Association for Information Systems
AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

2007

The Politics of Presence and Absence in Distributed Organisations

L. Yan

N. Panteli

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/ecis2007

THE POLITICS OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE
IN DISTRIBUTED ORGANIZATION

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we report a longitudinal case study to illustrate the politics of presence and absence in distributed organizations. The empirical data is taken from a small globally distributed organization for a period of 14 months. We find that presence and absence are not only socially negotiated in distributed organizations, they also serve as a useful tactic to comply, resist, or discount management control by individual members. The paper concludes with the argument that power and politics are central to understanding presence and absence in distributed environments and the theoretical and practical implications of this are discussed.

Keywords: presence, absence, politics, distributed organization

1.   INTRODUCTION

Distributed teams may represent a new form of organization but nevertheless the need for effective and cohesive relationships remain a key criterion for their success (Powell et al 2004) as is the case with traditional collocated teams. Our broad contention in this article is that though the current understanding of distributed teams has advanced in significant areas over the last few years, it has not taken sufficient account of the active negotiating and renegotiating of power relations among the dispersed individuals in their attempts to define presence and absence within the team. Yet, it has been found that presence is socially constructed and is negotiated and renegotiated during the lifetime of a project (Panteli 2004). In this paper, we present a longitudinal case study of a globally distributed organization to illustrate presence, and subsequently absence, as social negotiations that reflect, enhance or discount managerial power in distributed organizations.

In what follows, we provide the theoretical foundations of the study, identify gaps in the existing literature and present the research questions that have guided our study. Then the research site is described and the methods used for data collection are justified. The results are analysed and discussed and their theoretical and practical relevance is identified.

2.   PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN DISTRIBUTED ENVIRONMENTS

Presence and absence, the state of being there or not, in distributed organizations demonstrate their complexity beyond physical collocation. The predominant approach in research on presence in virtual environments has been to explain presence as 1) the perceived characteristics of the communication medium. In this way, presence is conceptualised in terms of the medium's capacity to reveal social cues (Short et al. 1976, Karahanna and Limayem 2000); and 2) as an illusion or a sensation of 'being' in a mediated environment (Steuer 1992, Biocca and Delaney 1995, Lombard and Ditton 1997). This view is taken by researchers in the field of human-computer interaction and is otherwise known as virtual presence (Kim and Biocca 1997).

A recent development, in contrast, emphasised the social nature of presence and absence in distributed organizations. Panteli (2004), for instance, has argued that the emergence of virtual environments requires a change in the conceptualisation of presence – from presence narrowly defined around availability on the project to presence that is extended outside the project to include other work assignments as well as family and personal matters. Panteli (2004) further illustrated the variety of presence and absence, including present availability, absent availability and absent unavailability. In other words, the lack of physical collocation or 'absence' indicates only one dimension of presence and absence. In addition to the being physically present or absent, 'availability', or members' willingness to interact with others, is also an important component of presence and absence in distributed organizations. This availability, perhaps independent from the physical or technical circumstances of the interaction, is socially negotiated, reflecting, and in turn reinforcing, the social connections between distributed members. This negotiation process was achieved with reference to one's personal-mediated environment, to explain their availability or unavailability on the team project and subsequently their presence or absence from the virtual environment.

In a similar vein, Orlikowski (2002) emphasised the ongoing negotiation of social relations in distributed organizations. According to Orlikowski, social connections over distance was achieved rather than given. Through recurrent, everyday practices, distributed members constantly negotiate and renegotiate their relations with others. Taking multinational corporations as a particular form of distributed organizations, Goodall and Roberts (2003) went further to illuminate the social dynamics over distance. Through a 'mantra of distance' of 'network', 'patron' and 'track-record-with', distant members maintained or

negotiated their social relations, and more importantly projected their own favourable social presence, in relations to others who are physically 'absent'.

What is worth noting from the new development is the departure from the traditional view of understanding presence and absence, namely that depicted in media richness and virtual presence theories, which focused on the characteristics of communication media, and their (in)ability to convey social cues. While this perspective illuminate an inherent feature of communication in distributed organizations, the studies reviewed above seem to offer a necessary complement in drawing attention to the social connections between members that may alter the use of communication media, and overcome the 'leanness' of mediated communications. It is with this social perspective of mediated communication that we embark on this attempt to study 'presence' in distributed environments.

