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Towards a better quality of life at work: How to collectively define digital communication conventions

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Abstract. The consumption of digital services has increased and has negative effects on the quality of life at work and even on the health of employees. Some solutions, such as charters, have been considered to address these problems and standardize practices. However, these solutions are often rigid and not aligned with work practices. As a result, they are little or not used at all. Faced to these findings, we are interested in studying existing practices of defining digital communication conventions in an organization. This poster presents an ongoing case study within a French national public agency where most of the agents are nomadic workers. We are intended at involving these workers so that they can collectively negotiate conventions and dynamically handle these conventions to make possible an evolution of their work practices.

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Introduction

Emails have undoubtedly become part of communication practices. Everyday, a significant amount of emails is sent and received, causing information and communication overload (Whittaker et al., 1997). Employees frequently check their mailbox in order to avoid their saturation (Jackson et al., 2001, 2003; Dabbish and Kraut, 2006) or they have to extend the time spent working (Barley et al., 2011). The frequency of email consultation can cause an increase in psycho-social risks such as stress at work (De la Rupelle et al., 2014; Mark et al., 2012; Renaud et al., 2006), phenomena of overload (Bobillier-Chaumon and Triposelli, 2012; Whittaker and Sidner, 1996), or work intensification (Klein and Ratier, 2012). Apart from quantity problems, emails also present quality problems, such as a lack of details or information (Burgess et al., 2005; Friedman and Currall, 2003). In addition, the content of an email can provoke negative emotions such as stress, irritation, fear, anger or frustration (Gauducheau, 2012) and can convey verbal violence and mediated harassment (Gauducheau, 2012). Uncertainty about communication conventions like the expected response time (Denis and Assadi, 2005) or the absence of formality in messages (Akrich et al., 2001) can finally cause communication problems. Acknowledging these issues, we are interested in understanding how workers use digital tools and services to communicate with their co-workers, managers, and clients, what are the conventions that they put in place or are lacking of, and how could we support them to collectively define and adapt conventions in order to reach for a better quality of life at work.

In this paper, we present an ongoing case study within a French national public agency where most of the agents are nomadic workers (Su and Mark, 2008). Based on observations, interviews, collection of communication traces, and cultural probes, we aim at understanding their current practices in order to design a socio-technical system allowing to collectively elaborate and adapt communication conventions.

The remaining parts first review existing research on digital communication at work, nomadic work, mailbox disconnection, and charters put in place within organizations. Then, we describe our ongoing case study and its expected outcomes.

Related Work

For decades, the consumption of digital services such as shared digital agenda, messaging and enterprise social networks, collaborative platform, or project management systems has increased. Electronic mail in particular quickly became popular for its speed and simplicity in exchanging information (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991).

This possibility for workers to be reachable at any time has beneficial effects for companies. Indeed, the intensity and number of emails exchanged between employees promote performance and productivity : the more employees consult,

receive and respond to emails, the more efficient they are (Mano and Mesch, 2010). However, this accessibility encourages individuals to be reactive to interactions via messages, whether at work or not (Morand et al., 2019).

Originally asynchronous, email is gradually supporting synchronous communication; when new messages arrive in their mailbox, workers often have to interrupt themselves, which can fragment their activity (Denis and Assadi, 2005). Therefore, when an employee sends an email to their colleague, they have to take into consideration their activity and anticipate when they will receive a response. Indeed, if they send an email during working time to ask for help, the employee must anticipate that their colleague will be busy (they must be working on a task). In a way, the activity must appear “transparent”. In these situations, awareness plays an important role in supporting individuals understanding what their co-workers are doing and accordingly adjust their own activities (Gutwin and Greenberg, 2002). Being aware becomes complicated when workers work from home, or travel most of their working time (to meet colleagues, superiors on other sites, clients, etc. . .), or do not have a single head office and are responsible for carrying, managing and reconfiguring their work resources (Mark and Su, 2010).

