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Performing in the Virtual Organization

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Performing in the Virtual Organization

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Dedication

For My Prince, Bunny and Bear

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Abstract

Performing in the Virtual Organization

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined fifteen organizational members across four international technology companies to discover how they behave and manage daily interactions in a virtual environment within a geographically distributed team. Using a grounded theory methodology, an extensive analysis of the interview data was conducted. Three core themes emerged that focus on the individuals' attempts to manage impressions in an environment that demands multicomunication. The themes of time stacking, participation predications and performance are discussed in detail using the theoretical lens of impression management.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

If you have been to a Starbucks recently, chances are you have seen a guy in the corner armchair with his Bluetooth headset wrapped around his ear frantically tapping on the keyboard of his laptop. His latte sits going cold on the table next to him and his brief case splays open with papers peeking out. He looks like he has been camped out there for several hours, if not days. He is one of a growing number of workers who, with the proliferation and reliability of wireless technology, has become untethered from the traditional office, free to work wherever he can get a “wi-fi” connection.

The modern global workforce has increasingly moved to the virtual space to conduct day-to-day business. Recent government surveys indicate 62 to 85% of employed Americans use the internet or email at their workplace and 56% of those networked workers do some work from home (Madden & Jones, 2008). The purpose of the research presented here is to expand our understanding of the virtual work place and explore how individuals consciously and unconsciously create impressions in a virtual work environment.

What is Virtual Work?

To gain a complete understanding of global work trends, we must have a broad definition of virtual work that includes all the many variations of remote work and distributed team work possible in today’s complex environment (Merriman, Schmidt, & Dunlap-Hinkler, 2007; Wallace, 2004). For the purposes of the research presented here,

virtual work is defined as work that relies upon various communication technologies and requires participation among individuals who work from remote or distant locations to achieve organizational and personal goals (S. L. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Virtual work encompasses all work conducted among virtual organizational members, or distributed teams regardless of physical location (S. L. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Merriman, et al., 2007). In other words virtual work encompasses both office bound workers who use communication technology, as well as, teleworkers that work away from the office from either home or remote locations (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). For example, imagine a conference call that includes a sales person who works from his home, a project manager from the corporate headquarters in Los Angeles, and an engineer calling from his cube in the European office in London. Two of the team members are in an office environment, surrounded by other people who work for the same company. They would not be considered teleworkers. Yet, these office-bound team members rely on technology for communication, just as the teleworker does. Together, these three are a geographically distributed team performing virtual work to achieve organizational goals.

There are very few studies that address the total picture of virtual work. Instead researchers tend toward narrow definitions of telework as a discrete type of work or worker or they focus on the influences of technology, without considering the constant fluctuations of the virtual workforce in time and space (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Garrett & Danziger, 2007; Hinds & Bailey, 2003). In this paper, virtual work is more broadly defined and positions telework as an immovable necessity, encompassing the many

realistic circumstances in the modern global organization (S. L. Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Wasson, 2004). By using the broader definition of virtual work, we can begin to more fully understand the complex dynamics of communication in future organizational studies.

Importance of Virtual Work

Networked workers are mobile organizational members who communicate and perform work anytime, anywhere. No longer confined to the brick and mortar conference room, the networked worker uses communication technologies to interact with other organizational members virtually, rather than face-to-face (Browning & Stephens, 2008; S. L. Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Madden & Jones, 2008; Reinsch, Turner, & Tinsley, 2008; K. Stephens & Saetre, 2005). For many, the majority of their communication takes place in a technology mediated format within a distributed, diverse network of individuals and/or organizations (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Communication formats might include audio, video or written signals conveyed through email, chat, web meetings, conference calls and the like.

It is generally accepted that organizational members will continuously shape the organization they are in by their actions and interactions with each other and with the organization (Asmu & Svennevig, 2009). However, there is limited research on how individuals' adaptive behaviors in the virtual environment affect organizational processes and norms for communication practices (Orlikowski, 2000; Reinsch, et al., 2008; K. Stephens & Davis, 2009).

In today's rapidly expanding global economy, we need to find real solutions for enhancing the efficiency and productivity virtual project teams. It is not feasible to suggest businesses can absorb the cost of face-to-face meetings, not even as an initial meeting for project teams. In addition, it is time to consider more fully the advantages the virtual work place may have over the traditional face-to-face environment (Wasson, 2004). One place to begin is to understand how individuals choose to participate in virtual work within a geographically distributed workplace.

Study Purpose

In this opening chapter, I have defined virtual work and explained why it is important for us to understand the communicative practices emerging in the virtual work place. The current qualitative study examined fifteen organizational members across four international technology companies about their daily interactions and behaviors in a virtual environment within a geographically distributed team. In the following chapter I will explain the theoretical lens of impression management chosen to frame the study. I will then explain in detail the methods and results of the research and move into an in depth discussion that links together three core themes of time stacking, participation predications and performance that emerged from the analysis. Finally, I will conclude by providing additional theoretical and directional links for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To frame the discussion of the findings in this study, it seemed appropriate to employ a broad theoretical construct to explain how individuals perform in a virtual organization. Therefore, in the following chapter I will discuss impression management theory and its application to the virtual work environment. Throughout this discussion, I will draw in other relevant theories pertaining to communication technology and characteristics of a computer mediated environment.

Impression Management

Erving Goffman is one of the ten most-cited intellectuals in the humanities and social sciences in the twenty first century (Science, 2007). His work focuses on interpersonal communication, particularly the order of interactions and implications for the self. He is most well-known for his use of metaphors to explain the interactions he observed (dramaturgical, ritual, game, theoretical, ethological), with “an almost Durkheimian regard for the power of ritual and routine to shape our thought, feelings and conduct” (Smith, 2006). He wrote eleven books and numerous articles before he died in 1982. His study of symbolic interaction from a dramaturgical perspective is most commonly regarded as his greatest contribution to social theory (Smith, 2006). In the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman explained impression management by framing complex social dynamics as something similar to a play, a performance set before an audience according to some preset rules or scripts (1959). The

framework of impression management assumes that within any social encounter there are performers who cooperate together to present a desirable impression for an audience.

A COORDINATED EFFORT

An important element of this framework is that both the individual and the group will react to each other in a manner that will manage impressions of attractiveness, likability, credibility and power (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). Performers act as part of a team to convince an audience of a situation and the audience in return puts on a performance to validate the agreed upon reality. In other words, interactants are both actors and audience members prescriptively influencing each other in a particular setting to achieve self-gratifying goals (Goffman, 1959). The way a person “acts” and reacts in a social encounter is directly related to his or her conceptions of self (Goffman, 1959). For example, a male rock star might pierce his eye brow and outfit himself in leather and a dog collar to convince himself and others that he is a rock star. This costume is part of his self presentation.

SELF PRESENTATION

Impression management theory suggests there are predictable ways in which someone will attempt to control his or her expressions in order to exert influence over others’ perceptions. Self presentation actions are both conscious and unconscious, calculating and spontaneous (Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe, 2000; Goffman, 1959; R. Hogan, 1983; Schlenker, 1980, 1985). Sometimes the individual may even be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware of it (Goffman, 1959). Sometimes he has acquired his methods of calculation because the tradition of his group or his social

status require this kind of expression. For example, a waitress will play a subservient role while she is in front of customers and may suppress her true emotions in order to play her part effectively (Dillard, et al., 2000).

Self presentation refers to the short term adaptive strategy an individual employs to manage impressions relevant to a particular interaction (Goffman, 1959). Self construction is more of a long-term identity statement that results from many interactions over time (Robert Hogan & Briggs, 1986). Self presentation is highly self-conscious, used to create a desired impression in response to the expectations of a particular external audience. Hogan and Briggs introduced the idea of self construction to differentiate the short term performance from a more enduring self image. Self construction is largely unconscious because one's behavior in social interactions is typically habitual and consistent regardless of the context of the interaction (Robert Hogan & Briggs, 1986).

Expressiveness of the individual (capacity to give impressions) involves two kinds of sign activity; the expression that he "gives" and the expressions he "gives off". Expressions the individual gives include verbal symbols or substitutes which he uses to purposefully convey the information (e.g. words chosen for a dinner toast). Expressions he "gives off" are a wide range of action that others may treat as a more truthful representation of the actor. The expectation is that the action given off is performed for reasons other than the information conveyed (e.g. sweat on forehead and wringing of hands while delivering the toast).

Regardless of the particular objective or motive, it will be in the individual's best interest to control the conduct of the others, especially their response to him (Goffman, 1959). An individual achieves control of a situation through his expressions. He will use his expressions in an attempt to influence others so that they will act voluntarily in accordance with the individual's own plan (Goffman, 1959). For example, the rock star mentioned earlier dresses his part in order to solicit a response from his audience that reinforces his star persona.

FRONT AND BACK STAGE

To continue with the dramaturgical framework, Goffman describes a front and back stage area. Performances are prepared in the back stage and are performed on the front stage (1959). Performers restrict access to these regions in order to prevent the audience from seeing the backstage and to keep outsiders from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them. For example, Dillard et.al. describe how the service staff at a Ritz Carlton manipulated their presentation between the front and back stage. They had received tragic news about a death of a co-worker and were understandably upset. Yet, when they went in an area where customers were present, they smiled and feigned happiness in order to preserve the performance expected by the customer.

The stage becomes important in the virtual work place because individuals are able to compartmentalize and delay their appearances in the front area and mask their actions in the back area in ways that are not possible in a face-to-face interaction. In addition, individuals must juggle roles and maintain their performance on multiple stages

at the same time. He or she must intermittently move between the role of actor and of audience member depending on the performance that has his or her focus at any given moment.

THE PERFORMANCE

In both face-to-face and virtual environments performers and audience members work under rules of politeness and decorum so as to protect the believability of the performance on stage (Goffman, 1959; Wasson, 2004). However, unintentional gestures can discredit or contradict the definition of the situation and risk a spoiled performance (Goffman, 1959; J. Turner & Reinsch). As mentioned earlier, observers divide an actor's actions into two parts: actions that are easy to manipulate (verbal assertions) and actions to which the actor has little concern or control (expressions he gives off). Observers use the expressions given off as a check on the validity of the information presented in the verbal assertions. "This kind of control upon the part of the individual reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery (Goffman, 1959, pg. 8)."

The virtual environment adds a different dimension to the rules of interaction within these information games. For example, when writing one must use words or symbols to convey non-verbal information. Symbols and words are easily manipulated and therefore become more of an expression that is given instead of one that is given off. Instead, other markers become important to the audience. For example, a timestamp in an email that indicates rapid response to an executive's inquiry may be perceived as a more

reliable marker of subordinate's respect than the actual words written in the email itself (Walther & Parks, 2002). To better frame the study at hand, it will be beneficial to first discuss the communication tools, like email, employed in a virtual environment and some of the characteristics of the virtual setting, or to follow the dramaturgical nomenclature the "props" and the "setting" of the virtual performance.