Accordingly, with the present study, we aim to take the conceptualisation of presence in a virtual setting further by exploring power relationships between members of distributed teams. We argue that presence and absence are not only negotiated and renegotiated in distributed organizations, they also serve as a useful tactic to comply, resist, or discount management control by individual members. The power dynamics, therefore, between the individuals involved need to be explored in order to identify any influence on how and to what extent different members make themselves present or absent. It is argued therefore that by incorporating the impact of power dynamics in our understanding of presence, the political nature of presence will be unveiled.

In considering power within distributed teams there is an increasing recognition in the literature that knowledge is indeed power and that teams are often formed to create knowledge through combination and exchange. In the broader 'knowledge management' literature, it has also been acknowledged that the possession of knowledge, particularly those experience-based, tacit and intangible, is often associated with greater individual autonomy in knowledge-intensive organizations (Tsoukas 1996, Hanlon 2004, Robertson *et al* 2004). Managing the 'knowledge worker', it was posited, involved ongoing negotiation of social relations through narratives (Brown and Humphrey 2006, Brown 2006), and practices (Carlsen 2006). It was this concern of negotiating power with knowledgeable individuals, in a virtual and dispersed setting, that guided this piece of research which aims to gain a better understanding of presence in distributed environments.

3.   RESEARCH METHODS

This research draws upon an exploratory case study. The case approach was chosen, not only to respond to our philosophical stance as qualitative researchers to *understand* phenomena through accessing the meanings that participants assign to them (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991, Walsham 1995), but also in line with the particular strength of case studies in exploring the 'how' and 'why' questions in a 'natural' setting where 'the investigator has little or no control' (Yin 2003, p.9). SUMMIT, a small global organization, was chosen for the purpose of the study.

The fieldwork lasted for 14 months between May 2003 and July 2004. Broad access was granted in the organization, including their Intranet, conference calls, meeting minutes, internal training sessions, meetings with clients and suppliers, newsletters, group emails, and in some occasions, emails that were exchanged between the individual members. Data collection started with participant observation, when one of us worked as a member of the organization's 'central office', responsible for assembling and editing group newsletters, restructuring the Intranet, and 'tidy(ing) up' documents (both paper documents and computer files). She later had the opportunity of conducting an organization-wide survey on the use of the Intranet, and thus began direct contact with the dispersed members of the organization, which led to

her later participation to the organization's international projects on cross-cultural management, and management training.

Indeed, the data collection process reflects the increasing involvement of the researcher into the organization. After the initial stage of observation of the 'central office' and its perspective on the dispersed members, documents analysis (particularly previous meeting minutes, and email exchanges between the 'centre' and the members) were used to enrich our understanding of the connections (or otherwise) between the 'centre' and its members. Finally, with direct contact with the dispersed members and the accumulated familiarity and goodwill, semi-structured interviews were conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, with all key members (16) of the organization; while unstructured interviews were conducted throughout the research process, with the 'centre' staff and with the members, surrounding event and issues at the time, as a reflection of the members' perspectives of their 'centre'. A typical interview lasted around 45 minutes to an hour. All semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were assured of confidentiality.

Guided by Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), data analysis in this study was intertwined with data collection throughout the research. Hints, hunches, and 'random thoughts' were noted down along the data collection process. Many of these later turned out to be valuable ideas in the writing-up. Except for the 'breaks' to draft reports, data analysis was conducted in parallel with data collection. While there was little reflection and deliberate theorising at the early stage of data collection, at the later stage, especially towards the end of the study, the balance between data collection and analysis was shifted significantly towards the latter.

These field notes, together with interview transcripts, company documents, meeting/conference call/conference minutes, newsletters, contents of the Intranets, and emails, were coded, mostly manually. As with data collection/analysis, coding also followed an iterative process along data collection, with much 'de-coding' and 're-coding' along the process. The preliminary analyses were shared with the members, in the form interim and final reports to the 'centre', and in the everyday 'chats' with the members. This proved to be valuable in 'elaborating and sharpening interpretation and yielding additional insights' (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991). While 'theoretical saturation' (Strauss and Corbin 1998) has not been reached along all major themes from the data, on the particularly issue of the connections between the 'centre' and its dispersed members, we were happy to draw a conclusion to the data collection, analysis, and coding process as the major themes started to replicate themselves. In the following section, we will report our finding concerning the use of emails as reflection, reinforcement, and resistance to 'central' control.