Being reachable at any time conflicts with the wish of seeking a better work-life balance (Thompson, 2019; Reichenberger, 2018). Various strategies can be applied to limit an excessive use of emails and to disconnect from work. For example, some employees will not take their laptop charger with them to limit working time based on battery life or by simply turning off the work mobile phone (Créno and Cahour, 2016). Even if these strategies can be initiated by employees who wish to preserve their health and quality of life (Felio, 2014; Jauréguiberry, 2006, 2012; Prost and Zouinar, 2013), work organizations are becoming aware of the link between permanent connection and psycho-social risks (Carayol et al., 2013).

Indeed, to tackle the constant connections of their employees, some companies propose initiatives such as charters on how to use electronic messaging (Datchary and Gaglio, 2014). By applying them, these organizations hope to put in place best practices on how to handle digital communication. However, it has been proven that charters are generally not well known by the employees and even poorly followed (Carayol et al., 2013). Moreover, charters are generally rigid and impose communication standards (for example constraints on the days or times for sending emails) whereas communication practices are transforming and evolving. These solutions are then not well appropriated (Jensen, 2018). In addition to charters, technological solutions have been proposed to monitor and control data flows generated by individuals (Barakabitze et al., 2020) or to control the use of electronic mail after working hours via servers or dedicated software (Prost and Zouinar, 2015). Once again, other problems were noticed. First, these solutions are not always compatible with professional practices and their evolution. For example, if a system makes it inaccessible to check an inbox and to send messages after working hours, this can cause problems for employees who would like to process and communicate urgent information. Another limitation is the fact that

the deployment of these technical solutions creates a feeling of control without any real possibility of intervention.

This is the reason why it is essential to involve users in the design of a socio-technical system so that they can collectively negotiate and establish collective conventions, and to make these conventions evolve if necessary (Mark, 1997). Cabitza and Simone (2007) defined conventions as a "shared agreement and related practice that is either established or consolidated by usage". In fact, conventions are respected because it is worth it for everyone involved. By establishing conventions, an organization can come to an agreement on how to handle digital communication. Mark and Prinz (1997) identified sources of difficulties in establishing conventions as the lack of feedback (social and visual information) when people are at a distance. Additionally, establishing conventions may impact existing practices, and individuals may be reluctant to adjust their practices to suit those defined collectively.

Taking inspiration from this existing work, we are interested in better understanding the current ways in which workers deal with the use of digital communication systems to articulate their work, and how to support the emergence, definition and evolution of collective conventions on this use in order to improve their quality of life at work.

Case Study

We have partnered with a French public agency dedicated to accompanying companies (mainly very small businesses and small and medium-sized businesses) in improving the quality of life and working conditions of their employees. The agency is organized with a head office in Lyon gathering all the supporting functions (human resources, finances, information system. . .), and regional subsidiaries, each of them having a director managing a team of project managers who intervene within their "clients" offices. These interventions can consist of training sessions, and deployment of systems and/or methods to improve working conditions. The main expertise areas of the regional agencies are : home office (eligibility and negotiation criteria, workplaces and spaces, digital equipment and tools, organization of time and workload, etc.), psycho-social risks (stress, burn-out, etc.), gender equality, prevention management, seniors' employment (promote the sustainable employment of young people, retention in employment or recruitment of seniors and the transmission of skills and know-how).

Data collection

Our data collection for the Ile-de-France agency is organized as follows: we have started with six semi-structured interviews lasting one hour with project managers and the director to understand their profile (their background, training, seniority in the network, on which topics they work), their activities and work practices. We conducted interviews either in person within their agency or by video-conference.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. We then conducted a thematic analysis, for the moment based on the themes discussed during the interviews.

Project managers explained how they are contacted by the organizations with whom they work, what are the usual requests they face and how they respond to them. They explained the different moments when they exchange with their colleagues and their clients, and the modality of these exchanges. They also presented their different workplaces (such as home or co-working spaces) and their travel arrangements. By doing so, we got an understanding of the organization of their working days and the different artefacts they use to communicate and coordinate their work. In particular, they presented the way they manage their emails: when they consult them, how often, how they respond, and the strategies they use for their management.

