication,” “distributed teams” (Sarker, 2005), “virtual teams” (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Suchan, 2001; Priest, Stagl, Klein, Salas, & Jentsch, 2006), “distributed work,” “virtual workplace” (Lee, 2000), “virtual computer-supported teams” (Thompson & Coover, 2006), “remote project teams” (Larbi & Springfield, 2004), and “computer-supported cooperative work” (CSCW). Additionally, concepts might be referred to by name, abbreviation, or acronym, and they might be used to mean the same thing or different things. Priest et al. (2006) discuss some of the significant differences between “virtual teams” and “distributive teams” but acknowledge that the two terms are often used interchangeably. My purpose is not to present an exhaustive list but to acknowledge the variety and suggest that we construct the rhetoric for virtual workplaces deliberately so that terms have the potential to grow with the field rather than change. Recently, a discussion on the terminology related to computer-mediated communication (CMC) took place on the listserv of the Association of Internet Researchers. CMC is an outdated term for some, and so list members were discussing alternatives. To a very real extent, we are trying to hit a moving target because products and processes change so quickly in response to technology and global distribution (think of the computer that is no longer state of the art by the time you order and receive it), but if we view our terminology as accruing meaning and value over time, we can choose carefully. A rich terminology more effectively focuses attention and filters information.