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What is This?

Computer-Mediated Communication and Remote Management

Integration or Isolation?

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The use of intranets and e-mails to communicate with remote staff is increasing rapidly within organizations. For many companies this is viewed as a speedy and cost-effective way of keeping in contact with staff and ensuring their continuing commitment to company goals. This article highlights the problems experienced by staff when managers use intranets and e-mails in an inappropriate fashion for these purposes. Issues of remoteness and isolation will be discussed, along with the reports of frustration and disidentification experienced. However, it will be shown that when used appropriately, communication using these technologies can facilitate shared understanding and help remote staff to view their company as alive and exciting. Theoretical aspects will be highlighted and the implications of these findings will be discussed.

Keywords: remote management, e-mail, intranet, organizational attachment

The increased use of technology to communicate with staff, such as e-mail and company intranets, may have fundamentally changed the content and context of remote working (O'Mahoney & Barley, 1999). Indeed, the take up of these forms of communication is posited to have increased the incidence of remote working, with some literature predicting that technology will enable new working practices such as teleworking and new organizational forms such as the networked or virtual organization (Fulk & deSanctis, 1995).

It has been suggested that managing staff in these circumstances may be fundamentally different (e.g., Davenport & Pearlson, 1998; Platt & Page, 2001). However, there has been little research on the effect of this form of working on relationships between the individual and the organization, or on the use of technology within remote management (Ellison, 1999; Kurland & Egan, 1999; O'Mahoney & Barley, 1999).

This article specifically addresses the issue of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in remote management and the effect on individual attachments to organizations. After clarifying key terms and discussing relevant theory, a brief overview will be given of research carried out by the first author that illustrates the potential pitfalls of remote management through CMC.

DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Telecommuting and Remote Work

One of the difficulties with assessing research in this area is the range of definitions employed, particularly as the term *telecommuting* is used loosely to refer to many forms of remote work. Kurland and Egan (1999) defined telecommuting broadly as "working outside the conventional workplace." However, O'Mahoney and Barley (1999) suggested that telecommuting should be more tightly defined as home-working using telecommunications, and argued that remote work should not be conflated with telecommuting, particularly due to differences in context. We agree with this distinction as much research suggests that telecommuting from home can be an isolating experience (Chapman, Sheehy, Heywood, Dooley, & Collins, 1995; Fitzer, 1997; but see also Belanger, 1999), whereas many remote workers have substantial opportunities for socializing. There is also evidence to suggest crucial differences between those working remotely some of the time and those permanently distanced (Duxbury & Neufeld, 1999). The opportunity to reintegrate with one's organization and colleagues is more readily available to those who return to the office 2 or 3 days a week. Staff working from satellite offices are also likely to have some access to colleagues and structural aspects of the organization to enable them to feel a sense of belonging, although whether this affects their attachment to the central organization is unclear. Fully mobile staff are likely to have opportunities to socialize with many clients but not to identify with aspects of their employing organization. Staff working on a client site are likely to be socialized into the client way of working and have different demands on their time and relationships. Research also suggests a difference between remote secondary workers, such as clerical or catering staff, and professional staff (Purcell & Purcell, 1998), due to differences in power and the meaning of work. We would propose that researchers distinguish between the categories of workers shown in Table 1, including distinguishing between full- and part-time remote.

In this article, we will be concentrating on professional staff who work full-time remote from their offices, either on a client base or at satellite offices.

Remote Management

Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest that predictors of organizational identification include the extent of contact between the individual and the organization, the visibility of organizational membership, and the attractiveness of that membership. Virtual work may affect all of these due to spatial and psychological distancing. In addition, remote workers may have difficulty identifying with the organization, due to the lack of exposure to organizational structures and symbols (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999). Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, and Garud (2001) suggested that perceived work-based social support can have a significant effect on organizational identification in individuals with low need for affiliation. This indicates that management communications may be important to maintaining feelings of attachment.

Some of the concerns of managers with respect to remote management are how to measure productivity and build trust (Kurland & Egan, 1999). Building trusting relationships requires much open communication on both sides, which is more difficult to achieve at a distance (Platt & Page, 2001).

Thus, an awareness of the organization may be more important precisely in the circumstances in which it is least available. Handy (1995) suggested that there is a paradox: The

TABLE 1
Forms of Remote Working

Location	Main Category	Temporal Frame	Work Type
Home-based	Telecommuters	Full- or Part-time remote	Professional/secondary
Satellite offices	Satellites		
Mobile	Mobile		
Client-based	Remote		

more virtual the relationship, the more face-to-face contact is needed. Davenport and Pearlson (1998) argued that managing people in these circumstances requires virtual-specific supervision skills and that training should be given. Good communication is traditionally considered to be a key management skill, and Staples, Hulland, and Higgins (1998) suggested that being able to use information technology (IT) effectively to aid communication is vital in remote management. However, what is effective use, and to what extent can electronic communication replace more traditional forms?

