



## **Chapter 12**

# **Sloan 2001: A Virtual Odyssey**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The “virtual phenomenon,” as it has been labeled is eliciting considerable interest these days. The literature on this topic is currently quite broad, representing a diversity of views and definitions, and differing by unit of analysis (individual, group, project, organization, network) as well as orientation of commentator (strategy, organization design, human resource, team development, technology management) (Boudreau, Loch, Robey and Straub, 1998; Castells, 1996; Davenport and Pearlson, 1998; Lipnack and Stamps, 1997; Mowshowitz, 1997; Nohria and Berkley, 1994; Townsend, DeMarie and Hendrickson, 1998). While much speculation about the kinds of changes likely to be associated with shifts to virtual ways of working and organizing has been widespread, there is also a great shortage of empirical data about what changes are actually occurring, how, when, why, and with what consequences.

In this chapter, we provide an account of the emergence of a virtual community following a shift in institutional work practice from a traditional process to one that was primarily electronic. In the 1998/99 MBA Admissions season, the Sloan School of Management moved from a primarily paper-based application process to an entirely Web-based application process. From the Admissions Office point of view, this shift to on-line admissions was intended to be a relatively contained and simple change in medium to reduce costs in one part of the process (in order to allow greater spending on another part) and to simplify work processes in the office, as well as to reinforce Sloan’s image of technological innovativeness. However, this shift was

anything but contained, and we will describe how it set in motion a whole series of further changes, both in the work of the Admissions staff, and in the lives of the students applying to and admitted by the school. In a matter of months, an extensive virtual community emerged, with many members of the newly admitted Class of 2001 creating and contributing to an on-line community which took on a life of its own. While many of these changes were interdependent, building on and influencing each other, most were also unplanned, emerging spontaneously from participants' action in the moment.

This emergent process of change has been identified in the literature as an alternative to the more dominant model that portrays change as planned, episodic, and discontinuous (Mintzberg, 1987; Weick and Quinn, 1999). It has also been used to characterize a series of ongoing and situated improvisations observed by Orlikowski (1996) in her study of organizational change enabled by the use of a groupware technology. We believe that the notions of emergence and situated improvisation can help us make sense not only of the changes we observed in the shift to an on-line application process but it can help us more generally make sense of the kinds of changes likely to be associated with shifts to virtual modes of organizing. Because the phenomenon of virtuality is so new and unprecedented, there is considerable ambiguity in what it means in practice to be working or operating virtually. Given this, we might expect organizations to experiment with and learn from a variety of virtual experiences. An analytic framework of emergence and improvisation would more easily account for such diversity and experimentation in practice than alternative models of change that rely more on assumptions of inertia, intentionality, and intervention (Weick and Quinn, 1999).

Our account of the changes associated with the shift in medium by the Sloan School's Admissions Office is drawn from multiple sources: open-ended interviews, texts (paper and electronic), and a survey. We interviewed the five key members of the Sloan School's Admissions Office, working at various levels and with various functional responsibilities. In addition, we interviewed ten members of the Sloan Class of 2001, some during on-campus orientation and before the start of the academic year (August 1999), some during the first semester (September – October 1999), and some (including two interviewed earlier) at the beginning of the second semester (February 2000). These interviews were examined for key activities, events, and outcomes. We examined two primary types of textual data: the process documentation of the Sloan School's Admissions Office (both paper-based and electronic), and the electronic archive of the Sloan Class of 2001 Yahoo! Club and newsletter, representing the asynchronous electronic communication of the Sloan Class of 2001 virtual community from March 31, 1999 to

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