Chapter VII

Fluid Interaction in Mobile Work Practices

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the increasing fluidity of interaction that workers perform in contemporary work settings. Everyday working life is increasingly constituted of a heterogeneous mélange where people, work objects and symbols, as well as their interactions, are distributed in time, space and across contexts. When considering interaction where participants, work, and interactional objects are mobile, the challenges of supporting the fluidity of interaction in collocated settings are immense. This chapter outlines mobile interaction in terms of the fluid topological metaphor and analyses the dimensions of struggling with fluid mobile interaction based on a framework characterising interactional asymmetries.

Introduction

Our recent history has seen an upsurge in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) supporting the mobilisation of computer-mediated interaction in general and, during the past decade, the mobilisation of organisational actors in particular. The ongoing mutual adaptation of work practices and such mobile and wireless technologies has both resulted in new work and technology practices and in the need for re-appreciating the perception of these practices. Everyday working life is increasingly constituted of a heterogeneous mélange where people, work objects and symbols, as well as their interactions, are distributed in time, space and across contexts. When we then consider interaction where participants, work, and interactional objects are mobile, the challenges of supporting the fluidity of interaction in collocated settings are immense. Many years of research and commercial efforts have sought to establish technological means by which interaction can be conducted with the same ease, or in the same fluid manner, as collocated interaction. However, as argued by Olson & Olson (2000), distance does matter.

This chapter addresses one particular aspect of organisational life for mobile workers, the constant negotiation of fluid work, based on the assumption that an essential aspect of mobile work is the negotiation of desirable versus disruptive interaction. We here take a closer look at mobile interaction in the locus of the individual meeting the others. The purpose of the chapter is to initiate a broader discussion of fluid mobile work by drawing upon social topology and the study of ICT use in organisations, as well as experimental research constructing and testing innovative interaction management technologies. In order to initiate the debate we ask the question: What are the pertinent issues involved in individuals negotiating mobile work? This is based on the assumption of temporary asymmetry between individual mobile workers in terms of fluid mobile work – what for one person is a perfectly justifiable request can for another be a disruption.

Previous research has demonstrated the richness of means by which people working “at arms length” negotiate fluid ongoing interaction (Heath & Luff, 2000). However, the increased mobilisation of work activities across temporal, spatial and contextual barriers has placed localised technology practices at the centre of the constant negotiation of fluid ongoing interaction. The need to seek advice, inquire, coordinate, delegate, arrange and sort out implies that mobile workers critically rely on ICT support for negotiating their interdependencies. There is also a rich body of literature demonstrating new and
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