Virtual Props

There are a bevy of communication tools available to the networked worker. These include: email, web conferencing, instant messenger, audio or video conferencing, SMS texting, chat rooms, wikis, share drives, blogs , online social networks and face-to-face meetings. Each communication tool has its own characteristics that mediate the outcome of the interaction. For example, chronemics (e.g. timestamp on email, ability to delay conversation), capability to make nonverbal expressions (e.g. emoticons or avatars) and the ability to remain anonymous can determine outcomes like affection, attitude and dominance in an interpersonal interaction (Walther, 1994).

MEDIA RICHNESS

Media richness theory defines each communication medium according to its ability to recreate a face-to-face interaction in terms of richness of the experience (Daft & Lengel, 1984). It proposes that richer, more personal communication means (like a phone conversation), are generally more effective for communication of equivocal issues than leaner, less rich media (such as email) (Daft & Lengel, 1984; 1986; R. L. Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). The theory implies that a sender can (and should) use the

richest possible medium to communicate the desired message (Daft & Lengel, 1984). In reality, senders often choose to use less-rich methods of communication even when more rich ones are available. Some researchers have found that individuals choose mediums based on social norms (Markus, 1994) or because of the ability to compartmentalize the conversation (Reinsch, et al., 2008) or reduce or mitigate emotional friction (O'Sullivan, 2000; K. Stephens & Saetre, 2005). These studies indicate that individuals don't solely choose a medium based on the need to reduce ambiguity. Instead, communication technology is chosen as a tool to control an interaction and manage impressions (O'Sullivan, 2000; Wasson, 2004).

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND CMC

Although traditionally impression management has been considered within the context of face-to-face communication, several interpersonal and organizational theories help to link impression management to computer mediated communication (CMC). For example, Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) suggests that online personal relationships demonstrate the same relational dimensions and qualities as face-to-face relationships (Walther, 1994). Addressing the dimensions of anonymity in virtual environments, Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (or SIDE model) is often used to suggest that anonymity and social context have cognitive and strategic consequences for individuals within a virtual interaction (Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). Likewise, O'Sullivan (2000) extended impression management to CMC finding that individuals actively manage ambiguity in online interactions to manipulate their impression. Further, interactants choose from a tool set of

communication technologies to help construct the performance—often using leaner media to minimize risk for interactions that could threaten positive impressions (O'Sullivan, 2000; K. Stephens & Sætre, 2005) or adapt to his or her audience more quickly (Browning & Stephens, 2008).

Researchers have also compared how impressions are formed when comparing CMC (or text-based interactions) to face-to-face conversations. Hancock and Dunham (2001) found that while impressions of the personality of their partner were less detailed in a CMC environment, they were more intense. So it appears that even in conditions of reduced cues, people still form impressions of others. Rennecker, Dennis, and Hansen (2006) examined how 22 managers negotiated between the “front” stage and “back” stage when using instant messaging and face-to-face meetings. They found that people use instant messaging to privately communicate with others; a practice they call invisible whispering (Rennecker, et al., 2006). Their study articulates six specific dimensions that comprise invisible whispering: attending to the meeting, providing focal task support, providing social support, directing the meeting, participating in parallel meetings, and managing extra-meeting activities. Their findings suggest that people are multicomcommunicating during meetings and they engage in several different types of communicative activities.

Impression management—specifically misrepresentation—has also been explored in chat room use. Becker & Stamp (2005) used a grounded theory analysis to understand the practices of chat room participants. Many of their findings were specific to a chat environment and they were not examining workplace use, but some of their motivations

are worthwhile reviewing for the current study. They found that there were three motivations for participants to manage their impressions: desire for social acceptance, developing and maintaining relationships, and identity experimentation. They also found that the lack of cues available in the CMC environment of chat represented a barrier to managing an impression. The participants used four different impression management strategies: demonstrating chat culture mastery, managing similarity, using screen names, and selective misrepresentation (Becker & Stamp, 2005). Finally they found that the participants could achieve their goals of relationship development and identity realization.

The tools of the virtual work place enable individuals to participate in the workday in a unique way that would not be possible in a face-to-face, traditional work place environment. Networked workers participating in an organizational setting acquire feedback from the individuals within their work day that in turn influence subsequent behaviors and affect one's self perception. It is useful then to learn from participants how they want to be perceived and how they think they are using technological props to manage impressions and meet their audience's expectations within a virtual work place.

Virtual Setting

While much of the research on impression management has been conducted in a face-to-face environment or compared face-to-face to a CMC context, the work on multicommuting and ICT sequencing may be most relevant to the current study. Multicommuting is defined as engaging in two or more overlapping, synchronous

conversations, where the participant makes a conscious selection to organize his communication streams to suit his needs (Reinsch, et al., 2008). ICT succession theory argues that the use of ICTs which engage complementary modalities in sequence (such as auditory with visual or visual followed by textual) can influence how successful an actor will be in persuading his or her audience (K. K. Stephens, 2007).

Although multicomputing is facilitated by cell phones, chat programs, email and the like, the focus for this paper is not on any particular ICT. Rather the research presented here centers on how individuals are managing participation in a virtual setting using multiple technologies to meet demands for attention and performance. Technology centered research can be constrained by the particular characteristics of the technology being studied and thus be limited in its application (Reinsch, et al., 2008; Sawhney, 2007). By studying technology as part of a social system, the phenomena is framed as human-centered, which means the findings can theoretically be relatable to any human technology interaction. In other words, a human-centered approach to research can help explain how technology is used today in a way that can help predict future use of yet unknown communication technologies (Sawhney, 2007). To that end, it is useful to look at the how individuals choose to engage and disengage in communication interactions in the setting of a virtual work environment with multiple simultaneous demands for attention. Two emerging behaviors have been recognized in the virtual work place; multicomputing (Reinsch & Turner, 2006; Reinsch, et al., 2008; J. W. Turner & Reinsch, 2007) and sequencing (Browning & Stephens, 2008; K. Stephens & Saetre, 2005; K. K. Stephens, 2007).

MULTICOMMUNICATING AND ICT SUCCESSION

Multicommunicating is a special form of multitasking that is possible only because humans can think faster than they can type or speak (Reinsch, et al., 2008). While multicommunicating, there is a conscious selection made by users of technology to organize communication streams to suit their needs. Multicommunicating (unlike multitasking) always involves an audience who form impressions based on the way an actor handles the interaction (e.g. spelling, pauses etc.). New technology allows an individual to divide his attention unobtrusively so as to be less offensive to his or her partner (Reinsch, et al., 2008). In addition, ICTs allow gaps of silence. For example, it is generally acceptable to have a delay in response to an email communication (Reinsch, et al., 2008). Organizational norms and the perceptions of others' thoughts concerning the use of ICTs for multitasking during a meeting can influence how individuals use ICTs in meetings and other organizational settings (K. Stephens & Davis, 2009).

There are certainly benefits and drawbacks to the practice of multicommunicating. On the one hand, an individual has a lot of flexibility. He can control his or her presentation and response to multiple streams of communication by compartmentalizing discrete conversations (Reinsch, et al., 2008). This ability to compartmentalize interactions can lead to more efficiency and productivity and allow the ability to tailor presentation to discreet audiences, even in a group setting (K. K. Stephens, 2007; Wasson, 2004). However, multiple simultaneous communication streams can also lead to distraction, anxiety, inefficiency and mistakes (Reinsch & Turner, 2006; Reinsch, et al., 2008).

Communicating with multiple partners simultaneously is demanding because it requires an individual to cycle among two or more conversations, engaging in interpretation, goal generation, planning, enactment, and monitoring for each of them in turn (Burleson & Planalp, 2000). In addition, the individual must do this on a time schedules that are coordinated with each of the conversational partners. An individual's ability to successfully multi-communicate depends on how many open conversations he or she is participating in, the pace of each conversation, the need to integrate social roles, and the number of topics discussed (Reinsch, et al., 2008). Individuals are also able to gain competency in their ability to multitask or multicomunicate through practice and education (Wasson, 2004).

VIRTUAL TIME

The virtual work setting also differs from the traditional work setting in the way organizational members conceive of time. In the virtual work environment, individuals must accommodate global timelines. Time is not a fixed concept that can be defined solely through objective parameters. In fact, fundamentally time is a situational construct, developed through communicative processes (Ballard & Seibold, 2006). Therefore, time can be crucial to understanding a virtual organization's communication-related behaviors and effects (Ballard & Seibold, 2004). Generally within any organization, time can be measured objectively in clock time against institutionally driven, formal temporal parameters (e.g. project timelines, quarterly reports). However, it is equally important to consider individuals' subjective, personal conceptions of time and shared group experiences of time (Ballard & Seibold, 2004, 2006; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

Together, institutional, individual and group time schemas can influence how well a team will work together in a virtual environment. Objective and subjective temporal constructs include; conceptions of time, mapping activities to time, and actors relating to time (Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001). Another temporal construct specifically applicable to the virtual work place is “connected time” which refers to both the physical act of being online and to subjective dimensions, such as the appropriateness and expectations to be “on” (Yates & Orlikowski, 2002).

These time constructs can help explain how individuals use technology to manage and extend traditional time boundaries and how individuals experience of time has changed with the increased need to blend roles during the work day. Additionally, individual, group and institutional time constructs can help explain the performance dynamic in the virtual environment and how time demands influence the actor’s ability to control the impressions he or she gives to the audience.

It may be useful at this point to give a hypothetical example of a complex performance in the virtual work place and how that performance is influenced by an individual’s conception of time, his activities and the group. Imagine Richard has just left work and is riding the subway home in New York City. It is seven o’clock in the evening, but he has to call into a meeting with his boss who is located in California where it is five o’clock. Richard’s wife expects him home for dinner at seven-thirty. He receives a text from his teenage daughter begging him to allow her to ride a motorcycle with her boyfriend to a concert. He simultaneously listens to his boss, who has begun to discuss pending layoffs. A woman sitting next to Richard on the subway asks him for directions

to the nearest movie theater. Richard has three simultaneous, compartmentalized performances he must attend to. How might his conception of time differ from others on the conference call?

Richard's experience of that conference call might vary substantially from his co-worker Ishmael, who has called in from Tel Aviv where it is Saturday at one o'clock in the morning, a holy day. He sits in a fifty row cubicle in a highly supervised office building. His outsourcing firm will take over the work of the laid off employees in New York. As soon as the call is over, he plans to visit the prayer room setup on the second floor of the office building, before he returns home to his family where he will be expected to participate in the holy day activities in just five hours.

If this meeting were face-to-face, instead of on a conference call, the individual experiences of Richard and Ishmael would ostensibly be more similar, influenced by the groups situational time and place (Ballard & Seibold, 2004). Instead, technology has enabled very individual, personal experiences influenced by each of the conference participants' individual situation in time and place. This complex, dynamic work environment of the distributed, technology enabled virtual worker undoubtedly impacts organizational systems (Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura, & Fujimoto, 1995).