Secondary data

This research is conducted as part of a larger research intervention in France, with colleagues from Toulouse who are working with the “Occitanie” (South-West of France) agency. We then have access to the data they have collected, which constitutes secondary data which nourishes our analysis since it is the same organization with the same type of workers but in a different region. The only differences lie in territorial and economic attractiveness, politics and regional issues. The data shared consists of interviews, observations, feedback from design workshops, photos of work environment layout (teleworking). This data will allow us to compare and cross-reference our results on the working practices of employees, what are the similarities or differences in their working practices, communication, travel, etc... Do they use the same strategies or artefacts?

Preliminary results

The regional subsidiary (based in Ile-de-France, Paris) in which we are conducting our study comprises a newly arrived (9 months ago) director, a deputy director (who is also a project manager), a management manager, nine project managers (among which three are newcomers), and a person in charge of communication. An interesting characteristic of this agency is that the director is looking for physical offices, as they are currently renting some rooms in a co-working building in the center of Paris. In addition, there are not enough offices or space to accommodate everyone (whether for agency workers or for invited guests). Partly due to this situation, most of the project managers are nomadic workers, working from their home, the shared offices, from their clients’ office, and travelling between these different places. They use a constellation of artefacts to organize and conduct their work and to articulate with their colleagues and clients. Some of these artefacts are officially supported by the headquarters, and others are put in place by the project managers themselves. There is no charter (either defined by the headquarter or locally) defining best practices in terms of digital mediation of

work. Indeed, employees do not get any guidance on how to use digital services at work nor how to communicate online.

During the interviews, two digital technologies were particularly mentioned: the project management system and the diverse communication systems. The participants mentioned constraints when using these systems and characterized their use as a poor appropriation due to a gap between the features and their work practices. From the management point of view, these systems are intended to foster cooperation among the different members of the agency but unfortunately, the workers feel that they are only used for reporting their activity. Some workers reported that they did not know where to share documents, or how to name files. Therefore, workers expressed their difficulties in finding resources and coordinating their activities within the team. For instance, they mentioned the risk for two persons to work on the same document at the same time without managing versions. Various strategies or tactics are put in place to overcome these issues.

First, they use an alternative platform for sharing and collaboratively writing documents, and finally store the result on the "official" document management system of the agency. Furthermore, they have defined some codes or rules for exchanges and communication, that remain superficial: in order to avoid overloading mailboxes and snowballing effects, all workers agree to not respond to emails to simply thank the sender. However, one person found it important to do it once in a face-to-face meeting for simple courtesy and good manners. This raises the issue on how to transpose the rules of good manners and respect that we follow during our face-to-face interactions into written digital communication without overloading mailboxes or disturbing colleagues in their work. Finally, participants expressed their interest in discussing, negotiating, and establishing communication conventions in order to avoid communication and information overload.

We also collected data about the different communication modalities that exist in the team and the channels that are used. When she arrived in the agency, the new director established face-to-face meetings once every two weeks for analyzing requests sent by organizations. Her intention was to establish a work collective and create links between workers who are often required to travel and work remotely. The agency members are favorable to this practice since it also allows them to anticipate and organize their work by interacting simultaneously with several of their colleagues. In addition, being present for meetings allows workers to get informal, so-called hallway information, which they would not get otherwise. This information can be valuable and interesting for their missions. We will go on investigating the different ways workers get information, when being physically in the office or remotely, and how does it influence the articulation of their work. Although most of the workers come in person for meetings, it still happens that some cannot come. In that case, hybrid meetings are established. However, most of the workers told us that they did not like these hybrid form because remote people may be forgotten or not being listened enough, and in-person people may converse and not discuss the purpose of the meeting. We will investigate this

modality, as, in a way, its limits and disadvantages are partly due to the lack of communication conventions.

Additionally, participants explained the strategies they have put in place to manage emails and interactions within the team and with their "clients'" organizations. For example, workers tend to use the instant messaging feature of their email system for discussions when persistence is not important. The "subject" field of emails was also raised. Indeed, at some point, when several responses have been sent, the topic of the message may have evolved, which is not reflected in the "subject". Therefore, this poses problems when people want to find information by looking at emails subject lines. One person also told us that she has now decided to send one email per topic.