Intranet and E-Mail Communication

In principle, electronic communication should facilitate remote working. Time of day, geographical distance, and physical presence are no longer important. The systems today are speedy and cost-effective. There has been a substantial increase in the use of intranets and e-mails within organizations to communicate with staff. Indeed, a new term, business to employee (B2E), has been coined to emphasize the way that technology may be used to benefit the organization-employee relationship. So this type of technology may be used as a facilitator to increase communication with existing remote workers, as well as a driver to increase the extent of remote working within organizations. However, there are concerns regarding the extent to which technology can replace traditional forms of communication.

Some theories suggest that the reduction of social cues inherent in electronic media means that e-mails and intranets are unsuitable for certain forms of communication, particularly ambiguous or relationship building forms (Schmitz & Fulk, 1991). It is suggested that managers should choose their communication medium carefully, depending on the task (Daft & Lengel, 1986). However, there is evidence that socioemotional content can be found in e-mail messages, and that equivocal tasks can be handled by e-mail due to the ongoing nature of communication and the time for reflection inherent in the medium (e.g., El-Shinnaway & Markus, 1997; Walther, 1996). On the other hand, there are clearly a variety of aspects of organizational life that are not (yet) replaced by technology, including the understanding of corporate culture, creation of loyalty and identification, and a range of socialization processes (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998).

The ease and speed with which e-mail messages can be sent and intranet sites developed has led to concerns regarding information overload. Indeed, this has been a key concept in practitioner literature for the past 20 years—generally linked to worker well-being (negatively) and general work overload (DeSanctis & Monge, 1998).

If staff are finding it difficult to identify with a remote organization, cannot relate to their manager, and yet receive too much seemingly irrelevant information, might this affect their

feelings of attachment as well? Can intranets and e-mails help staff to feel more a part of the organization, or might they hinder?

Investigating Remote Management in IT Outsourcing

The issues of how managers use CMC to manage remote workers and the effect this has on employees' identification with the organization were explored as part of a larger project investigating IT outsourcing conducted by the first author.

Semistructured interviews were held with 40 IT consultants, managers, and project staff, all of whom were working away from their employer's office on a client or a satellite site. Follow-up interviews were held with 18 participants approximately 6 months later to enable analysis of change. As well as working remotely, many of these staff had been through an outsourcing transition at some stage (their department had been transferred to the systems house). Although an interview guide was used as a check, care was taken to ensure that the interviews followed the flow preferred by the participant (Kvale, 1996). The types of questions asked ranged from discussions about the context in which they worked, their attachments to the client and their employer, and their perceptions of the usefulness of technology to facilitate communications and attachment. All of the interviews were transcribed in full.

Hermeneutic analysis was carried out (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Skoldberg, 1998) with a view to gaining an understanding of participants' experiences in context. This required repeated in-depth reading of the transcripts and notes regarding ideas, thoughts, and feelings of the researcher and her impressions of the participants' understandings. Participants are referred to by number and a 1 or 2 indicating first or second interviews (e.g., P01-1). The analysis reported here focuses on how the staff perceived their relationship with the company and the use of IT in the context of remote management.

RESULTS

Four main areas of concern were identified with respect to remote workers' experiences of computer-mediated management: information overload, difficulties of remote access, lack of thought, and attachment and belonging. These are discussed in more detail below.

Information Overload

Most participants discussed the issue of receiving too much information: The term *information overload* was well known with this type of sample, and this may have influenced the discussions (although it was not an explicit question in the interviews). However, in many cases, of particular note was the way they felt issues of information overload reflected on the organization:

> P: We are getting like, it's almost getting to the stage, oh no here's another one let's bin it. Don't even bother reading it. Which is a shame, I mean you can be over . . .
> I: Overload.
> P: That, that's a symptom of the American influence. (P29-1)

Many other participants also admitted they got to the stage where most messages were ignored. The implications of this loss of communication are probably greater in remote management than in traditional forms.

Difficulties of Remote Access

Some participants said they had difficulties using the company intranet due to firewalls and other technical difficulties, but even when they could access, the feeling was they did not have the time or even that it was unfair on the client:

> Erm, newsletters tend to be, you get sort of things saying, the company has done this, da di da di da, look at this Internet site, and of course if you are on, if you are off-site you dial in to do that and it's a bit slow and tedious, and I do sometimes think I shouldn't be running up [client]'s phone bill all the time. (P17-1)

Others suggested that it was too much trouble to find the information or that they were really too busy to take time out to search the system. Yet there were indications from the organization that the intention was to put more information on the intranet.