Chapter Summary and Guiding Research Question

It is useful to discover how individuals use multiple communication technologies to manage performance and make impressions in a virtual work setting. It is also interesting to look at why individuals choose to engage and disengage in interactions,

particularly when they have multiple, simultaneous demands for attention. The nature of this study, therefore, is to understand how the shift in the organizational landscape to a virtual, mobile work place has impacted personal interactions and participation in day-to-day work. The aim was to explore how virtual workers attempt to manage their audiences' perceptions amongst simultaneous performances.

RQ 1: How do people manage impressions in a virtual organization across multiple communication channels?

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Chapter Overview

A qualitative approach was chosen for this research topic because it allows for broad investigation into the behavior of virtual work. This study's goal is to determine how individuals manage impressions in a virtual work place. Although there were guiding theoretical frameworks in mind, the approach to discovery was very open, as seemed appropriate given that virtual work is a relatively new area of study.

Approach

This study used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Organizational members who work in distributed teams and have considerable virtual work experience were engaged in a dialog about the way they manage impressions they make at work. The data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The resulting nineteen data themes were collapsed into three core categories that helped explain how individuals manage impressions in the virtual work place.

Participants

Research participants were chosen based on their experience in the virtual work space, as well as, to capture a variety of virtual work situations. A total of fifteen organizational members across four organizations were selected for participation in the

in-depth interviews. Eight participants were recruited from a fortune 50 telecom company. Two participants work for an international printing services company. The other individuals work for international software or hardware corporations. Individuals were purposefully sampled to be certain to include people who had extensive experience communicating in a virtual team. All of the participants work in international organizations that employ more than 300 workers where the majority of daily business is conducted amongst geographically dispersed teams. Occupations ranged from project management, to IT, to design, marketing and sales. One participant chose to work almost exclusively from home, even though she had a physical office. Two participants worked in a home office because they were geographically separated from corporate offices. The other participants all worked primarily from a company owned office where they were collocated with other organizational members. All but one interviewee reported that 75 to 100% of their meetings were held in a virtual setting, typically with an audio bridge and web conference. The one outlier worked in the corporate headquarters where she was collocated with most of the team she manages. All of the participants reported having ten to fifteen meetings each day, often double or triple booked. One participant stated that less than ten percent of her time per day was spent outside of meetings. In addition, all of the participants use ICTs to stay connected to their workplace, even during personal time. About half of the participants have a non-traditional schedule, meaning they would regularly perform personal tasks during weekdays and perform work tasks during evenings or weekends.

Data Collection

The fifteen interviews were conducted over a one-year period from 2009-2010. These in-depth interviews ranged from forty to seventy-five minutes in length, were recorded, and later transcribed. The total recorded time was fifteen hours thirty-six minutes. The total transcribed data equaled 75,125 words or 133 transcribed single-spaced pages. The interview schedule consisted of 18 questions and these questions were asked in a semi-structured format.

The interview began with general questions about the typical day, including questions about how many meetings the participant attends in a day, and the nature of those meetings (face-to-face, virtual, or mixed). Then participants were asked detailed questions about how they choose to participate in virtual work and manage their personal and work life using ICTs. Finally, the participants were asked questions about how they form and make impressions of others in a virtual setting.

Data Analysis

Following the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first phase of analysis involved coding as many categories as possible from the data set. Some of the categories originated from the concepts found in the literature review, but because of the inductive nature of qualitative study, much of the coding came from direct quotes or assigned attributes of the recorded conversations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Each interview transcript was divided into chunks of text signifying a distinct thought. Using an open coding method, each chunk of text was then coded with attributes or descriptive terms used by the interviewee resulting in a total of 624 items. Using axial coding, the data were examined for commonalities including causal conditions, context, strategies, and consequences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This coding step resulted in nineteen categories (see Table 1). A codebook was then created that included code names, a definition and an example for each category. To further collapse these categories into core themes, the incidents in each category were compared to all incidents using a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and this resulted in three core themes: time stacking, participation predications and performance.

These categories are not mutually exclusive (as you typically find in a content analysis), but rather each of the nineteen categories reflects a dominant theme and in many cases it secondarily informs either one or both of the other core themes. One of the advantages of grounded theory is that categories do not need to be mutually exclusive. Table 1 visually illustrates the relationship between the categories and the three core themes. A major contribution to a core theme is indicated with an “X” in the Table and a secondary contribution to a core theme is indicated with an “o”. Together these three core themes form a new foundation for understanding impression management in virtual meetings.

Categories

To explain the results, I will first briefly discuss the nineteen categories of data and then provide more detailed narrative accounts to elaborate on the three core themes of time stacking, participation predications and performance. The discussion focuses on theoretical explanations for these findings and how this study expands the current understanding of impression management to a virtual work place context.

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe the routines and structures of daily interactions. Topics emerged ranging from very tactical matters, such as the way a person interacts with technological tools, to more emotional and social reactions like the technological effects of isolation and feelings of powerlessness or loss of control.

Tactical categories emerged in the form of structure and rules imposed either by the organization or by the virtue of the technology used. The tactical categories of time, logistics, channels and mediums, compartmentalization, efficiency, control and prioritization primarily contribute to the time stacking theme. Time stacking, which will be discussed further later, relates to the way an individual tries to expand time to meet demands and maintain personal and work boundaries. Additionally, the tactical categories of norms and expectations, artifacts, barriers, action and exposure were key to the theme of participation predications. In other words, these five categories relate to how individuals choose to engage or disengage in interactions in a virtual work environment.

Together these twelve tactical categories indicate the structures that virtual workers accept as a foundation to work with, in and around.

The other seven categories can be directly related to the actors' performances and are more emotionally responsive in nature. These categories include feelings & attitudes, expectations, accountability, presence, control, focus, exposure and connectedness. For example, accountability and expectations describe how participants react to audience demands (typically leadership). Presence and control indicate how participants attempt or fail to maintain the divisions between front and back stage. Looking at the complete performance, the nineteen categories describe how individuals structure their interactions, participate and manage impressions within the virtual work space. Refer to Table 1 for a chart depicting how each category informs the three core themes of time stacking, participation predications and performance.

Themes

The guiding research question of this study was: How do people manage impressions in a virtual organization across multiple communication channels? The three core themes answer this question in an overlapping and mutually causal manner. The first theme, time stacking, refers to an individual's perceived need to plan for a primary and secondary action for the same block of time (e.g. an individual will plan to eat lunch, put together a grocery list, and listen to a conference call from noon to one o'clock). Due to the prominent need to stack time combined with the knowledge that people want to manage impressions, individuals vary meeting participation and evaluate the performance

of others differently than they might if they met face-to-face. See Table 1 for a complete grid of the three themes and corresponding categories. I will elaborate on these three core themes of time stacking, participation predilections and performance in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: TIME STACKING

Chapter Overview

At five o'clock in the evening most weekdays you will find Elena on a freeway in bumper-to-bumper traffic inching her way from her office building to her home office. Her primary task is to get from here to there. Yet, she has a secondary and sometimes tertiary agenda in mind. She knows that it takes approximately twenty-five to forty minutes to travel. Next to her, lying on the passenger's seat, is a "to do" list of items: call her daughter's math teacher, call her co-worker to get coverage for tomorrow's meeting, call boss to figure out next steps on a new project, register her son for swim class. She had written the list before she had left work. A subset of her much longer "to do" list, these are quick things that she can potentially get done during her commute. She quickly glances down the list to decide which one to tackle first.

The next step is very quick, verging on intuitive. She mentally prioritizes each item before she begins. She almost instantaneously takes into consideration duration of the task, importance and urgency of the task, and relative importance of the person or audience for whom she is performing the task. Elena's tasks are both personal and work related, yet they are judged on the same criteria. This behavior, the premeditated allocation of one block of time to accomplish various goals, as well as the active prioritization of competing demands, is what I will term here as "time stacking". In this example, time stacking is a precursor and active construct for multitasking. In the following chapter, I will further describe time stacking as an organizational strategy. In

addition, I will discuss why time stacking is prevalent in globally distributed organizations where individuals are often faced with multiple demands at the same time.

Time Stacking as An Organizational Strategy

Time stacking and multitasking are not new. Imagine a mother in the 1940's who, while drinking her morning coffee, ponders about how she will organize her day to make sure she is ready for her dinner party that evening. Something along the lines of ... from four o'clock to five o'clock today, while the kids are sleeping, I can set my hair in rollers, do the laundry and start dinner in order to be ready for the party by eight o'clock this evening. What has changed between 1940 and today? The ubiquity of communication technology and the blending of work and life have exacerbated the need to stack time. The construct of time stacking is particularly relevant to individuals that have multiple streams of communication turned "on" to accomplish their goals.

Jorge, who lives in Texas, works out of a home office for a global technology company based in the United Kingdom. His work peers are distributed across four time zones. He is married and has two daughters. In order to meet all of his work and life demands, he has chosen to be accessible via instant messenger (IM), email, SMS text, and mobile phone. On a typical day, you might find Jorge texting his teenage daughter while he is chatting in IM to the test team in India, as he simultaneously listens to a conference call for the project he is managing. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, this type of behavior, engaging in two or more overlapping and synchronous conversations, has been defined as "Multicommunicating" (Reinsch, et al., 2008). Time

stacking is a multitasking and multicomcommunicating strategy for how one uses communication technology to accomplish multiple goals within time constraints. Jorge describes how he starts and ends each day by methodically checking his email and calendar. In his business, the email are sent twenty-four hours a day, so unless he stays in a routine of email maintenance, he can quickly lose step.

I usually spend the first hour of the day returning email I got during the night from Europe or India and addressing any concerns from that standpoint.

A common theme found in the conversations was that of formalized calendaring for even the smallest interactions. The need to time stack was predicated by the demand for multiple, simultaneous performances for which an individual must manage his or her impressions. As a result, an individual is left to manage time as a tradable commodity that has a high value based on the demand at any given moment.

Time as a Tradable Commodity

Many of the people interviewed described times when their work day is filled with meetings, sometimes two or three meetings scheduled for the same hour. Because of the high demand for one's time, tactical and emotional coping mechanisms emerge. Emotionally, individuals are forced to protect their time and have personal awareness of their own goals and priorities and how their time is spent. Social pressure, such as organizational norms and expectations often push individual's boundaries. Avery described how at least once a week, you can find him listening to two meetings at once.

I rarely do triple, but I'll do double and I will call into one on my blackberry and do the other from my desk phone. I let people know – I'll tell them, I have two calls going on and they are both important.

Jorge also describes how working from home, allows him the ability to receive more audio input than he would be able to do in a shared office space:

In the remote work place I can have two different calls going on at the same time without really effecting anybody. I can have one on my speaker and one in my ear.

