Aligning IS Research and Practice:
A Research Agenda
for Virtual Work

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ABSTRACT

Recent advances in information technologies have led organizations to diversify their organizational structures. One of the most prominent trends in this diversification is to conduct work in distributed or virtual environments. Distributed work alternatives are numerous, but the common characteristic that defines these alternatives is the physical separation of employees from each other and/or their organization's workplace. Several corporations have reported their efforts, successes, and failures at implementing some form of distributed work. Practitioners face a number of issues when considering virtual work alternatives. However, research does not seem to successfully help in understanding and solving some of these key issues. This paper attempts to develop a new and broader research agenda that takes into account emerging issues and concerns of practitioners, existing published work, and interdisciplinary perspectives on the topic. In doing so, emerging trends in virtual work and supporting technologies are explored.

Keywords: *Virtual work, distributed work, academic vs. practice, research recommendations*

INTRODUCTION

Virtual or distributed work environments are increasingly employed by organizations. These environments include geographically distributed work teams, global project teams, inter-organizational teams, and non-traditional work environments such as virtual organizations, telecommuting (telework), hoteling, and satellite work centers. While there is increased complexity and potential for problems, virtual work strategies allow organizations a great deal of flexibility to compete in a rapidly changing business environment. Existing research provides insights into distributed work environments, but does it deal with the major concerns and issues faced by managers? What problems need to be addressed before organizations can take better advantage of today's technologies in distributing their workforce? It seems that research has

not been successful at understanding and solving some of the key issues that practitioners face when considering virtual work alternatives ("the gap").

A gap between research and practice has always existed since the two areas' interests have different roots. Practicing managers are concerned with current challenges in their particular work settings while academics are concerned with developing more generalizable rules and understanding. In addition, there is an inherent time lag between the surfacing of challenges in the day-to-day activities of managers and the development of academic research addressing these concerns and challenges. While academics focus on understanding virtual work environments and practitioners focus on managing these environments, our discussions and research about this gap reveal that it is inappropriately large.

This paper has three objectives:

1. to examine the gap between research and practice in virtual work;
2. to investigate the factors leading to this gap; and,
3. to identify a research agenda to address emerging issues and concerns relevant to practice in virtual work.

We proceed by identifying current concerns of practitioners through descriptions of two companies' virtual work environments. We compare them with published research to establish the extent of the gap, and then investigate the reasons for this gap.

METHODOLOGY

Our study includes three steps. First, we reviewed the recent literature on virtual work and included a discussion of early work in the area of telecommuting and telework. Second, we compared the topics identified in our literature review with issues raised by practitioners in two organizations. Finally, we identified and discussed the gap found between the two views (academic and practitioner), and developed an agenda for future research.

VIRTUAL WORK LITERATURE

One of the biggest problems in conducting or discussing research on distributed work is that an abundance of definitions and terms used interchangeably (Bélanger & Collins, 1998; McCloskey & Igbaria, 1998; Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001). While there are other distributed work arrangements such as hotelling, neighborhood work centers and flextime, most of the literature has focused on telecommuting (telework), and virtual teams/organizations. There is overlap between these terms, and this is part of the difficulty with conducting research in the area. We use the term virtual work to represent work environments where individuals spend some time working in non-face-to-face (FTF) mode, using information and communication technologies to perform work activities.

In order to identify relevant academic research on telework and virtual work, we employed two different methods. First, we searched a number of sources for articles. We performed searches on ABI/Inform using the keywords virtual work, distributed work, telework, and telecommuting. We concentrated on the years 1998 to 2001 since research prior to 1998 has been summarized in several recent literature reviews (discussed in a later section). We focused on mainstream IS journals targeted to the MIS community[2]. In addition, we investigated the Academy of Management jour-

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