

## Chapter 12

# An Office on the Go: Professional Workers, Smartphones and the Return of Place

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, the authors examine how senior managers, as professional workers, in a leading ICT company use smartphones, according to new configurations of time and space. Of special interest is how smartphones act as comforting handheld consoles without being rooted in physical location. Three non-physical places, as spatial nodes, are presented: pause in the temporal current, place as a function of the intensity of communication, and place in terms of becoming rooted by felt value. The authors argue that highlighting non-physical places as structures emanating from the use of smartphones is an important variable to account for when studying how professionals use smartphones, both in instrumental and non-instrumental terms.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones have evolved from being used largely for oral communication and information transfer, to handheld personal devices also used for accessing emails and Internet sites, as well as retrieving and storing all kinds of digital data. Expanding from being a mobile phone to becoming an integrated handheld wireless digital service provider – a smartphone. In line with other ICT-

applications, smartphones let us move away from traditional office structures towards increasingly mobile and flexible management and workforce (Wellman, 2001; Kakihara & Sorensen, 2002) where multiple tasks are engaged simultaneously, practices coordinated and synchronized in new ways, and performed at higher speed (Townsend, 2000).

Mobile computing activities facilitate information management on the move (Wiredu, 2007,

p. 123; Kakihara et al., 2004; Cousins & Robey, 2005). The conventional argument is that mobile phones are no longer telephones linked to a certain place (in an office, a house, etc; cf. García-Montes, 2006) in which a person is inserted. For that reason, place has been argued as becoming less relevant when social and work-related transactions can be carried out in spaces. Harvey (1989) even argues that communication technologies “compress” time and space with the potential to eliminate characteristics of place. However, even if Alfred Marshall asserted already in his 1890 treatise, *The Principles of Economics*, that in economic life the influence of time is more fundamental than the influence of space, time still needs to be understood together with human notions of space and place.

Spatiotemporal configurations and their applications are well studied areas. This study follows the approach that temporal issues does not mean that place loses its meaning and vanishes into thin air in an accelerating flow of events (e.g. Giddens, 1990, p. 18). Rather the opposite; previous research about mobile computing noticeably accentuates the importance of spatial dimensions and their close affinity to time. Cousins and Robey (2005), for example, not only show that agency in organizations is affected by physical locations (e.g. home, road, office etc.), but also that different boundaries are quite clear for the (nomadic) agents, which allowed them to use segments of time in a wide range of spaces more productively. Furthermore, Sørensen and Pica (2005) stress the need to study the relationships between the situational aspects of work, the institutional context of work and the use of mobile technologies supporting work (see also Lee, 1999; Mazmanian, Yates & Orlikowski, 2006; Prasopoulou, Pouloudi & Panteli, 2006; Wiberg & Ljungberg, 2001; Wireu & Sørensen, 2006). While these studies have yielded important insights about place relatedness in virtual work, few have explicitly addressed human time and space configurations in professional mobile communication, and studies of time-space con-

figurations that highlight spatial aspects of mobile organizing are particularly scant (cf. Lee & Whitley 2002; Schultze & Boland, 2000; Wiberg & Ljungberg, 2001).

What is undeveloped and somewhat neglected in previous discussions on mobile phone use is not only that ICT build relationships between places through processes of time and space compression, but that these mobile influences also tend to undermine singular stable and unitary conceptions of place. This study therefore argues that patterns of smartphone use should not only be described in terms of explicating different dimensions of physical places, and their relation to temporal, and contextual properties (e.g., office, road, home, etc., cf. Cousins & Robey, 2005). Instead, in the spirit of Jacussi et al.’s (2006) headline plea “...taking complexity seriously in IS research” a theoretical approach is proposed in this study that highlights how different physical, as well as non-physical, nodal places, may be manifested in contemporary smartphone use as emergent structures enacted by professionals’ daily use of smartphones. This is the first aim of this paper. The second aim is then to explore how nodal places as theoretical categories can be incorporated into the analysis of time-space configurations of mobile technology use in a professional context.

This paper’s empirical material is primarily based on a qualitative and interpretative investigation of how managers as professional workers in a world-leading Nordic ICT company adopt and incorporate smartphones in their daily life. By professional workers we mean actors that have to deal with increasingly complex work and are able to flexibly make decisions and interact with a large number of people (cf. Kakihara & Sørensen, 2002; Sørensen & Gibson, 2004; Schön, 1983).

The paper is organized in the following way: The next section will further exploit how time-space can be configured in human place and space, and how these socially-constructed concepts are employed in this paper. The following section addresses methodological issues. There subsequently

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