Because of crowded calendars, even personal lunch breaks are set as meetings on a daily calendar. Tactically individuals use formal calendaring as one way to create boundaries. One participant color codes her calendar by meeting category, urgency, delegate (if she wouldn't attending) and sphere (personal, work, training). For example, red meant it was a meeting her leadership would attend or expect her to be in attendance. Green was a particular project that one of her subordinates was assigned to. Purple was personal time. She admitted that when her days were double or triple booked, the purple times were the first to go. Her calendar looks something like a Tetris game (see Illustration 1).

In addition, there is an expectation that people understand the value of time and that if you ask for someone's time, it should have a purpose. Veronica explains:

Most people have back-to-back-to-back meetings – you can't just necessarily take another fifteen minutes. You have to be aware of that and respect that.

There is also a sense of frustration that meetings are prolific in a virtual environment because they are so easy to schedule. In addition, several individuals indicated that they felt meetings were scheduled because the meeting organizer was trying to "get it all done at once," or to "cast a wide net."

If you are the one pulling together ten people for an hour meeting and for each one of them fifty minutes of the time is wasted.... it doesn't give them any additional information that they couldn't get in an email.

So, here we see a conflict in perceptions of time between a meeting organizer and the meeting participants. The meeting organizer may think he is being efficient with his time, but those who are participating feel it is a misuse of time.

Another recurring area of discontent focused on the quality of communication about the meaning of the meeting. The interviewees admitted that many times they are uncertain of their role or what will be expected of them within a meeting. Agendas are typically vague, meeting minutes are not sent and they rarely know all the other participants on the call. When an individual was unsure about what would be expected of them, there was a reticence about missing a meeting because they couldn't determine the value the meeting would have for their personal or organizational needs.

I don't like uncertainty. If I sit through a meeting and by the end of it I can make a judgment I really didn't need to be here, or if I'm still thinking obviously they want me here but I have no clue, then I'll pick up the phone and call someone.

With this example we begin to see some coping techniques for managing the ambiguity of the virtual meeting and time demands. Throughout this chapter, I have described how individuals attempt to structure their day to maximize value. In a virtual work environment, individuals balance personal goals, organizational expectations and time demands. Yet, the morning calendar is only an outline to represent the real pattern of the communication that will happen that day.

Rapid Time Shifting and Prioritization

Even though individuals use calendars to block off segments of their day, the crowded schedules of overlapping and back-to-back meetings cause individuals to evaluate and prioritize every minute of the day. Time is constantly reallocated to meet the most urgent demand. Even though a person may be in attendance for the full hour of an hour long conference call, he participates in minute increments (Wasson, 2004). One minute he may be chatting with his boss on IM, the next minute he is presenting on the conference call, the next he is texting his wife to remind her that he can't pick up their child from school and then quickly he turns back to the meeting to address a question someone has asked him. Lisa describes how she uses multiple communication tools throughout the day to manage her overburdened schedule:

I commit to one meeting but am available on IM or email for the other, or if one of the meetings is a webcast for example and the other is not, you can always chime into the webcast as well. So, there's way to do lots of multitasking.

Similarly, Kevin describes how he constantly shifts his focus amongst open communication channels:

Depending on the context of the meeting, I may do both (meetings) at the same time. Say I have two internal calls, one where I know my participation isn't necessarily vital. I may take both and put myself on mute, then go in and out of each one.

Jason, an IT project manager, also describes the need to work in minute increments depending on the most critical need any given moment. He also describes how he engages accomplices to achieve his performances in the meetings. He typically reaches out to another meeting participant using a back channel before or at the beginning of a meeting. He will ask them to help cue him into the time he needs to focus on the meeting.

Usually I can bounce back and forth... I'll have representation on both calls ... and I'll qualify it and tell them you might have to yell out my name or something ... there is usually value in my doing that so I can hear when something comes up that is related to me and I can jump in/chime in.

Jason, goes on to explain that time-stacking is a necessity in a corporate culture that demands quick knowledge transfer to remain competitive. When he was asked if he gets embarrassed when he is caught multitasking, he laughed sarcastically and with frustration in his voice said:

I would like to not have to multitask....It's just the pace of the work I am in. If I get a chat window that comes up and someone is asking me a simple question that they need me to answer to keep moving on what they are doing, I'm not going to wait until my next conference call to answer them.... I'd rather give them that immediately than wait until the end of the call.

His observation reflects the overall perception that the business is demanding more time, and more multitasking behavior. Time stacking, as a tool, and multicomputing as a behavior, have become important because of this shift in the nature of work, particularly in technology fields. With distributed teams and global timelines, individuals are given an incredible amount of flexibility and responsibility. Life and organizational tasks are accomplished at all times of day or night, no longer bound by artificial time constructs (e.g. work is nine o'clock to five o'clock.). Also, since communication technology is so prolific, organizational members are expected to attend to more than one interaction at a time. They are expected to know how to effectively create more time by stacking obligations.

Global Clock and the Need for Broad Time Availability

Technology allows individuals to "commit" to being in more than one place at any given moment and it allows individuals to perform work from anywhere in the world and at any time. This leads to a lot of flexibility in the way a person works and requires individuals to become adept at balancing organizational expectations and personal needs. The organizational need for employees to be available at all times contributes to the

individual's need to stack time. Avery, a software engineer in an international corporation, provides an example of how individuals accommodate to the global workplace:

My meetings are primarily done in the morning ... between eight and noon because I do a lot of work with Europe and a lot of work with India ... it's easier to get things done in the morning to accommodate everybody's schedule.

Interestingly, he gives his perspective on how the Indian team is forced to accommodate to a western timeline.

If you work in India, you are forced to – you get into work later and leave later to accommodate the time frame. Like those guys stay around typically to seven or eight o'clock.

As some workers must accommodate, others see the flexibility of the virtual work space. As a full time teleworker, Avery is given a lot of flexibility in the way he manages his work day.

I feel like my schedule from a remote stand point... there's a lot more opportunity for me to be organized by task and manage my own personal schedule.

Avery seemed to be very comfortable interweaving his personal schedule with his work schedule. He seemed to feel he had a good balance of work and life satisfaction, and was willing to break traditional conceptions of work time (e.g. work hours from nine to five). His experience points to a shift in thinking about work/life balance.

If I want to go run errands during the day, I can work later in the night. Or if I want to spend the day with my kid, you know sometimes I can work that in, so throughout the week, you aren't conditioned to only the weekends right?

In contrast, Erica, an executive on the east coast works at the company headquarters is expected to be in the office where she is collocated with her vice president by 9:00 a.m. She is also expected to adhere to the west coast work day where her direct boss is located. After her hour commute in the evening, she arrives home around 8:00 p.m. She says that she wishes she could telecommute more because she feels she would be more productive, particularly because she would gain two-hours in the work day that she currently spends in the car. She enjoys face-to-face meetings and feels they are beneficial, particularly for planning sessions or brainstorming, but the reality is that most of her work day is spent on conference calls.

My work days are typically very long and my commute times are long. People always schedule meetings through my lunch or want to schedule meetings until seven at night.

She indicates that she doesn't feel she has a choice, that her career would suffer if she tried to take back some of her personal time. She doesn't seem to have a mechanism to create a personal boundary.

I guess I'm fortunate because my children are grown. But, I can see how if I had a family, younger children and had to go home and do all those family things in the evening I could see how it could impact my opportunities at work.

This exemplifies a tension between the organizational need for employees to be available and the need of the individual to have personal time. It appears that workers who both have a physical office and are expected to work virtually have a more difficult time meeting personal needs while maintaining a positive impression in the work place.

Blending of Work and Personal Life

Many of the interviewees discussed how overcrowded schedules affect their personal life. Unlike Erica, Jane who lives in Texas, does have young children. She also complained that her west coast partners consistently booked meetings late into the evening.

On principle alone I'm not going to attend that meeting. I just send a note to say let's see if we can do something that's not quite so late. This timeframe doesn't work for me as this is family time for me.

She frequently tried to "push back" on the meeting organizer, but admitted that she rarely was able to have the meeting rescheduled. Instead, she shifts her personal schedule to accommodate the meeting.

I felt guilty logging off at five-thirty because I knew they would be reaching out to me and I wouldn't be there. And I'd go off and do other things, make dinner and whatever but I had my computer on and my IM on until eight o'clock at night. And let me tell you that's not good. It's not good for your family, for your morale.

In another similar example Sheila, a 32-year-old mother of a toddler, pleads her case:

Some people are more open to say I'm going to work until ten o'clock to get this done, than others. I have kids, I'm not doing that. So we have to make the best use of our time when we are here, because I have a family, I have children.

Yet, she later admits that she often works well into the night and checks her email on the weekends.

In the end, the extended work day and constant juggling of time based on business demands seems to force individuals to prioritize personal time, just as they prioritize business time. A dentist appointment for a child is likely to be treated just like a meeting invite. Can I move this? Can someone else do it? Is it as important as attending this business call? Can I squeeze it in, overlap it, "double task" it? Even basic personal needs are sometimes double booked.

Jorge described his trip to the grocery store at eleven a.m. on a Wednesday as "the labor of life". The language he uses indicates the underlying blurring of boundaries between life and work. When probed, he explained further how he integrated the trip to the grocery store into his work day. Jorge had looked at his email in the morning. He had noticed ten email and quickly assessed their importance and how much time it would take to respond to each. He also knew that he had used the last of the milk in his cereal that morning and would need to get more before his three year old daughter's nap at two o'clock. He formulated a plan to call his boss on the way to the grocery store and respond to the three most critical email while he waited in the checkout line. He then confessed that he was actually glad to go to the grocery store, as it was a reprieve from the home office.

One of the disadvantages of the remote work place is ...you are always at work.

There's no difference. You work in an office, you know what it's like you come home and you relax on the couch.

In these examples we see individuals are pressured to be available for extended times compared to the traditional work place of twenty years ago. This pressure comes from organizational norms and expectations of the modern global work place. Individuals use time stacking techniques to balance work and personal needs. Yet, personal boundaries are constantly challenged as organizational expectations infringe on personal time and individuals fear a negative impression if they are seen as being unavailable to work.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described how the virtual work environment allows for more flexibility in the way individuals approach work. Through the use of communication technologies individual are able to manage multiple streams of communication at the same time. Time stacking can be thought of as a strategy for multicomcommunicating or multitasking. It is both premeditated and employed at the minute. Time stacking decisions are based on personal and organizational needs, norms and expectations. It is a practice that is not tied to any particular technology or work environment. While multicomcommunicating and multitasking are behaviors, time stacking encompasses the organizational strategies around that behavior. Even though it may appear on a color coded calendar that communication is in blocked off discrete hours of unique topics, the

reality is that participation is shifting every minute of the day. Participation in the virtual work day is sequential, incremental and calculated. Individuals are challenged to protect personal boundaries while keeping up the appearance of being available, always connected, ready to respond.

CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPATION PREDICATIONS

Chapter Overview

So far I have discussed how the virtual work place enables an individual to attend to more than one task or more than one conversation at any given time. The next core, theme, participation predication, reveals how individuals make rapid decisions about how and when they will engage in any of their open communication channels. For instance, when individuals have been “booked” for more than one meeting during a one-hour block, how do they choose when to switch their focus between those meetings during that hour? Much of the following discussion about participation centers on meetings to help place a frame around the action and because meetings are considered a central place where groups exchange important information and coordinate their actions (Tracy & Dimock, 2004; Volkema & Niederman, 1995).

In a virtual meeting space, there are not physical reinforcements to hold participants accountable for meeting participation. Individuals can simply “dial in” a meeting by making their digital mark and then continue to work distractedly on tasks not associated with the meeting at hand. In this chapter, I will discuss how individuals participate in the work day sliding along a continuum from “passive listening” to “actively engaged”. I will also discuss the various methods individuals use to focus their attention to the conversation that is most critical.

Participation Continuum

As mentioned earlier, the virtual worker tends to have multiple streams of communication open simultaneously (e.g. chat, email, conference call, SMS text). Through these alternate communication channels, a virtual meeting participant can choose to engage in additional conversations while he attends a virtual meeting. However, once the meeting participant engages in another conversation, his attention is necessarily divided.

To manage impressions, gain control and maximize efficiency, meeting participants will negotiate their participation during a meeting along a continuum between “listening” to “active engagement” (see Figure 2). They will “listen in” on a meeting when they are unsure of their role or how the meeting affects them. They will be more open to multitasking or multicomcommunicating when they are not held personally accountable for the outcome of the meeting. Then there are meetings where a person is fairly certain of her responsibility and role within a call, but she is only required to report something. In these status report meetings, she will wait for a cue to participate and only focus on the meeting at hand for a very short time. Going further up the spectrum, individuals will participate more in meetings when they will be required to give input on the matter being discussed. Finally, if an individual is directly responsible for solving a problem or is running the meeting, he will be actively engaged in the meeting and less open to multitasking or multicomcommunicating.

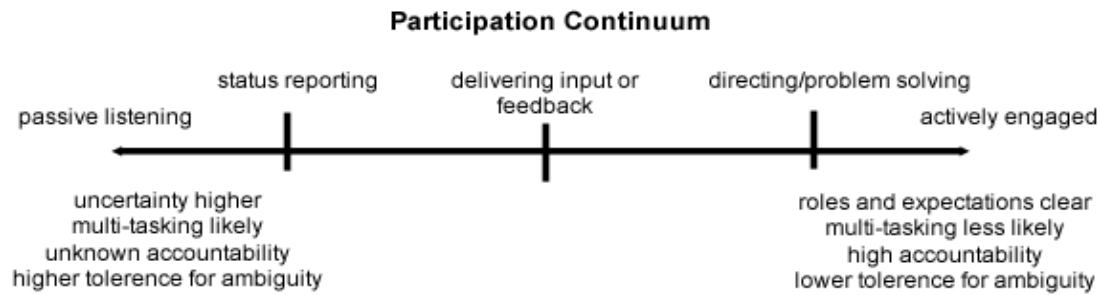


Illustration 2: Participation Continuum

Several individuals felt that a benefit of a virtual meeting is the ability to give incremental focus depending on the demands and particular individual needs of the participant. For example, one woman explained how on a daily hour status call, she passively listens until her team speaks. During the time she is “listening” she is actually answering emails, chatting in IM or taking care of other low level tasks. She is only actively engaged for about ten minutes of the hour while her team is speaking.

I listened to everyone else but I double tasked until my team was doing their read out and then I didn’t – because I can’t absorb information when I double task – I mean you are listening and you might be gleaning information, but not really.

This example points to the fact that individuals choose to become actively engaged in a meeting when they predict an evaluation of their performance will impact them. I use the term performance here to include all audiences, both personal and organizational. In this case she only listened to the portion of the conversation that impacted the reputation of her team. She was concerned with the impression her team made on the meeting audience. Other examples included references to when a boss expects something from them during or after the meeting, the project team is going to ask for input, etc.

Newness and meeting size also played a role in the willingness to attend and participate in a meeting. When people were new to their role, had a new boss, were in a new organization or starting a new project, they more frequently indicated that they would attend a meeting for which they were unclear about the objectives. Perhaps because there is an accommodation period where an individual learns what is expected of him and how his performance will be judged. In addition, size of the meeting invite list often would influence how much a person would participate in a meeting. If the meeting invite list is for more than ten people, then there would be a lower level of participation from the majority of individuals.

The most common basis for participation seems to be tied to leadership expectations and predicted personal impact of outcomes. In other words, the level of personal accountability seemed to indicate how active a participant would be in a virtual meeting, or conversely how open they would be to multitasking or multicomcommunicating. Accountability can be defined as the incentives and punishments for action or non-action. We begin to see a marginalization of things like creativity, socialization or learning. Jane explains how one of her participation predications is whether or not she would be held accountable for information from her leadership:

My time is better spent on things I have direct impact over. If I'm being included on a meeting just to listen in, then I'll just tell my team, status me on this. I don't think I need to be on unless I'm responsible for reporting status to leadership.

Not everyone was so cut and dry. Jason describes how he actively prioritizes his attendance and participation during the work week depending on his focus:

There are times that it's informational and it will be beneficial to me or the team or I'm representing my team at those calls, than I will attend and listen even if I don't have much to contribute.

He also explained how he would tentatively accept many meetings with a preconceived notion that he would attend, only if he had the spare time or he had something he needed from the team members in that meeting.

There are some things that I have on my calendar now that are more the – I can go and leverage it if I need it.

Later in our conversation, Jason, like Jane before clearly indicated that certain leaders in the organization get his immediate and undivided attention, regardless of the meeting he is attending:

I'm the primary escalation contact for a lot of issues that have a big impact on our global business... if my phone rings and I look down and I see it's a certain phone number, I won't hesitate to get up and walk out the meeting, regardless of who's calling it.

Gregg, uses priority as a predicate to his participation. He indicated that if he was busy with work or life issues that were a "higher priority" he would quickly escape his meeting life:

A lot of times because of conflicts, I'll have to choose what has a higher priority. Sometimes I cancel a meeting because I just don't want to go to it and I'll just say, this doesn't work for me.

Some individuals are more comfortable with setting boundaries and weaving personal and organizational life than others. Both organizational culture and experience in telework seemed to contribute to the comfort one had in setting boundaries. However, everyone seemed to constantly gauge focus and employ techniques to remain focused on the most critical tasks.

Maintaining Focus Through the Distractions

As much as communication technology can enable efficiency by allowing individuals to multi-task and multi-communicate, it is also an environment that is prone to distraction. Shawna explained how her corporate culture encourages multitasking and how she self-consciously regulates her behavior to reduce anxiety about trying to attend to her overburdened schedule:

I find that it's almost like A.D.D. is encouraged. If you are not doing ten things at once than you almost feel a little panicky about it. I try to keep myself from getting into those modes, you know that hyperactivity.

Ken also mentioned that he had developed methods to force himself away from distractions at the desk when he had to regain focus:

When the email are coming in and the IM messages are flashing up they are a distraction – and sometimes if I find myself being too distracted I will physically turn away from the computer so I can focus on what is being said on the phone.

Ultimately, each individual seems to have a ‘breaking point’ where they can no longer concentrate. It may be because there are too many open conversations or it may be because of the length of time a person is engaged in activities without a break.

I can get too distracted if I try to do too much at one time, and if that’s the case I have to – it’s best for me to just step away and come back to it. Go get a drink, play with my daughter for five minutes. Then I go back with a little bit of focus.

Not only did individuals discuss a degradation in their own personal focus, but also how the collective practice of multitasking during meetings tends to effect the organization as a whole. In particular, several interview participants referred to the inefficiency of meetings, how often times during a meeting things would need to be repeated or follow-up meetings scheduled because individual participants were distracted and not able to contribute efficiently or effectively. Angela describes her frustration:

I think, really you shouldn’t have meetings over thirty minutes ... it forces people to really tap into the issue.... I mean how many times do you hear this? “Oh, sorry, I was multitasking can your repeat that.” What a waste of time.

Chapter Summary

To conclude this chapter on participation predictions, it might be useful to use the radio as a metaphor. Imagine the virtual worker has access to multiple communication streams at the same time, just as a radio listener can tune into various radio stations with the turn of a dial. Some radio stations will have stronger signals than others. The virtual worker varies his focus throughout the day (what he is tuned into) depending on various

influences that can shift any minute of the day (see Illustration 3). Some of these influences are attributed to what role he has within the organization, personal needs, leadership expectations, the size of the meeting, his group membership, the number of competing streams of communication, his ability to defer input and how clearly the agenda or topic is defined in a particular event. In general though, the strongest predictor of participation is directly related to the individual's need to meet the expectations of his audience and perform to maintain his self-identity.

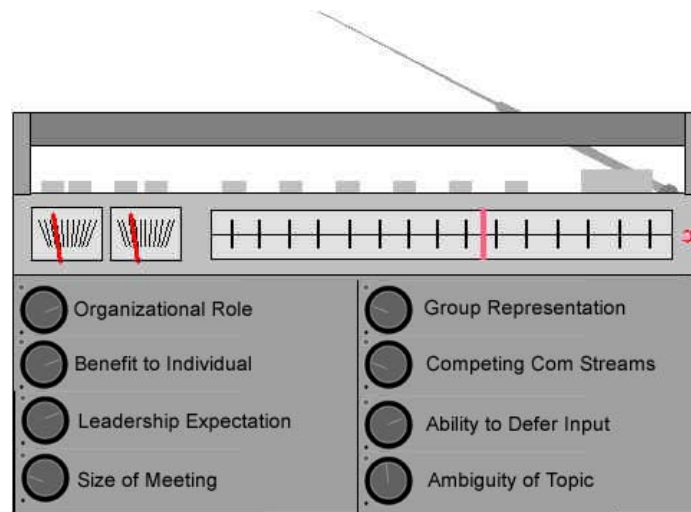


Illustration 3: Virtual worker's focus during the work day is like tuning a radio.

CHAPTER SIX: PERFORMANCE

Chapter Overview

So far the discussion has focused on virtual work in terms of time management, attendance (the choice that you will make your presence known) and participation (the intensity and matter of one's focus). Performance is the actual behavior to achieve a desired outcome during an interaction. Goffman defines performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers (1959, p.22). In this third and final theme, I will discuss how individuals evaluate their own and others' performances in a virtual work place. I will first address how individuals gain communicative competence in the workplace by learning the inherent benefit's and constraints of each communication technology, as well as, by understanding the organizational norms around the use of those technologies. I will then discuss the cultural landscape of the blended work team. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion about socialization in the virtual workplace and how it differs from the traditional face-to-face work environment.

