Chapter 9
Mapping the Workspace of a Globally Distributed "Agile" Team

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative activities have become an important consideration of contemporary workspace design, and this is especially in software development companies as teams work to innovate products and customer experiences. Meanwhile, globally distributed virtual teams have also grown more common, but collaborating across time zones presents a new set of challenge to navigate. To address some of these challenges, many organizations are also implementing more agile information design strategies. Architecting user-friendly work environments that support collaboration for globally distributed virtual teams practicing agile methodologies is not a simple task, however. This article reports results from a workplace study of a distributed team of information experience designers at a multinational software company as the team worked through reorganization of their internal processes and workflow. The case study illustrates which environmental design features caused disruptions and contradictions for the team as they participated in project work.

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative activities have become an important consideration of contemporary workspace design, and this is especially in software development companies as teams work to innovate products and customer experiences. Meanwhile, globally distributed virtual teams have also grown more common, but collaborating across time zones presents a new set of challenge to navigate, such as worker attitudes toward technology, approaches to intercultural and interpersonal communication, and developing a universal information architecture in support of a project. To address some of these challenges, many organizations are also implementing new project management strategies, such as agile software development. Architecting user-friendly work environments that support collaboration for globally distributed

virtual teams practicing agile methodologies is not a simple task, however. This article reports a portion of results from a larger workplace study of a distributed team of information experience designers at a multinational software company as the team worked through reorganization of internal processes and workflow. The results of the study specifically address the architecture of the team's workplace environment at "MSDC" (pseudonym assigned to the company). Also, this case study illustrates which environmental design features caused disruptions and contradictions for the team as they participated in project work. This research is valuable because today's cross-functional teams often require flexible ways of working and require environments that are adaptive to the emerging needs of a project as agile iteration and ideation unfolds. The article begins by discussing MSDC's background and then reviews existing literature on workplace design and agile workflow. Then, the article addresses research methods and analytical procedures. Finally, the article reports the results of the study and concludes with a discussion of future research considerations. Using this organization, the article will help readers understand what environmental design features disrupt and contradict agile methods at MDSC as they are extended online.

BACKGROUND OF MSDC

MSDC is a large multinational software development company with offices all across the world. This study took place at an office in the southeastern United States where many of the technical communicators on the team were co-located. The technical communicators and their managers were undergoing reorganization, and as a result, the technical communicators' job title was changing to "information experience designer." Their job function was also changing to include more cross-functional involvement on teams and to include more collaboration and collaborative design methods. Management wanted employees to perform this collaboration face-to-face using "high-touch," physical activity, such as affinity diagramming a customer's journey. Their goal for adopting a more collaborative approach was to deliver just-in-time product information and documentation. As the manager of the organization noted in an interview, "One thing that is a challenge for us is that now we are in a new organization, and we are being asked to shift what we produce, how we produce it, and how we work." For example, the manager also explained, "So we are right now in a transitional phase where the language sometimes that's being used may not mean much to them because they haven't experienced it yet. Even the words 'design thinking,' everybody knows what it means, but if you are on a project, you run a workshop, or you've gone through the process, you have a different appreciation for what that means than if it is just a concept."

MSDC had several ongoing initiatives to make the employee working environment more adaptive to agile processes. One such idea was hoteling, which has historically been used by corporations since the 1990s. When hoteling, employees lease at no monetary cost, a place at the office based on need, collaborators, and project. All employees have a place to work, but they do not work at the same desk or in the same office every day, instead choosing the location of their work based on which physical space best supports their activity. Each area is reserved as needed. Other initiatives in motion were flexible rooms, which could be designed for a given activity. If a team wanted to reserve a space, for instance, they could order the sort of room they needed. MSDC was also creating bring-your-own-device (BYOD) open floor plans where cubicles were replaced with oversized chairs and docking stations to connect to the organization's network. Ultimately, MSDC seemed interested in creating flexible working environments that could be adapted for various activities, communication styles, and projects. The company used a combination of hardware and software to give employees access to project work over secure servers.

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