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# How to understand the organization of remote work with a processual approach focused on communication: the contribution of the CCO approach

*13<sup>th</sup> Organizations, Artifacts & Practices (OAP) Workshop*

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## **Historicity in Organization Studies:**

Describing events and actuality at the borders of our present

Axis 3: **Managerial instruments**, dispositives, their genealogies and relationships with larger collective activities

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## **Contextualization**

By challenging the spatiotemporal framework of work consisting of working in an office according to specific schedules, the health crisis of Covid-19 has turned the notion of 'remote work' upside down (Baruch, 2001; Golden, 2009; Katsabian, 2020). It is therefore urgent to update its scope in order to understand the new modes of organization and the transformations underway (Aroles, de Vaujany and Dale 2021). While there were already a few so-called 'officeless' organizations (Lai & Burchell, 2008) before 2020 (e.g., Fizzer, Buffer, or Nubik), these models were limited to certain sectors of activity (new technologies, consulting) and to a few start-ups (Estienne, 2005). Since then, a growing number of companies are choosing to go without offices and physical existence to save money and attract geographically dispersed talents in search of flexibility.

This research is drawn from my current thesis. I seek to explore the organizationally of an open work world, without falling into the trap of opportunism, considering the health circumstances experienced in recent months. To avoid this pitfall, the project emphasizes the choice of a communicative approach (Bencherki et al., 2022), the Constitutive Communication of the Organization (hereafter CCO) approach, which I propose to relate to a phenomenological approach inspired by Merleau-Ponty (1945), in order to understand how workers in officeless companies *'font corps'* remotely.

## **Focus and research question**

### **« *Faire corps* »: the question of the collective and the sensitive in organizational theory**

Taking remote work as an object of study inevitably means questioning the notion of organization. As a reminder, the word *organization* comes from the Latin noun *organum* and designates, in the 12th century, a musical instrument, the voice, a body organ. Thus, etymologically speaking, ‘to organize’ presents from the outset a sensitive, embodied dimension, which has nevertheless been forgotten or called into question with the massive shift to remote work during the pandemic. In this paper, stemming from my doctoral research, I seek to understand how individuals who work at a distance, without a common shared place, *font corps* at a distance. *Faire corps*, in French, can be understood in two ways: the embodied practices of people working at a distance (in the literal sense) and the practices aiming at the constitution of an organizational collective (in the figurative sense).

The notion of body also refers to the sensible, which, from the Latin *sensitis*, means ‘that which can be felt’, that which has the faculty to receive physical impressions. It echoes the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945). In *Phenomenology of the Perception*, he gives the following definition: ‘the sensible is what one seizes with the senses, but we know now that this "with" is not simply instrumental, that the sensory apparatus is not a conductor, that even at the periphery, the physiological impression is engaged in relations considered formerly as central’ (1945, p. 17). The sensible, according to Merleau-Ponty, is thus deeply relational: the body is not only object, but also a subject of action.

### **The CCO approach: Explaining an organizational phenomenon with a communicative approach**

The Constitutive Communication of Organizations (CCO) approach, originating from the work of the Montreal School (Bencherki, 2014; Taylor & Van Every, 2000) is considered part of the strong processual approaches (Langley et al., 2013), but with the particularity of being communication-centered. According to this perspective, communication is not the product of an organization, but a phenomenon actively participating in the organization's way of being and acting, it is its essence. In other words, the organization exists because there is communication (Cooren & Robichaud, 2010): language and texts define and co-create realities. This theoretical

lens helps to understand the organization without walls or physical or even temporal boundaries.

## Research design

To discuss key CCO concepts, I will present interview data from an exploratory fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2021, during Covid-19 crisis, with 18 remote workers based in Montreal, including some of them working for officeless companies, and the ongoing data from my thesis. These data will serve as a basis for discussing possible methodological avenues for CCO approaches. In particular, the analysis will focus on the daily practices of the respondents, whether it is to arrange their space, their time, or their practice in the online space with their peers. The CCO approaches thus represent a fertile ground both from a theoretical and methodological point of view for understanding how to ‘organize’ remote work. I will mainly rely on the following CCO premises:

- **Communication is relationship.** Communicating involves linking discourses, objects, texts, spaces, temporalities, individual and institutional actors, among others (Cooren, 2015).

- **Everything that exists presents itself according to different degrees of (im)materiality.** Communication is relation, and these relations materialize in a myriad of arrangements. According to this logic, the organization is thus a configuration of material relations. Materiality being a property of existence, and thus of all organizational phenomena, their study implies focusing on their materialization process (Cooren, 2020).

- **Organization of and through space.** Organization unfolds and is constructed through communication as an extended configuration of space-time (Vásquez and Cooren, 2013).

- **The concept of ventriloquism** (Cooren, 2010) allows us to understand how the organization ‘speaks’, exists and is transmitted through the voice of its members, to which it is superimposed.

## Contributions

The main goal of this paper is to operationalize the CCO concepts with an actual empirical field, and to combine it with a phenomenological lens. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's

phenomenology is a relevant grid for the role of the lived body and the embodiment of practices in organizational worlds (Küpers, 2014). By focusing on the sensible, the CCO concept of materialization processes (Cooren, 2020) would allow me to discuss different degrees of embodiment (Gherardi et al., 2018) in remote work. This would involve considering the emotions, affects (*sensu* Ashcraft, 2017, 2020), and feelings of remote people as taking part, in a relational and agential way, in the constitution of the organization. For example, an emotion is a non-human element that is certainly not tangible, but terribly important since it will animate (its Latin etymology is *motio*, which designates setting in motion) the person through whom it flows, will influence his or her behavior at work (speaking louder during a meeting, writing an email with a different tone), and thereby have consequences on the collective. Returning to the sensitive and to the affects allows us to get out of a mythological vision of the future of work, by bringing back the present experience to the center of our concerns.

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