Competence in the Virtual Workplace

The first topic in performance concerns the impression a virtual worker makes about his or her communicative competence. The data indicates that individuals acquire knowledge about the different communication technologies to help them choose the tool

best suited to each communicative task (Wasson, 2004). Suitability is often specific to the organizational norms. The consequences for inappropriate use of a technology can lead to misunderstandings and spoiled performances. It is a tricky landscape that requires practice and education within the virtual environment.

LEARNING CURVE

Interview participants often indicated that there is a learning curve, an adaptation period, for individuals who are new to a virtual work environment. During this phase a virtual worker learns which tools are available to him, the limitations and benefit's of each tool and when it is appropriate to use each tool. Avery describes his view on employees who transition from a face-to-face environment to a telework environment:

There's definitely a learning curve ... when you are going to lose productivity, because they simply have to get used to it, but I think you are going to face that no matter what type of change, like moving from one office to another.

Those new to the virtual environment need to accommodate to the flexibility in time management, the use of different tools to accomplish tasks and to a more verbal means of communication. The way one writes and the one speaks has more impact in a virtual environment because those are the primary ways to communicate in a virtual work place. Jason suggested in his interview that to be truly successful in the virtual space, companies should invest in formal training for communication in a virtual work place.

If I was running a company, I would want to provide some level of education or set process for how I want people to communicate. Not in terms of how to

communicate through IM, but an understanding of how to communicate effectively in a virtual environment.

It seems to make sense that one would need to learn this new way of communicating, but none of the interview participants had received any sort of formal training on virtual communication. Most of them learned through trial and error. Dan described an embarrassing incident that occurred when he was hosting a webinar (a training session hosted online so individuals can see a shared presentation). One of his co-workers was not aware that her IM message to him would display for the entire call to see:

She sent me an IM saying “this call is a disaster, that guy is obnoxious.” And it popped up and I was sharing with everybody. I caught it quickly and deleted it, I don’t know if he saw it, but it never came up.

This was an interesting incident because it indicates the coordinated performance that occurs and how technology can sometimes interfere with a performance. Not only is there a need to have an awareness of the technology, but also how to effectively write communication to a virtual audience. Lisa described how one co-worker was in danger of being fired because of the repeated complaints about her inappropriate communication style.

She doesn’t know how to communicate effectively – it sounds like she is just barking orders the whole time –whether it’s an IM, and email ... it makes people not want to take her seriously ... and as a result it slows down the work.

So, not only should an individual become knowledgeable about the technological characteristics of a communication tool, but he or she should also understand how to craft a message to impress his or her audience.

Often, impressions are formed based on organizational norms for behavior. For example, organizational norms can affect one's choice of medium and propensity toward multitasking and/or multicomcommunicating in the virtual work place. The study participants were asked if they felt it was rude to multitask during a meeting and whether they were embarrassed if they were caught multitasking. All of the participants indicated that multitasking is accepted in their organization. However, value judgments are often made based on whether the person is able to be responsive when they are called on to participate.

I think it's very accepted (multitasking) ... I don't think too many people look at it as a bad thing, but if it's to the level that you are not paying attention and you get called up on a question and you stumble, than yeah you are embarrassed.

Sheila explained how she trusts that an executive that is texting during a face-to-face meeting is not doing it to be rude, but because he has urgent items he must address. This aligns with prior research that indicates that organizational members in a distributed team use communication repertoires that are influenced by institutional conditions (e.g., incentives, trust, and physical proximity) and situational conditions (e.g., urgency, task, etc.), and by routine use of the media over time. (Watson-Manheim & Belanger, 2007). Next we will turn to a discussion about the various tools with the virtual worker's tool belt, like the cell phone, and some of the ways these tools are chosen.

THE TOOL SET

There are many tools available to a virtual worker. No one tool will accomplish everything in every situation. In fact, often several tools need to be employed sequentially to achieve a business task.

It becomes about how well you are able to communicate with people across multiple media types. You know you have email, wave, social networks, IM, as well as, telephone and you have to be able to communicate across all of those. The data in this study indicates that choosing the tool to communicate depends on several things, including; complexity of message, urgency, importance, time of day, volume of communication and perceived need for personal warmth. Jason describes how he approaches a project to maximize his efficiency by mixing mediums. When he is with vendors he uses audio conferences. When he meets clients it is typically face to face.

It's a mixture, of really knowing what's the value in it. Usually I will get in front of the client two times. At the inception of the project I will help define and scope out what they are looking for. Then at the end of that project. He went on to describe how, within his organization, technology was chosen based on the expense (both of time and money) versus the importance of the topic or audience. He has access to a very advanced video conferencing technology known as Telepresence from Cisco, but it is expensive and cumbersome to set up.

Unless you are a C level individual sitting in say Singapore and having C level conversations that are strategic to and internal to a company-- you typically aren't going to go into a conference room and start up the Cisco software.

Many times the interview turned to discussions about using different media depending on the audience or setting. For example, different media are used depending on the complexity and or personal nature of a message. Jane recounts:

I tend to use instant messenger for simple things just to ask a question, if it gets too complicated I think it becomes inappropriate ... just like email, it's a medium that you can easily be misunderstood and you can end up having a virtual fight.

Other times, the choice of medium is based on the known preference of the receiver or to match the initiator of the conversation or the time of day. Jane went on to describe how she knows that her boss will respond if she texts him, but he may not respond to email. So, when she needs to reach him, she uses text. She also explained that if it is after hours, she uses text to her employees' cell phones because it is less obtrusive than a phone call.

To conclude this section on tool sets, note that individuals were conscious about the inherent characteristics of technology to mask appearances. For example, one woman mentioned that she felt conference calls are beneficial because she can tailor her presentation more specifically when her voice is the sole means to convey information.

I tend to be more outspoken in a virtual environment. I can focus more on my words and I'm not concerned about all of a sudden twenty sets of eyes looking at me and not really listening to what I'm saying but looking at my earrings.

This indicates that there is an awareness about how the choice of technology may influence your appearance and the reaction of your audience. Particularly, that technology can allow one to reduce or manipulate non-verbal cues.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

If a tool is selected that is an inappropriate match to the topic or audience, then often misunderstandings result. Consider the following example. Dana, a marketing manager, is talking to one of her subordinates over instant messenger. She is trying to prepare for a meeting with her leadership and needs information from Aaron. Pay particular attention to the time stamps on the conversation.

Dana(14:49:58): do you all have a deployment plan to share? i havent heard anything from anyone..

Aaron(14:51:15): Lisa Stone has a release roadmap - you might wish to reach out to her for a current copy.

Dana(14:51:28): sigh.. nevermind

Dana(15:13:09): I would really like to know why you all are being so unsupportive.

Dana(15:15:21): you have always been so awesomely supportive

Dana(15:15:39): i am disappointed.

Aaron(15:28:19): I'm not...I don't know why you think I am... I was only making sure that we were on the same page before Sunday came around. Please tell me what I did that makes you think I'm not being supportive?

Aaron(15:29:14): I saw the presentation deck and only wanted clarification on your expectations as we discussed on the conference call

Dana(15:37:24): we have done so many releases together collaboratively....yet this release, the only meetings I've attended related to the release are my own, i

don't know the deployment plan, who's on call, who will be supporting us, or how...

Dana(15:38:03): and i am being told to go to someone else when i ask you for help

Dana(15:40:01): i hate working like that

Dana(15:40:14): our jobs are all so hard as it is

Aaron(15:41:16): you had a simple request for documentation. didn't realize that directing you to the document owner was such a huge issue. this chat is completely focusing on the wrong motives and I'm not going to engage in this anymore. It is counterproductive.

This is a strong example because it points out several nuances of the virtual work place and how the choice of medium, timing and the written words can all influence the result of the interaction. Notice when Dana responds, "sigh, nevermind". She is using an expression to show disappointment, but Aaron doesn't pick up on it. After twenty minutes, Dana becomes more emotional and accuses Aaron of being unsupportive. Aaron seems to be completely taken off guard as he thought he had addressed the request and closed out the task. If this interaction would have happened face-to-face or over the phone, it may have had very different results. That leads into the next part of the discussion about performance, blended teams.

Blended Teams

Virtual work relies upon various communication technologies and requires participation among individuals who work from remote or distant locations to achieve organizational and personal goals (S. L. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). A geographically distributed team consists of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by communication technology. This setting provides for a very diverse set of individual backgrounds and experiences that can affect overall individual and group performance. In this section we will discuss blended organizational and social cultures of the virtual work place and how these cultures impact an individual's ability to make impressions.

OFFICE WORKERS, TELEWORKERS AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

In a geographically distributed environment there are many permutations of interaction. A project team can consist of people that work together in the same office, people who work virtually from separate corporate offices, full time teleworkers that work from home, or travelling workers who are temporarily displaced. In addition, you may have outsiders who participate in a given interaction (e.g. consultants, vendors, customers). Each interaction will be different based on the way the participants are geographically distributed.

Differences emerged in the data when discussing individuals who are “in the office” and those who work from a remote location. Personal attributes (e.g. looks) are more important if you work in the office. Whereas, responsiveness is very important if you work remotely. Virtual workers, particularly full time teleworkers who have no home

office, are tied to their mobile devices so they can provide instantaneous response at any time.

I don't think telecommuters are expected to work more hours so much as they are expected to work smarter. The telecommuter has to be available at all times. You are not entitled to a lunch hour and if you do have lunch you need to make that very clear in your IM status. Your availability is beyond reproach.

The result is that remote workers become more task oriented, where office workers tend to be more socially oriented. Office workers tend to focus more on being seen at the office.

When you are in office, your days might go a lot longer because you spend more time talking to people ... on a phone call you can do that in 15 minutes – if we do it in person, you look up and you've been in there for thirty-five minutes.

So, the office worker is concerned about being present in the physical office, but might not have the same care of being present and responsive to his virtual coworkers. This results in a perception that the office workers are not collaborative and are at worst “goofing off”. Janet, a product director in Texas describes her frustration.

There are times when I couldn't find people who were in the office because they were all holed up in a room brainstorming or meeting where no one else is a part of the discussion – or all of them piling up into someone's SUV and going to lunch for two hours.

She continued to describe how she used various ICTs and her personal network to get someone in the physical office to walk into the conference room and get the person she was looking for.

Where the office worker struggles to stay on task with the distraction of social demands, the virtual worker can struggle to remain connected to the office dynamics.

Jason, a full time teleworker explains:

I mean you are always out of sight, you have to spend a lot of time thinking about how you maintain your network in a virtual environment because you don't have the option of running into someone in the office every day.

When an individual works solely in a virtual environment, with very little face-to-face interaction, feelings of exclusion and isolation begin to surface.

Communication technologies create new opportunities to build global teams by bridging barriers of time and distance, but at the same time, without face-to-face interactions, individuals can begin to feel disconnected from the organization. David describes how he manages his interactions when he is the only participant to call into a teleconference bridge while the rest of the participants are in a face-to-face meeting in a conference room.