4.   THE CASE OF SUMMIT CONSULTING

SUMMIT is a small consulting firm, with a mission to achieve business transformation 'by mastering the art of implementing organizational change through the mobilization of people and ideas'. Its main services covered 'strategic development and deployment', 'operational effectiveness', and 'emotional alignment'. Since its establishment in 1999, SUMMIT had evolved into a global organization with offices, associates and affiliates in 18 countries, including the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Lithuania, Canada, China, the US, with a 'central office' in London, UK, boasting itself as 'a global network of top consultants'.

4.1.   The Members

Compared to leading multinational consulting firms, SUMMIT saw its competitive advantage precisely in its small size. The 'network' has 53 members, with a 'core team' of only 16. Instead of having a

'pyramid', hierarchical, structure usually found in large consulting firms, SUMMIT's organizational structure was flat, with most employees at the senior levels as 'partners', 'senior consultants', or 'consultant'. This reflects the experiences of the members, as most have years, if not decades, of experience in professional consulting, and are generally regarded as an authority in their individual fields. Collectively, their expertise covered all the major areas of management consulting, while each individual had a distinctive specialist area.

With few exceptions, most work on their own, either from home or on site with their clients. The exceptions are the Italian, Dutch, and Lithuanian offices. With a few members, each office had an administrator to provide back-office support, while the consultants, like their colleagues elsewhere, mainly work remotely and held regular, but infrequent (monthly), meetings, usually on the same day when they took part in SUMMIT's global conference calls. The lack of collocation seemed rather natural and unproblematic. 'Consulting', admitted a member, was 'solo work', autonomous and independent by nature.

Equally importantly as autonomy, however, was the opportunity to collaborate with other members of the organization - international projects were an important part of SUMMIT's work. As a small consulting firm, they saw their strength in providing comprehensive, but tailor-made services, to their international clients. Each local outlet has its own expertise – the work in the UK, Canada, and the US focused broadly on the 'soft' side of management, such as Human Resource Management and Leadership, the Italian, Dutch, and Lithuanian consultants worked on the 'hard' side of operations management and supply chain management, while the Scandinavian consultants focused on strategic consulting. It was by drawing upon expertise from various part of the organization that SUMMIT was able to occupy a niche market as a provider of in-depth knowledge on all major areas of management consulting. Often, their work started with the local branch of an international client and later 'rolled out' to the clients' global sites. The 'central' office in London, managed by May, aspired to provide central coordination to their projects, although not without difficulties.

4.2.   The 'Central Office'

Unlike most of her colleagues, May did not have prior connection with any member of the network. When Ronald decided to set up SUMMIT in Europe, he decided to recruit a back-office support, a person who ideally had both American and European backgrounds, and who had 'the right quality' to coordinate SUMMIT's global projects. Following these criteria, they recruited May. May's 'central office' was a small one, with three members. May was supported by two others for marketing support, and financial control. The location of London was seen as appropriate in presenting SUMMIT as an organization that bridges European and American practices, as one of the co-founders explained:

> *Both of us came from large consulting firms, and most of these firms are headquartered in the US. Coming from a European perspective, some of the American approaches, brilliant ideas as they are, simply don't work in this part of the world....We set up SUMMIT precisely to do that, to bridge the gap. We want to see the new ideas coming from the US work in Europe, but not necessarily with the original approach. That's our niche. So we needed to find a location that's right in the middle between the US and Europe, and where else could it be except London?*

Besides being strategically 'right in the middle' between Europe and the US, the small size and limited roles were also features of the 'central office'. In addition to the three staff in London, the co-founders, based in Netherlands and Italy, were also official members of the 'central office'. While May was responsible for its day-to-day operations, her role at the 'centre' was limited to 'back-office support'.