Lack of Thought

A number of participants suggested that the problems with technology use were more to do with lack of thought. Sometimes an individual manager was blamed, but often this seemed to reflect a general organizational phenomenon, suggesting the organization itself was uncaring:

> And when my uncle died, I went to him and said I would be having a couple of days off y'know, and he says, "E-mail me." [Pulls a face and both laugh.] I mean. Really. A lot of their middle management within Newco are techies, and their man-management skills are zero. (P09-2)

Although these discussions supported the concept of media richness, what is particularly interesting is the way the individual managers and the company culture tend to be blamed for the use of technology rather than the technology itself. Perhaps there is an implicit assumption that "we all know" that some issues should be discussed personally, and that ignoring this shows a total disregard for the people one is managing. In turn, this may be reducing the individual's feeling of attachment to the organization.

In two of the organizations, it was clear that the top management had adopted the view that they should communicate regularly with staff, but perhaps due to the way the briefings were written, these communications seemed to backfire:

> I mean there are all sorts of strange e-mails that come through, I mean [key executive] is one of these guys that sends out e-mails at regular intervals, you've probably heard this story already. Erm, barking mad I think, of most of them, I think. (P16-1)

This form of communication was mentioned by most participants, and in all cases what was noticed was the poor content and lack of relevance rather than what the e-mails might have been trying to convey. One participant suggested they were like "streams of consciousness." Another stated that they only succeeded in proving how remote the senior management was from the staff, and whereas these may be taken as interesting at first, as one participant put it, "They become a joke after a while."

This suggests that very basic guidelines regarding use of e-mails are being ignored, and also highlights the effect that inappropriate use of e-mails can have on employees even when the communication may have been well-intentioned.

Included in these discussions were the general difficulties of getting across something like culture when relying only on technology. This mix of information overload, lack of socialization, and potentially poor use of the technology (in terms of copying to all staff, irrelevant information, lack of thought put into content, etc.) seemed in many cases to affect directly the sense of belonging the participants felt for the organization.

Attachment and Belonging

There was evidence that the nature of the communication could actually make the entire organization feel less credible and therefore reduce the attractiveness of belonging. Communications from senior staff attract particular criticism:

> No, I mean you are exposed to so much, they have, a riotous thing in Newco, they have this chairman who flies round the world and sends us all e-mails. Right, so I just, and he, that actually removed almost all credibility, y'know, so we had, "Oh did he send one to you as well," and they're just, well, we don't read them in the end, I don't think anybody reads them, but what it does is it, it makes the, the other stuff, less credible, it, removes credibility from something that might be helpful. (P9-1)

Furthermore, it was clear that putting one type of message on the intranet (espoused values) and not enacting that message in practice could have a very negative effect. After discussing how difficult it was to build up a new social and political network in the organization as a remote worker, one participant stated,

> Yeah, and it's contradictory, because if you read all the appraisal stuff, about how you sort of appraise people, and manage your staff, it comes across as a very caring ethos, but in reality, and I don't know whether that's just us, again, in our pockets, y'know, or whether it's sort of endemic in the company, this, sort of, treat you like a machine. (P33-1)

The whole issue of developing or maintaining an attachment with an organization that is remote was spontaneously discussed by many participants, and for all there was an emphasis on how their manager and coworkers could help or hinder. The following excerpt gives an indication of the difficulties: Having discussed how physically meeting people is far more important than receiving e-mails from on high, this participant stated,

> P: I might have felt totally different about it if I was working in a Newco building.
> I: I wondered about that.
> P: We are off-site. We are off-site, so we are somewhat distanced if you like, from the organization as a whole. We get visits from senior managers sometimes, sometimes they might acknowledge you, other times they might look through you. Erm, but the day-to-day managers of the project are on site and they are the ones that make you feel a part of the organization. (P07-2)

Although this participant expressed in some ways an attachment to the organization, there is clear dissatisfaction (note the "other times they might look through you"). This participant, and many others, reiterated the importance of physical contact and the opportunity to socialize in their sense of belonging to the organization. This is the second interview of a transitioned manager, and there is much more awareness, at this stage, of being remote from the organization. It was noticeable by the second interviews that isolation was actually increasing; indeed, some discussed how they were beginning to feel abandoned. Having spo-

ken about high levels of supervision and an extensive hierarchy at his old company, this participant outlined how little managing he receives and stated,

> Erm, but it would be nice if, just once a month they came over and we had a little meeting, and we went over sort of what they were expecting, and how well you think we were doing or how badly they think we are doing, what he wanted us to do in the next month. A little bit of guidance from a higher level would be nice [sarcastic tone]. (P18-2)

Although this type of situation could be put down to poor management, it is likely that the managers concerned felt that their e-mails were sufficient. The literature suggests that in a virtual organization less monitoring, increased trust, and a flatter hierarchy are more likely and these changes seemed to be occurring in the organizations studied. The issue appears to be that the staff were unused to this type of organization and had no way to gain an understanding of it—the socialization aspects were missing. Interestingly, staff who had not been transferred and who could be classed as already socialized into the organization expressed similar problems understanding the changes in their organization while they were working remotely. This highlights the importance of ongoing socialization as a process that can be difficult to access while remote.