It feels a little different ... there are times, depending on what the conversation is where I might feel more excluded, and there are times when I have to focus a little bit more on the interactions and be a little more and be involved.

It is interesting that he has developed mechanisms to remain engaged in the conversation. He talks more, asks more questions, and asks others to repeat things for him if he is

unable to hear. However, he admits that if his attempts are ignored or he continually has trouble getting the groups attention, he will slowly withdraw from interacting.

This dynamic is an important example because it demonstrates how a mixed virtual and face-to-face environment can affect one's performance. David may be perceived as boisterous or bold because he must interrupt the conference in order to participate. Or, he may retreat and be ignored and thus not seen as a contributing member of the team. His performance will be judged by the limited cues the audience receives. What if David came from a culture that feels it is inappropriate to interrupt a conversation without first being recognized?

A TASK ORIENTED ENVIRONMENT

In a virtual environment, individuals who work remotely are often judged by their availability and responsiveness. Indeed, when the interviewees were asked to think of someone they have a positive impression of but have never met face-to-face, the positive characteristics described were not personal attributes (e.g. nice guy, funny, etc.), rather they described functional attributes. Most responses were related to the person's ability to be present, communicative and responsive.

This person is responsive. I don't mean that if I send them something they reply right away. I mean that if I send them something that they respond in a reasonable amount of time.

Or, Jane explained:

He does a good job of communicating and keeping people apprised of status ... he does a good job of recognizing when the written stuff isn't working and pick up a phone and call or schedule a live meeting.

When speaking about how inquisitive, vocal or aggressive a person might be on a call all interviewees indicated that leadership expectations were a key determination. If they knew they would be directly responsible to get a particular result, they would be more blunt and boldly interject. Interestingly, when asked to describe a person that they work with virtually whom they did not have a positive impression of, the most frequently described characteristics were boisterousness, hogging the conversation and rudeness. Often these personality traits are influenced by someone's cultural background. In the next section I will discuss how diverse cultural representation can influence communication in a virtual organization.

THE MOSAIC CULTURE OF THE VIRTUAL ORGANIZATION

In a geographically distributed work environment, there will be a diverse representation of cultures. An individual's cultural background can influence how they interact in the virtual work place. Different languages, accents, technological constraints and social norms all contribute to performance perceptions.

For example, David describes how he has a hard time understanding the conversation with the Indian based engineering team. He will often use instant messenger to chat with a trusted co-worker in Bangalore to ask her to clarify for him. He also complained that since India is a developing country, the technology can be unreliable.

If I'm on a call and she's on it, I'll just ask her on IM, what the hell is this guy saying? It's so different over there – their telecommunications, the line quality is always very bad, all sorts of problems, they have power outages all the time. It's just a developing country.

Jason had similar experiences with Indian co-workers. He added that he felt Indian co-workers “took things very literally,” and “they have to be told exactly what to do.”

Jason later described a miscommunication on a project timeline that occurred between the Japanese services team and the Indian engineering team. The engineering team has set a timeline that required the services team to deliver on a particular date. When Jason asked if the Japanese team could make the date they said yes. He later found out that the Japanese team didn't understand anything that Indian team said on the call. The Japanese were ashamed to admit they didn't understand and were attempting to be polite, so they just agreed with any question posed to them.

Dealing with Japan you have to be aware of their culture ... manners, politeness, how respectful you are, how you introduce yourself. You can't just go in slap someone high five and say let's go do this thing.

The examples in this section point to how cultural and geographic differences may influence performance evaluations and ultimately effect the success of a geographically distributed team working in a virtual environment. Next, for the final topic under the theme of performance, I will give a more detailed discussion on how individuals try to overcome some of the cultural and organizational differences to create a network of distributed team members for needed social support.

Relationships in the Virtual Workplace

Earlier, I discussed how individuals can have feelings of isolation and how individuals who work remotely are often judged by their availability and responsiveness, as opposed to more personal attributes. In this section of the paper, I will explore how individuals use technology to try to bridge that socialization gap and remain connected to the organization by using the features available in communication technology.

TEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS AND LASTING IMPRESSIONS

The nature of the virtual workplace seems to lend itself to limited socialization. Virtual workers have to make concerted effort to build and maintain relationships, that would otherwise be more fluid in a face-to-face environment. It is recognized that you can build relationships electronically, but they take a long time to build and disappear more quickly if they are not maintained.

It's very easy to turn somebody off, because you are not seeing them f2f, you are not passing them in the hallway. Think about it from the standpoint of someone leaving the company. You know, everybody gets that email right, you know "here's my personal email, keep in touch ...". How often do you really stay in touch with that person? Especially if they are from a different state, or what about a different country?

One of the key differences between virtual socialization and casual interoffice socialization is spontaneity. Greg explains how IM is a means to socialize, but it is contrived and able to be manipulated:

IM kind of takes the role of the water cooler and kind of acts as the water cooler.

But, still, it's not as casual right? You can always ignore an IM, you can't ignore somebody who's walking by your desk and sitting down.

Another important difference between a face-to-face relationship and one that is virtual is the amount of cues available to the audience for them to form an opinion. An impression can be made in a virtual environment that will be so strong based on one interaction, that it is difficult to overcome. Jane recounted a story from four years ago when a project manager began his conference call with 40 participants and proceeded to the bathroom and forgot to put himself on mute. The incident was embarrassing for everyone and it caused considerable damage to the man's professional reputation. Ever since that incident, the project manager was perceived by the team as a "buffoon."

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how individuals in a virtual work environment consciously and unconsciously make impressions based on the communication technologies they use and how competent they are at communicating using those technologies. Performance is judged by one's availability and responsiveness. Individuals gain communicative competence in the workplace by learning the inherent benefits and constraints of each communication technology, as well as, by understanding the organizational norms around the use of those technologies. We also discussed how the complex cultural landscape of the blended work team can affect both individual and group level performance. Finally, I

described how socialization in the virtual workplace differs from the traditional face-to-face work environment.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Chapter Overview

In theorizing from qualitative data, meaningful relationships were found between the core themes of time stacking, participation predications and performance. In the following chapter, I will distill these three concepts and draw out impression management related propositions based on the discovery process in this qualitative study.

Time Related Implications

The analyses suggest that the virtual environment fosters a more structured approach to daily interactions. Emphasis in the work place is placed on productivity, responsiveness, availability and follow-through. Global, distributed organizations require organizational members to be available at all times, forcing individuals to juggle a complex schedule of competing work and life demands throughout the day. As a result, time is viewed as something that is given, taken or taken back.

Increased demand for a person's time results in a more task oriented approach to work interactions. As a coping mechanism, individuals stack activities, with a plan to multi-task during peak hours of interaction. In addition, an individual will employ an active mental construct to address competing demands for attention at any given moment during the day.

To allocate time, individuals take into consideration duration of the task, importance and urgency of the task, and relative importance of the person or audience for

whom the task is performed. This behavior, the premeditated allocation of one block of time to accomplish various goals, as well as the active prioritization of competing demands, is introduced here as “time stacking”.

Prop 1: In a virtual environment, individuals will actively plan some multitasking behaviors to manage impressions.

Participation Implications

The virtual worker typically has many channels of communication open simultaneously (e.g. chat, email, conference call, SMS text). Through these alternate communication channels, a he or she can choose to engage in additional conversations while he attends an organizational meeting. Depending on competing demands for attention, the meeting participant will negotiate his or her participation during a meeting along a continuum between “listening” to “active engagement”. When a participant is closer to the “listening” end of the continuum, he or she is more open to multitasking or multicommuting and his participation in the meeting itself declines.

A person’s level of participation varies minute-to-minute within the virtual environment based on a complex formula of personal, team, project and meeting objectives, as well as, organizational norms and leadership expectations for response. Research indicates that the probability of multicommuting is directly related to the pace of each conversation, the number and complexity of topics and the number of open conversations (2008), as well as the norms of the parent organization and the beliefs of management and work groups (K. Stephens & Davis, 2009). As well, individuals are

motivated to participate in any communicative interaction based on perceived future benefits or punishments (Sunnafrank, 1986). Finally, prior research indicates that multitasking is more likely to occur in meetings while information sharing and routine decision-making activities are occurring (Wasson, 2004). The research presented in this paper indicates that when individuals have multiple communication channels open, they will attend to the channel that has the most immediate need for response in order to maintain a positive impression.

Prop 2: While multicomcommunicating, individuals will attend to the interaction that has the most immediate need for response in order to maintain a positive impression.

The data here suggests that while individuals consciously switch focus throughout the day, they are judged more positively if they are able to respond quickly and be available. Unlike a face-to-face environment, socialization is marginalized. However, in both virtual and face-to-face environments, the perceived need to be always present and always available has personal consequences, such as unfulfilled personal needs (Wasson, 2004).

These findings challenge the notion that ICTs need to replicate nonverbal communication in order to allow for personal bonding in a team setting. Instead, it suggests that virtual team work is about efficiency and maximizing time so that individuals can “take back” time for their family and friends. When attending an ambiguous virtual meeting, the attendee is more concerned about what is expected of him than he is about socializing with others on the call.

Prop 3: Performance in virtual context will be evaluated by how responsive participants are and how well they react at the appropriate time.

Performance Considerations

In distributed teams, as opposed to traditional teams, virtual participants must rely on technology to mediate their communication. Prior research focused on the ability of a given technology to simulate face-to-face interactions, concluding that the richer the medium, the more closely participants can mimic face-to-face encounters. Therefore, a team can more easily bond, trust one another and mitigate or solve conflicts (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). However, looking at only the capabilities of the technology leaves out the critical factor of how and why users choose to engage with technology. In the research presented here, the argument is that it is not the features or bandwidth of the technology that is central to participation, rather how individuals appropriate the technology for their own goals.

The facelessness (partial or full anonymity) and the ability to manipulate digital cues within a virtual interaction are tools that individuals knowingly or passively use to manage their impression and make sense of the encounter and their role within it. Today's virtual workers start the day by managing a calendar double and triple booked with virtual meetings – they become adept at creating digital disguises to optimize their work time and maintain each of the discrete, simultaneous performances they attend to.

We all play many roles in our life; mother, sister, friend, co-worker, subordinate, student, etc. In the virtual work place, transitions between these roles have contracted to

require almost instantaneous shifting between each role. For example, a wife and a customer would expect different levels of formality in a discussion. This requires the performer to quickly shift between roles. These have been referred to by others as micro-transitions because of the frequency and recurrence of role changes (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Ashforth, et. al. break micro-transitions down into three types: work-home, work-work (different roles at work), and work-social (2000). The work on micro-role transitions assumes sequential interactions. In the virtual work place, individuals are forced to manage role transitions in simultaneous conversations.