'Strategic issues', such as negotiating partnerships contracts, developing new services and markets, were the responsibility of the dispersed partners located in the Netherlands, Italy, the US, Germany, the Czech Republic and Lithuania. Although May participated in these strategic discussions as the head of the London office, this was not part of her daily duties. As a co-founder explained, the 'central office' in London was necessarily small due to the characteristics of the dispersed members:

> *[a] mini office, for us, is a natural thing to happen. We are top consultants, we manage ourselves, often well, for most of the time.... when it comes to team work, we are good. Many of us work in this area; we know how to work with others...To have an office in London is good, people see where to go for help, and [to] have a spot in London is important for the company. But we don't need a big one, we need a different kind of central office*

In London, May focused on establishing and maintaining an 'infrastructure' for SUMMIT. To her, organizational coordination, especially in an organization dispersed in many countries and across various areas of expertise, required some 'structure', particularly for international projects.

SUMMIT operated a 'twin leaders' system on international projects – one 'owner' who provided professional knowledge and support to the participants of the projects, and one 'project manager' who oversaw its progress, such as documentation and managing deadlines. May was the project manager in most cases, and insisted on introducing communication structures on 'reporting' to the centre. As there were seldom clear boundaries or responsibilities between the 'owner' and the project manager, there were no formal procedures on reporting. May however relied on an implicit understanding among all SUMMIT members that they were expected to keep her, as their project manager, informed. This was usually done by copying May in their emails with one another. Although May was able to get an idea of project progress from these emails, she was not satisfied with either their contents or frequency. During an interview, May pointed out that email updates would have to be used 'properly' to achieve a balance between keeping her informed, and overloading her:

> *Because we're in so many countries, we use emails a lot. But I find them a bit difficult...for example, I find myself being copied in a lot of emails about the projects; some of them, perhaps 50%, don't have much to do with us in London. But on the other hand, I do miss out some important updates; somehow they don't come to me. I suspect it's not very different for others. So I thought we should have a (sort of) standard of using emails, especially for ongoing projects, as part of project management.*

Her ambition to be informed on major project events, however, met various responses, as will be elaborated below.

4.3. Email Presence and Absence to the 'Centre'

For some members, email presence to the centre was a useful means to keep the centre informed of their current activities, and an illustration of their compliance with the central power that May would like to assert. A member in Canada, for instance, saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate her connection to the organization, particularly given the relative lack of activity in her local office.

> *I copy London in, most of my project emails. I think it's good to let them know what I'm doing. Here in Canada, we are not very big, not always on international assignments. So I want London and the partners to know that we're working.*

This intention to 'let London know that we're working' is also reflected in other email presences, although others seemed to prefer to control their presence in such a way that the 'centre' is informed on the on hand, and the local consultants could enjoy their autonomy on the other. A member in Italy illustrated how she used project deadlines to time her presence to London:

> *Umm, we usually have deadlines, several deadlines on one project. I will copy emails to May, a couple of days before the deadline? Yeah, a couple of days before; and she knows that when the deadline comes, I'll perhaps have done this, or more...(otherwise), it's just small things, not worth mentioning.*

It is worth noting that it was the local members', rather than May's, judgement as to what was 'worth mentioning'. Only when they needed to inform London of the critical development of the projects that events became 'worth mentioning'. Although they nonetheless complied with May's requests for central reporting, the dispersed consultants also asserted their autonomy – after all, it was them, rather than May, who controlled what information London had, and what it did not.

Similarly, email presence was also used to prepare London for forthcoming face-to-face meetings. For instance, a member commented that he only copied emails to London 'every now and then'; but was more active in doing so 'before my European trips…so that in May's mind, I'm around, not just a cast-away'. Despite his anxiety in being a distant member and his desire to be present to the 'centre', he nonetheless limited his presence, again, in line with his preference instead of the central control proposed by May.

For others, the central control was to be discounted to the minimum, if not resisted altogether. Email presence to London was not only redundant, but also an intrusion to their autonomy. A member in the UK was particularly critical of copying emails to May, and justified her view as a necessary approach to reducing information overload, for May.

> *Oh yes, I left a lot of things that I don't copy May in. Well, if everyone copies everything to May, how on earth could she cope?*

She also pointed out that May's request for being informed was more for the centre's benefit than the individual consultants'; for the dispersed consultants, their own 'discretion' was more important in carrying out their projects, while informing May, was no more than a formality to be complied, only when entirely necessary.

> *Well, the purpose of copying May in my emails to other colleagues, is to give May some flavour of the progress of the project, as this is important for her, central co-ordination. But unless it's about the critical timeline of those large-scale, critical projects, I think we generally rely on our own discretion.*

As head of the 'central office', May attempted to assert control over the members by requesting, though implicitly, email presence from the members. In response, the members adopted email presence (and absence) to enhance, reflect, or discount their connections with the 'central office'.