So many participants spoke of their feelings of isolation and remoteness, even when working in satellite offices, that it is clear that employee attachment and identification with their employing organization is a central issue in this form of working. Some, working in close-knit teams, felt a part of that team but not a part of the organization, suggesting that there may be problems with relying on this level of attachment. It should be noted, however, that although there were problems with the use of technology, there were instances in both the first and second interviews where participants felt it really did help them in their work and their attachment to the organization:

> P: That the company, as an organization, is far more alive than the Oldco, ever seemed to be.
> I: How, what makes you feel that?
> P: The e-mails, for all I say about e-mails, and there are newsletters and things like that, but you know that things are, you can feel that things are happening. Erm, even though the details of that information don't come down properly through your line manager. (P9-1)

Here the participant is aware of the inconsistency between her earlier discussion of problems with the use of e-mail and her comment that it can be useful. This is also expressed in her side comment about the line manager, whom she feels should help to back up the written communications. Her opinion of his inability to do so is clear throughout the discussions, highlighting again the importance of the line manager in these remote individual-organizational relationships.

The steepest decline over time in feelings of belonging occurred for the participants who had little or no access to technology. For them, the isolation was complete. Not surprisingly, these participants were also quite open in discussing their intentions to leave the organization.

DISCUSSION

Whether CMC was regarded as a sufficiently rich medium seemed to be important only in extreme cases: Participants felt appraisals and reprimands should be carried out face-to-face, but most other communications appeared acceptable through e-mail. However, the effect of inept use of CMC may be critical, as it increases perceptions of uncaring, perhaps mechani-

cal management and influences perceptions of the entire organization. This, along with the reduction in socialization and lack of physical contact with other members of the organization, has an effect on individual-organizational attachment.

Of even more significance was information overload and the sending of incoherent or irrelevant messages. The rational basis of media choice is certainly cast into doubt, with support shown here for the influence of organizational norms and symbolic force (Prasad, 1993). It is likely that the increased use of CMC may have improved the acceptability of the medium, at least for these high-technology organizations. These types of theory need to take more account of differences across groups and of changes in organizational practice.

The analysis confirmed the view in attachment and socialization literature that there would be difficulties identifying with the organization and feelings of remoteness and isolation. Whether mental maps of organizations are facilitated by intranets may well depend on their actual usage as well as their ease of use. Certainly, most of the participants in this study suggested that they had a poorer understanding of the organization because they were remote, supporting Davenport and Pearlson's (1998) view that many functions of physical organizations are not replaced by technology. Given the clear signs of negative forms of attachment, more research should be carried out on concepts such as schizo and disidentification (Elsbach, 1999).

The emphasis on good management and its apparent links to organizational attachment suggests that virtual specific skills may be needed, and more research should be carried out to assess these. Staples (2001) found that good practice modeling by managers was linked to feelings of self-efficacy and to higher performance and more positive job attitudes, including commitment, among remote workers. Although causal relationships are unclear due to the cross-sectional nature of their study, our longitudinal study suggests that effective management is indeed an influence on attachment, of which commitment is one facet. It is unclear from our research to what extent e-mails and intranets can help to develop attachment, although there were hints that it might be possible. However, links between poor practice in the use of these technologies and attachment and feelings of overload were clear.

Limitations

Although this was a relatively small sample compared to many questionnaire studies, for interpretative analysis this was a large sample to manage. However, a substantial amount of time and effort has been put into the analysis and the longitudinal nature of the study is a strength, allowing for some assessment of changes over time. The mix of the sample is quite broad, working in different types of projects for different systems houses, some on client sites or in satellite offices, which can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness.

It is often difficult in interviews to assess whether certain aspects did not come up because they were not explicitly sought. Alternatively, there is added confidence that participants have not been forced to comment on certain aspects because it has been requested of them, as in a questionnaire (Mishler, 1986). Only a small amount of actual talk has been included here, by necessity, but it is hoped that alternative readings can be made based on these, and discussions will be welcomed.

CONCLUSION

This article suggests that problems can arise from the (mis)use of communication technology in remote management. Excessive and inappropriate use of e-mail and intranets to communicate with remote staff can lead to poor perceptions of management and culture,

information overload, and increased isolation, including specific problems with socialization of newly transitioned staff. Research could usefully consider the attachment and socialization implications of an overreliance on communicating with staff through electronic means.

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