These micro-role transitions are difficult, but they can become less difficult over time as “individuals develop transition scripts and role schemas (Ashforth, et al., 2000).” The data presented here indicates that individuals do go through a learning phase in a virtual work place. Organizational norms, as well as technical adeptness contribute to the person’s ability to make a desirable impression. However, when a communication technology is used in a way that is inappropriate, it may result in a “spoiled performance” (Goffman, 1959) that can leave a negative impression that is lasting.

Prop 4: The longer individuals work within a virtual environment, the more adept they will become at switching between roles and maintaining multiple, simultaneous performances.

Chapter Summary

The shift in the organizational landscape to a virtual, mobile work place has impacted personal interactions and participation in day-to-day work. The data presented

here demonstrates how workers attempt to manage their audiences' perceptions amongst simultaneous performances. The propositions listed in this chapter indicate that participants will become more adept at time stacking and multicomcommunication the longer they work in a virtual environment. In an environment where time is viewed as a commodity that is high in demand, individuals will premeditate multitasking and multicomcommunication behavior in an effort to manage impressions. While multicomcommunicating, individuals will shift focus each minute in order to attend to the interaction that has the most immediate need for response in order to maintain a positive impression. Indeed, audience members in a virtual work place will evaluate an individual's performance based on how responsive participants are and how well they react at the appropriate time.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

This qualitative study indicates that communication technology creates new ways for individuals to manage their participation and meet increasing work demands. However, it is a relatively small sample of participants that were interviewed. In addition, the majority of participants were from the technology industry. Further research could approach impression management in a virtual work place quantitatively to determine specific approaches to time stacking and participation. Areas for further research focus also might address how multiple technology channels in meetings influence the outcome of individual participation and individual perception of satisfaction.

The research here contributed to the existing literature in multicomcommunicating (Reinsch, et al., 2008) and ICT succession (K. K. Stephens, 2007), in that it added new insight into the context of how individuals choose to use communication technology to manage appearances. Further research could help explain how the addition of multiple audiences can affect an individual's ability to multi-communicate effectively. It has been noted that we need more research on how individuals can effectively use ICTS to maximize efficiency and reduce the negative consequences of multicomcommunicating, particularly in real world settings such as meetings (K. Stephens & Davis, 2009).

It would also be interesting to understand how individuals choose technologies to create an impression on an audience and whether a combination of technology are chosen to impress different audiences. In addition, since responsiveness and timing appear to strongly influence the impressions made in a virtual work place, future research could help define the time schemas used in a distributed work place.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

What does it mean to put on a performance in the modern work space? When Goffman initially presented his impression management framework (Goffman, 1959) he limited his discussion to interpersonal relationships that were co-present in nature (face-to-face). In the virtual work place, an individual can simultaneously perform in multiple interactions, playing very different roles in each interaction and quite likely to very different audiences. The tenants of impression management are very applicable in this setting, but the mechanisms for impression management are quite different.

The Performer

The performer in the virtual work place is less concerned about physical appearances and more concerned about the appearance of presence and responsiveness. Thus, less emphasis is placed on social attributes and more on the ability to address audiences at the right moment, in the right context. In this virtual organization the illusion of presence is more important than actual physical presence. I cannot physically stand in more than one room. However, I can be seen as present in thousands of locations at the same time in a virtual environment by simply turning on a status indicator in my instant messenger (e.g. a note saying 'available'). Yet, to keep the performance believable, I cannot just turn on my status indicator, I also must perform when called upon. Otherwise, my audience will perceive my status indicator as deceitful. This becomes very complicated if, at a given time multiple people engage one individual for conversation at

the same time. The individual performer must decide which audience to attend to first, which performance is most crucial to maintain believability.

The Audience

The performer in the virtual work place must attend to multiple audiences expectations at the same time. These audiences may or may not be aware of the other interactions in which the individual performer is engaged. In addition, these audiences may have contradictory expectations for how the performer should behave. A wife will expect a much different manner of response than a boss.

A performance's success depends on the coordination of behavior of the individual performer and the audience (Goffman, 1959). Audience members will behave in a way to protect the believability of the performance. In the virtual space, it seems that audiences and individual performers make an attempt to disguise the fact that they are attending to other tasks or conversations. If the illusion of full presence is broken (someone is 'caught' multitasking during a meeting), the audience will justify and readjust the performance to bring it back to an illusion of one co-present interaction.

Conclusion

Virtual work is a relatively new practice, made possible with the proliferation of communication technology and reliable network infrastructures. To approach a study in virtual work, it is important to acknowledge that the discussion is multi-dimensional (Rice & Gattiker, 2001). Each organization is unique and different technologies afford and constrain communication. The way in which organizational members adopt and adapt to technologies will eventually shape social practices within that organization (Giddens, 1996: 100-101).

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was meant to advance a conceptual framework that is fundamentally centered on performance and impression management. The intent was to explore how individuals consciously and unconsciously create impressions in a technology enabled, distributed work environment. We are only beginning to understand the social and business impact of virtual communication. However, one thing has not changed. It is the human performer who engages in conversation. The performer still has personal and social motives that translate into how they interact using technology. He or she will adopt technology to maintain self-presentation and adapt behaviors to maintain the group's orchestrated performance.

APPENDIX

Coding Book

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Time | Of or relating to objective or subjective perceptions of time.
"But, I feel like I get a better use of how I manage my own time. " |
| 2. Feelings & attitudes | Subjective views or emotional responses.
"..this week, I asked somebody for something. I interpreted it as them being belligerent and said 'why are you talking to me like that?' and they got offended and said I'm not talking to you any more in IM. So we kindof had a virtual fight." |
| 3. Norms and Expectations | Organizational or cultural norms or expectations.
On multitasking - "Everyone does. If I get caught.. I mean it doesn't happen over in over in a meeting – I think everyone knows if you say "I'm sorry I didn't catch that..." "could you repeat that" that everyone knows – everyone does it – that someone was over at your desk, that you were answering an email or a IM." |
| 4. Barriers | Technological, physical or subjective barriers to individual or group success.
"The very concept of out of sight out of mind is a strong point, a fact in a virtual environment. I mean you are always out of sight and you have to do a very good job of networking, maintaining, you have to spend a lot of time thinking about how you maintain your network in a virtual environment because you don't have the option of running into someone in the office every day." |
| 5. Action | Active verbs such as act, listen, watch, lurk. Participant is taking an action.
"I have to listen to what you are asking so I can answer it appropriately. I don't think I could do that if I was typing." |
| 6. Logistics | Objective constraints. These can be technological or physical. |

"I think the biggest challenge is the lack of personal relationship building that results from visual communication -- you know seeing how someone

- actually is reacting to you . And trying to get an understanding of what they mean when they say something vs. trying to imply it in IM and having it come across poorly. As a result, purely virtual environments – you know they can be successful, but I think they will always be missing something."
7. Expectations Real or perceived expectations for an individual or group to behave in a particular manner.
"One of the things that's a requirement if you are a remote employee for the most part is that you have to be able to travel. So there is sacrifice to some degree there from the family. The upside is you get a lot of time with your family. The down side is you may have to travel more and be away from your family for periods of time in order to be successful and make the connections that are necessary. It's the nature of the beast. "
8. Channels and Mediums Modalities such as auditory, visual etc. or the medium such as text, email, wiki.
"I'll simply hang up and maybe send an email or IM to the host to let them know I've dropped and it's not impactful. If it's something that I think hanging up is going to be disruptive or I don't have a way to reach the host on IM or email, I may just let them know (verbally) I don't see this as impact to my group, I'm going to hang up. "
9. Compartmentalization The attempt to compartmentalize work, actions or interactions so as to exclude or include individual participants.
"I do like having two – even if it's being able to ping someone and say hey I need you to speak to this – or heads up this is what we are going to be talking about next – it's nice to , if you need to , have a side conversation with someone."
10. Efficiency Discussion around inefficiency or attempts to increase efficiency.
" So, from the standpoint of finding resources that I can enact that are cost effective, you know the whole outsourcing principle. In a purely f2f environment, that doesn't exist."
11. Artifacts Any record of interactions or communication (e.g. meeting minutes, calendar, text messages)

- "I have found that many meetings where minutes are not captured and sent. I would say 40% of the meetings we attend minutes aren't captured and sent out to a distribution list. I find that often people use email to try to replace a meeting. If you've ever tried to print out an email that has gone back and forth, sometimes it's not surprising to me that an email is 15-20 pages long. "
12. Accountability The opposite of anonymity - individuals feel accountable for performance or appearance.
"It becomes a matter of since you aren't in the office, they can't track what you are doing, and, but you still have to get the job done and done well."
13. Presence The degree to which others are aware of an individual's presence.
"... he didn't have a lot of interaction with the higher ups and you have to ... that's a side area of any job, but especially when you are remote it becomes a very difficult thing to do... is how do I get "face time" with the executives or management if you are never in a position to be face to face with them. How do I make myself known?"
14. Control The ability to plan for and predict outcomes of an action or interaction.
"I like being able to have my computer and having resources available to me. Especially when I needed to know the details of a project at quick notice – I can open emails, I can reference documents, I like being able to use livemeeting and netmeeting to share stuff and make sure everyone is looking at the same thing."
15. Roles Personal and organizational roles for individuals or groups.
" So, if I want to go run errands during the day, I can work later in the night. Or if I want to spend the day with my kid, you know sometimes I can work that in, so throughout the week, you aren't conditioned to only the weekends right? "
16. Exposure Actions taken that increase or decrease liability of an individual or a group.
"You know I haven't checked my email so there could be a bomb lying there – but there's only so much you can do to manage your virtual environment and still be able to be able to communicate appropriately."
17. Prioritization The need to organize or deal with something according to

its priority.

"Like I have these three times a day leadership calls right now .. and I have to be on to represent the my group even if I have no updates."

18. Focus

The ability or inability to stay focused.

"Sometimes if I find myself being too distracted I will physically turn away from the computer so I can focus on what is being said on the phone."

19. Connected

The physical or emotional act of being connected to work or to personal life through technology. References to being plugged into a network.

"Also there's the capability of expanding my relationship base to the fact that I'm working and managing and organizing workforces around the globe versus being tied to a centralized work location."

Table 1: Coding Themes and Core Categories

Core Themes			
Categories	Time Stacking	Participation Predications	Performance
1. Time	X	o	o
2. Feelings & attitudes		o	X
3. Norms and Expectations	o	X	o
4. Barriers		X	o
5. Action	o	X	o
6. Logistics	X	o	o
7. Expectations		o	X
8. Channels and Mediums	X	o	o
9. Compartmentalization	X	o	o
10. Efficiency	X	o	o
11. Artifacts		X	o
12. Accountability	o	o	X
13. Presence	o	o	X
14. Control	X	o	o
15. Roles	o	o	X
16. Exposure	o	X	o
17. Prioritization	X	o	o
18. Focus	o	o	X
19. Connected	o	o	X

"X" central to core theme; "o" informs core theme

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