5. DISCUSSION

SUMMIT was an example of the 'new form of organising' that aimed to balance central coordination with geographic dispersion and professional autonomy in the 'information economy' (e.g. Child and McGrath 2001). Presence and absence, in this case, went well beyond physical distance and technological

mediation, but served as a means to negotiate power relations. In this study, we have shown the political nature of presence within distributed environments. Individuals actively choose when to show their presence or when to remain absent from their distributed setting. Our case study found that they consciously do so as a way to distance themselves from organizational politics and as a way to show that they resist the power/management approach imposed upon them. In what follows, we will reflect on the social nature of presence and absence in the case, and investigate their root in power and politics.

5.1.   Social Nature of Presence and Absence

Confirming earlier work on the variety of presence and absence in distributed organizations (Panteli 2004, Panteli and Fineman 2005), this case further illustrated the negotiated, thus social, nature of presence and absence. In contrast to media richness and social presence theories (Daft and Lengel 1984, Short et al. 1976), it was found that technology may influences, but cannot dictate, social relations over distance. All members in SUMMIT were physically distant from their 'centre' in London, having access to similar technologies, yet their presence (or the lack of it) was diverse, reflecting the various social relationships they aimed to develop with the 'Centre'. Technologically mediated communication, for these members, was less about technologies' limitation in conveying social cues; instead, it was precisely technology mediation that offered the platform to signal social cues. It was in the varied uses of emails that the members articulated distinctive social connections with London.

5.2.   Presence and Absence as articulations of Power and Politics

What, then, underpinned the diverse presence and absence signally via emails? This case drew our attention to power and politics. Power, defined as the capability of one party to exert an influence on another to act in a prescribed manner, is often a function of both dependence and the use of that dependence as leverage (Rassingham 1999). In its simplistic form, power can take the form of either coercion or persuasion. Coercive power (Allen et al. 2000, Rassingham 2000) is often apparent when one party possesses punishment ability. Whilst short-term gains are sometimes available, coercion very much reflects a short-term perspective which can result in the weaker, more vulnerable, party yielding begrudgingly and engaging in defensive co-operation. This in turn encourages opportunism (Rassingham 1999, Van der Smagt 2000) and degrades the relationship (Allen et al. 2000) often into a downward spiral (Rassingham 1999). Coercion often results in distrust (Allen et al. 2000) and a resultant evasion, deception, and distortion of information. It therefore becomes a significant constraint to relationships, which prevent improvements in coordination, and often results in an attempt by the weaker player to try to escape (Rassingham 1999). Whilst coercion may force cooperation (Rousseau et al., 1998), true collaboration requires trust (Kanter 1994) and as a result coercion is often self-defeating in the long term (Rassingham 1999).

Persuasive power, in contrast, provides a better alternative for enhancing the satisfaction of less powerful partners (Allen et al. 2000, Hart and Saunders 1997, Rassingham 1999). It seeks to build trust and helps with the tight coupling of actors with often economic, symbolic and personal benefits (Rassingham 1999). Whilst persuasion often requires the adoption of a long-term perspective, it is often more expensive and takes time. It also significantly increases the probability of building trust, which occurs when a trading partner is informed about the fullest potential of the relationship (Rassingham 1999, Hart and Saunders 1997).

The power May aimed to assert is perhaps best described as 'implicit coercion'. By establishing and maintaining a communication 'infrastructure', May would have liked to assert her role as the centre of information, the source of project coordination, and the foundation for general management support. What she possessed, at least in theory, was the ability to punish – to withdraw her support in project management - in line with her authority as director of the 'central office'. This coercion power, indeed,

encouraged opportunism, in the members' deliberate exaggeration of their ongoing activities, and resentment, selective compliance, and resistance. How 'central' was the 'central office' in London? How much power could it actually assert in this distributed organization? Different members had different interpretations. For some, London resembled management authority, where individual performance was recorded and assessed. This recognition led them to comply with May's central request, some fully, some partially, in their email presence to London. For others, however, London was no more than another location of the organization for documentation. Instead of being a 'centre', it was perhaps best described as a back office; May, instead of being head of the 'central office', an administrator. Despite all the efforts May put in to establish and maintain an 'infrastructure' for the dispersed members, complying with these back-office requests was seen as secondary to carrying on with the 'real' work of consulting projects. In the absence of persuasion (perhaps in terms of articulating the long-term benefits of keeping effective communications in the organization and sharing project information promptly), May's insistence in implementing the communication infrastructure, furthermore, was seen as excessive administration burden that could only result in information overloading. Via emails, they indicated their reluctance and resistance in response to the coercion May attempted to impose. By doing so, people used their power politically to ignore London's requests for information. The proposal to provide information came more as a demand on them than a request without a legitimate reason.

