2 Mobile Virtual Work – Concepts, Outcomes and Challenges

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2.1 Emergence of new concepts

Working life and organisations are changing rapidly. The worlds of work and technology are full of new concepts fighting for a living space. The variety of concepts and their concurrence are an understandable outcome of the recent developments in working life, which inevitably result in confusion and sometimes chaos in the minds of both laymen and experts. A consolation is the consciousness that it usually takes several years to reach a widely accepted definition of a joint object when some new thing or idea is invented. People coming from different disciplines identify the same new phenomenon at the same time and from different perspectives. It takes time to compare and match visions and agree on them. Business people are interested in ‘mobility scenarios’ and ‘mobility roadmaps’ in order to create ‘e-Business models’ and ways of doing business electronically. Their headache is the management of partnerships in network organisations while trying to find and create new business opportunities. Technologists are interested in the development of new technologies and want to create mobile collaborative ‘virtual working spaces’. Sociologists and social scientists write about the ‘network society’ and ‘eWork’ and aim at understanding and describing developmental trends in societies and defining new types of jobs, such as ‘flexiwork’, ‘telework’, and ‘mobile work’. Organisational scientists try to figure out how ‘company networks’ and ‘virtual organisations’ function, and how they should be managed. Managers and human resources people want to learn how to lead ‘virtual organisations’ and ‘distributed teams’, in spite of disturbances in their internal and external processes and relationships. Social psychologists explore intra-group processes in dispersed teams and psychologists and cognitive scientists the functioning of the ‘distributed mind’ in order to understand the
purpose of communicative actions and the emergence of telepresence and awareness. There are additional concepts around, such as ‘distributed work’, ‘multi-local work’, ‘virtual work’, ‘micromobility’, ‘campus mobility’, ‘multi-site employees’, ‘multimobility’, ‘total mobility’, etc. In all, it is clear that some conceptual clarifications are needed just to guarantee the quality of discussion. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a coherent picture of the concepts of ‘mobile’ and ‘virtual’ work and how they are related to each other. Additionally, the definitions are operationalised in order to analyse and describe mobile and virtual work systems. Some challenges and impacts of mobile virtual work are also presented.

2.2 What is mobile?

The concepts of ‘mobile’ and ‘mobile work’ are ambiguous from the perspectives of working life, organisations, and employees. ‘Mobile’ and ‘Mobility’ have a strong link to wireless technologies. Most often ‘mobile work’ is related to the possibility of a person moving and executing tasks anywhere and at any time, with the help of wired and wireless technologies and in a flexible manner, i.e. regarding his or her physical mobility. ‘Mobile’, in this case, is defined as a quality of an individual who moves to and from different places and works in them and, while travelling, uses information and communication technologies as tools. However, studying ‘mobility’ on the level of an individual is not enough: more levels, components, and viewpoints are needed to understand the complexity of mobile work as a goal-oriented activity.

In this chapter, ‘mobility’ is studied as an aspect of an activity system consisting of a subject using tools to process objects of work in a working context (Fig. 2.1). Activity systems in working contexts are goal- and interest-driven entities, which aim at fulfilling given or self-set tasks and assignments. Work is realised through purposeful actions.

Subjects, as actors, are social and cultural entities such as individuals, pairs, groups, organisations, and networks. They use both concrete and mental tools to work on their objects in their respective environment, which can be characterised by its complexity. The objects of work are manifested as self-set and given assignments, tasks, and goals related to them. In addition to goals, the driving force can be an interest without any exact goal, but one which does, however, create joint actions. Because of the systemic nature of work and working, ‘mobility’ is preliminarily de-

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1 It is underlined that although ‘subject’ is used in singular, it refers to both individual and collective actors that share their interest, goals and volitions.