Chapter IX

Exploring the Vision of “Anytime, Anywhere” in the Context of Mobile Work

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This chapter explores the vision of “anytime, anywhere” in the context of mobile work. The exploration is done empirically. Using qualitative research methods, we studied to what extent the work tasks they do are dependent on time and place. We analyzed the data using a 2x2 matrix, with the two axes “time” and “space,” which both have the categories “dependent” and “independent.” One of the four situations is “anytime, anywhere,” while the other three are dependent on time, place or both. We found instances of work in all four categories. Some traveling seems very difficult to escape, simply because there are places that staff need to visit physically to do their job. For example, to repair a telephone pole, you need to go there. We also found there are timeframes that staff cannot escape. For example, rebooting parts of the telephone network has to be done at night. Lastly, there are work tasks that seem pretty much independent of time and space, e.g., scheduling and rescheduling of activities. Accordingly, the vision of “anytime, anywhere” is not easy to realize in the case of the mobile workers we studied.

A PARADOX?

The adoption of Internet technologies, mobile phones, etc., have increased and in a sense made the world smaller. Compared to 10 years ago, it is today much easier to communicate with remote sites, and the frequency of communication in many organizations has increased accordingly. Some people have even talked about “the global village” (Preece, 1994).

A parallel trend is that people travel more than they used to do. According to predictions, this trend will sustain, and even increase. For example, the national road agency of Sweden reports the number of flights will increase by a factor of four over
the next 10 years. How can it be that the global village is so mobile? If people can interact independent of time and space, why then do they spend more and more time traveling? Is not that a paradox?

Reviewing the literature on the topic, we find no research that has explored this seeming paradox. Authors are either concerned with remote interaction (e.g., Ellis et al., 1991; Brave, Ishii & Dahley, 1998; McDaniel, 1996; Kuzuoka, 1992; Tang & Minneman, 1991) or mobility (e.g., Luff & Heath, 1998; Bejerano & Cidon, 1998; Porta et al., 1996). Furthermore, research on mobility has mainly dealt with technology issues, e.g., limited battery life, unreliable network connections, varying channel coding and characteristics, volatile access points, risk of data loss, portability and location discovery (e.g., Bhagwat, Satish & Tripathi, 1994; Dearle, 1998; Francis, 1997; Varshney, 1999). Accordingly, no research so far has explored the relation between, on one hand “the global village,” with its idea that distance plays no role, and on the other hand the trend of increased mobility. How do the two trends hang together?

In order to investigate the question empirically, we conducted an empirical study of mobile telecommunication engineers in a Swedish company. Using qualitative research methods, we studied to what extent the work tasks they do are dependent on time and place. We analyzed the data using a 2x2 matrix, with the two axes “time” and “space,” which both have the categories “dependent” and “independent.” One of the four situations is “anytime, anywhere,” while the other three are dependent on time, place or both.

We found instances of work in all four categories. Some traveling seems very difficult to escape, simply because there are places that staff need to visit physically to do their job. For example, to repair a telephone pole you need to go there. We also found there are timeframes that staff cannot escape. For example, rebooting parts of the telephone network has to be done at night. Lastly, there are work tasks that seem pretty much independent of time and space, e.g., scheduling and rescheduling of activities. Accordingly, the vision of “anytime, anywhere” is not easy to realize in the case of the mobile workers we studied.

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows: The next section contains a background describing the two trends of the evolving global village, i.e. anytime, anywhere distributed and co-located work, and mobility as work on the move. Then in the next section we present the theoretical framework. In the next section we introduce the empirical study, i.e., mobile service work at Telia Nära. That section also presents the main results from the study. We do so by taking Ellis et al. (1991) dimensions of time and place and then draw upon a model of dependencies and independencies of those two dimensions when it comes to the case of the mobile service technicians at Telia Nära. So, in this section the vision of anytime, anywhere is contrasted to its opposites, e.g., particular time, particular place dependent work. In the final section we present the conclusion of the chapter.

BACKGROUND: THE GLOBAL VILLAGE AND MOBILITY

In this section, we describe in more detail the vision of “anytime, anywhere” and the trend of mobility.
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