The study also has practical implications which relate to the management of power within distributed environments. What went 'wrong' for May in carrying out her legitimate responsibilities, and which subsequently led to frustrations among other team members, was a lack of understanding of the nature of power and politics in distributed organizations. In SUMMIT itself, the issue of power has not been openly discussed. The findings suggest that issues of power and politics need to be brought to the open, discussed and clarified. A way to deal with this is to introduce a facilitator or a care-taker; both of these roles have been highlighted in discussions on managing distributed organizations. For example, Tucker and Panteli (2003) emphasised the need for a facilitator in helping team-building, at the early stage of the virtual work project, and during projects. Similarly, Powell et al (2004) identify the need for caretakers, or ad –hoc managers, in order to provide support and ensure information sharing and relationship building. It is perhaps through facilitating, rather than controlling, persuasion, rather than coercion, that manager in distributed organizations can eventually achieve the effective communication and coordination that is central in distributed environments. Recognising that there are different communication technologies available is vital as their different characteristics can aid in different stages of the team project. For example, instead of using a text-based and asynchronous medium such as email, other synchronous tools such as teleconferencing and videoconferencing could be adopted to increase interactions and awareness among team members in an attempt to overcome negative power dynamics.

6.   CONCLUSIONS

The paper has presented a socio-political approach to the analysis of presence and absence within distributed organizations. As noted by various researchers, power and politics are an inherent part of distributed organizations. Being mediated by 'virtual' technologies does not eliminate power from organizational life; instead, distributed environments pose new management challenges for managers and leaders (Tucker and Panteli 2003, Constantinides and Barrett 2006). Despite this acknowledgement in the literature, however, paucity remains in exploring the political nature of interactions that may take place among distributed team members. Thus, by viewing presence and absence from a political perspective contributes to a better understanding of the power domains of key stakeholders. We believe that this study serves as an initial step in unlocking the power dynamics in distributed environments.

The findings show that social actors have the power to control their presence in distributed environments. They can hide away and remain absent by avoiding to respond to emails and by controlling their participation in other information exchanges. Using the case of SUMMIT, it was found that distributed team members can be selective as to when, to whom and what to share/exchange as a way for managing power and politics matters. In this way, it is found that presence and absence are not only socially negotiated in distributed organizations, they also serve as a useful tactic to comply, resist, or discount management control by individual members. It is therefore worthwhile to examine the power dynamics and politics in distributed environments in the future. Managing such power dynamics in particular should be placed within the agenda for future research. By no means have we claimed that power is the only factor that determines presence and absence. Other factors that influence and differentiated members' choice to be present or absent from a distributed environment also need to be explored, such as the nature and sequence of tasks (for example, whether individual members are involved in multi-tasking), the social status of distributed members (in this case, most members in SUMMIT were more experienced thus more senior than May), and individuals' preferences of technology (some more comfortable, while others less so), just to name a few. Following these, we would like to further explore the negotiated nature of power and politics, and to what extent 'shared understanding' and 'common goals' are articulated, implemented, resisted, and re-negotiated in distributed organizations.

Finally, this study was based on a single case study. While it fulfilled the purpose of exploring the dynamics of power and politics among geographically distributed members, further multiple case studies would help to generate deeper insights. Furthermore, this case study followed an ethnographic approach, when one of us undertook a dual role of researcher-employee in the organization. This helped to illuminate the richness of field data, and get the insiders' stories. Further research may benefit from researcher triangulation to retain the richness of field data, while minimising researcher's bias.

Acknowledgement

References

Allen, D., Colligan, D., Finnie, A., and Kern, T. "Trust, power and inter-organisational information systems: the case of the electronic trading community TransLease", Information Systems Journal, (10), 2000, pp21-40.