Generally speaking, workers check their emails throughout the day, but they all said that they always start and end their work day by checking their mailbox to make sure that they have not miss any important information or any emergency that would have to deal with. Some workers even schedule the sending of their emails to not show when they have looked at and written their email. We will further explore the balance and boundaries between their personal and professional life. Indeed, even if they check and process their emails outside of their work time, the members of the agency do not perceive their work as being invasive in their lives. One of them told us that once she finishes work and is at home, her professional cell phone is in airplane mode. Therefore, she cannot be bothered by work. But she also said that her colleagues or superiors know her private phone number and can call her if there is any particular issue.

Apart from working from home, the members of the agency are required to travel frequently to meet their clients. They told us the equipment they take with them when they travel and how they reconfigure their work resources. Several of them argued why they could or could not work on public transport such as trains. Other clearly told us that their backpack is their office even if they raised limits and points of vigilance (confidentiality, comfort, risk of theft, etc.). Their clearly confirmed that they can be characterized as nomadic workers.

Ongoing data collection

We are currently planning to observe the group during meetings when most of the workers will be in the office space which will allow us to understand how they collectively analyze requests from organizations and how they distribute missions. In fact, these requests come from different ways: from the head office, from project managers and from the website. Sometimes, they have to send requests back to the head office because they do not correspond to a regional request but to a national one. So, after treating and analyzing requests, they work in pairs (one experienced and one less).

After observing the meetings, we will be planning to follow some of the agency members and the director during their working day. Through these observations, we intend to get a deeper knowledge on their work practices, how do they manage their

different communication channels, and the number of time they are interrupted in their activities, and how do they articulate their tasks.

These observations will complete the declarative information collected during interviews and will allow us to cross-reference the perceptions they have of their practices and their workload, with the situations we will observe.

As we will not be able to shadow the workers when they will be at their clients' office, or when travelling, these observations will be completed by the distribution of cultural probes (Gaver et al., 1999) for several weeks. The two probes we are planning to offer are a diary in which participants will be able to describe striking elements of their practices, and a clock in which they will indicate how their working days are organized, coloring the different periods of the clock according to the type of activity, and using stamping pads with smileys to indicate their level of quality of life. With these probes, we are aiming both at collecting data and offering a way for employees to reflect on their practices. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted again to clarify some of the things we have observed, and to discuss the collected probes, that should help us to trigger discussions on particular situations.

Finally, the emails received, read, and responded also constitute data that we wish to collect. We have therefore asked to get access to sets of emails and other communication exchanges that seem relevant or interesting to analyze. Here, it is not a question of looking at and interfering in their work, but to understand the elements that lead to an exchange by email.

At the end of this data collection and analysis phase, we will organize two participatory design workshops. The first one is intended to support the employees in collectively identifying everyone's issues and expectations and to start defining conventions. As mentioned above, we are planning to offer the participants a sociotechnical solution so that they could be autonomous in defining their conventions and making them evolve. This is why we are aiming to support them in defining both face-to-face moments and a collaborative system to support their decisions and their on-going adaptation of the defined conventions. At the end of the first workshop, we will then be able to design the digital solution for these debates.

In the second workshop, approximately 4 to 5 months later, the first version of the designed collaborative system will be presented and discussed, in order for all the participants to bring new elements. The results of the second workshop will be integrated into the collaborative system and we will then follow its deployment into the agency for 6 months.

This case study will contribute to providing new elements on the organization and working practices of nomadic workers and how they use digital communication to articulate their activity. The design and introduction of a sociotechnical system within a work collective will allow us to understand what happens when communication practices are collectively negotiated. Finally, our work will provide new concepts on digital communication conventions as part of improving the quality of life at work.

Conclusion

Digital communication at work can negatively affect the organization, social life and health of employees. Charters have been offered to resolve these problems but they seem to not consider the realities and working practices of employees. In this poster, we present our ongoing research study that will offer a practice-centered design of a sociotechnical solution to collectively define communication conventions and improve the quality of life at work.

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