Situated Coworker Familiarity: How Site Visits Transform Relationships Among Distributed Workers

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Previous research describes significant benefits from coworker familiarity but has largely assumed proximity and that familiarity accrues simply with the passage of time. Based on a qualitative study of 164 workers on globally distributed teams, we propose that relationships transform as a result of situated coworker familiarity established when people are collocated in a shared space for an extended period of time. Site visits play a pivotal role in enabling coworkers to become more familiar with one another’s communication and work styles, capabilities and interests, personalities, work and social roles, and the cultural context in which they are embedded, thus transforming their relationships. After returning home, situated familiarity fosters behaviors reflecting closer ties, which then reinforce those bonds, suggesting that the situated nature of site visits transforms work relationships between distant coworkers in enduring ways. We contribute grounded theory about how situated coworker familiarity comes about and how coworker relationships transform as a result, particularly when workers spend most of their time apart.

Key words: computer-supported collaborative work; organization communication and information systems; qualitative research; research design and methods; psychological processes; organizational behavior

Introduction

The last decade has generated a steady stream of articles on distributed workers and work teams. In most of this research, distant workers are assumed to meet rarely, if ever. If such meetings do occur, they are treated as incidental to the research. As pointed out by Mortensen and Neeley (2012) as well as Maznevski and Chudoba (2000), however, many distributed coworkers meet face-to-face at least occasionally, and many visit their distant colleagues on a regular basis. We have, nevertheless, little understanding of the interplay between site visits and distant work and the effect of these events on relationships among coworkers. To further complicate matters, research on the value of face-to-face interaction for distributed work is inconclusive. In a recent review, for example, Connaughton and Shuffler (2007) note that the role of face-to-face interaction is a continuing theme in the study of distributed teams but that results are ambiguous, with some studies suggesting that face-to-face interaction is crucial to distributed work and others indicating that technology-enabled communication is adequate for collaboration at a distance. In the end, we are left with little understanding of what happens during face-to-face interaction between otherwise distant coworkers and how this matters to their work together. In our qualitative study of 164 workers on globally distributed teams, we found that workers became more familiar during site visits, and more importantly, familiarity was situated in the experience of day-to-day work and social interaction and observations made while side by side. This situated coworker familiarity then provided a foundation for closer coworker relationships after returning home—relationships characterized by increased responsiveness, more frequent communications, increased personal disclosure, and more discussion of difficult topics. We build theory about what situated coworker familiarity is, how it comes about, and what it means for ongoing relationships among coworkers.

The Role of Site Visits in Distributed Work

Proximity has long been considered one of the conditions necessary for ongoing relationships. In a study of friendship among students, Back et al. (2008) report that students who sat next to each other were more likely to be friends. Proximity increases perceptions of familiarity (Zajonc 1968; see also Kiesler and Cummings 2002), which contribute to the development of relationships (Berscheid and Reis 1998, Sias and Cahill 1998). Not all research, however, agrees that proximity and face-to-face interaction are important to relationships among coworkers. Walther (1992, 1996), for example, leverages social information processing theory to argue that, although the process may be slower, rapport among members of distributed dyads that never meet