Biocca, F. and Delaney, B. (1995), Immersive Virtual Reality Technology. In F. Biocca and M.R. Levy (Eds), Communication in the Age of Virtual Reality, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Brown, A. and Humphrey, M. (2006) Organizational identity and place: a discursive exploration of hegemony and resistance, Journal of Management Studies, 43(2), 231-257.

Brown, A. (2006) A narrative approach to collective identities, Journal of Management Studies, 43(4), 731-753.

Carlsen, A. (2006) Organizational becoming as dialogic imagination of practice: the case of the indomitable gauls, Organization Science, 17(1), 132-149.

Child, J. and McGrath, R. G. (2001) Organization unfettered: organizational form in an information-intensive economy, Academy of Management Journal, 44(6), 1135-1148.

Constantinides, P. and Barrett, M. (2006) Negotiating ICT development and use: the case of a telemedicine system in the healthcare region of Crete, Information and Organization, 16, 27-55.

Daft, R. and Lengel, R. (1984) Information richness: a new approach to managerial behaviour and organization design, Research on Organizational Behavior, 6, 191-233.

Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory, Chicago: Aldine.

Goodall, K. and Roberts, J. (2003) Repairing managerial knowledge-ability over distance, Organization Studies, 24(7), 1153-1175.

Hanlon, G. (2004) Institutional forms and organization structures: homology, trust and reputational capital in professional service firms, Organization, 11(2), 187-210.

Hart, P. and Saunders, C. "Power and Trust: Critical factors in the adoption and use of electronic data interchange", Organization Science, (8:1), Jan-Feb 1997, pp23-42.

Kanter, R.M. (1994) Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances , Harvard Business Review, 72, July-August, 96-108 .

Karahanna, E. and Limayem, M. (2000), E-Mail and V-Mail Usage: Generalizing Across Technologies, Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce, 10, 1, 49-66

Kim, T & Biocca, F. (1997). Telepresence via television: two dimensions of telepresence have different connections to memory and persuasion. Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, [On-line] 3 (2). Available:http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue2/kim.html.

Lombard, M, and Ditton, T. (1997), At the Heart of It All: The Concept of Presence, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 3, 2, September

Orlikowski, W. (2002) Knowing in practice: enacting a collective capability in distributed organizing, Organization Science, 13(3), 249-273.

Orlikowski, W. and Baroudi, J. (1991) Studying information technology in organizations: research approaches and assumptions, Information Systems Research 2(1), 1-28.

Panteli, N. (2004) Discursive articulation of presence in virtual organizing, Information and Organization, 14(1), 59-81.

Panteli, N. and Fineman, S. (2005) The sound of silence: the case of virtual team organsing, Behaviour & Information Technology, 24(5), 347-352.

Powell, A., Piccoli, G. and Ives, B. (2004) Virtual teams: a review of current literature and directions for future research, Database for Advances in Information Systems, 35(1), 6-28.

Rassingham, 1999 Rassingham, P. "Risks in Low Trust Among Trading Partners in electronic commerce", Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy, (10:1), 1999, pp56-62

Robertson, M., Scarborough, H. and Swan, J. (2004) Knowledge creation in professional service firms: institutional effects, Organization Studies, 24 (6), 831-857.

Rousseau, D., Sitkin, S., Burt, R & Camerer, C (1998) Not so different after all: a cross discipline view of trust Academy of Management Review 23 (3) 393 – 404.

Steuer, J. (1992), Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence, Journal of Communication, 42 (4), 73-93

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory (2nd ed.), Newbury Park: Sage.

Tsoukas, H. (1996) The firm as a distributed knowledge system: a constructionist approach, Strategic Management Journal, Winter Special Issue, 17, 11-25.

Tucker R & Panteli N (2003), "Back to Basics: Sharing Goals and Developing Trust in Global Virtual Teams". In N. Korpela, R. Montealegre & A. Poulymenakou (Eds), Organizational Information Systems in the Context of Globalization, IFIP 8.2/9.4 Proceedings (Athens, Greece 15-17 June 2003), Kluwer Academic Publishers: Boston, pp. 85-98

Van der Smagt, 2000

Walsham, G. (1995) The Emergence of Interpretivism in IS Research, Information Systems Research, 6(4), 376-394.

Yin, R. (2003) Case Study Research (3rd ed.), London: Sage.