Computer Supported Cooperative Work (2005) 14: 79–85

Book Review


With the globalization of economies creating new needs for governance and collaboration over geographical and cultural distances it would appear that ICT technology could open up new possibilities to support such cooperation – if only we knew what is essential for it to succeed. In 2000, researchers representing different disciplines and research traditions convened in California for a conference on group and organizational aspects of distributed work. The volume “Distributed Work” is based on the papers of the conference. Its 18 chapters contain reviews, reports of empirical research, and case analyses grouped under five headings: History of distributed work, Lessons from Collocated Work, Group Processes in Distributed Work, Enabling Distributed Work, and Distributed Scientific Work. The book is nicely edited and the chapters are both interesting and well written.

At first sight the concept of distributed work seems straightforward and clear. Perhaps this has been the general feeling of the authors and the editors too, because they do not endeavor to analyze and theoretically elaborate the concept or its two components “distributed” and “work”. The chapters attend to phenomena which the authors think are aspects of distributed work or related to it. In many of them the content of “distributed work” is constructed simply by contrasting communication and social interaction in teams that can have face-to-face communication with geographically distributed ones that have to rely on various communication technologies. The need for more thorough theoretical analysis, however, is of increasing concern when one proceeds to read the chapters.

The heading of the first section is “History of distributed work”. Its two articles do not, as the heading would suggest, deal with the history of distributed work. They are historical case analyses of the ways in which to deal with the contradictory needs, on one hand, to control subordinates and, on the other, to invest them with authority and to rely on their discretion. John Leslie King and Robert L. Frost analyze the technologies of disambiguation and ambiguation in the management of distance, or I would rather say, management from a distance. They argue that the attempts to develop technologies for improved management of distance have concentrated almost
exclusively on improving means of disambiguation and overlooked the subtle
and crucial role of ambiguation and the need for a careful balancing between
disambiguation and ambiguation in maintaining shared understanding, while
allowing local discretion. To illustrate this they explore the strategies of
ambiguation and disambiguation the Vatican has used through the centuries
in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church. While distance clearly is
one aspect of the problem the authors discuss, the balancing of disambiguity
and ambiguity is, of course, a central problem in all coalition building.

Michael O’Leary, Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates attend a related
problem in their analysis of the various combinations of means of acquiring
knowledge, creating trust and exercising control the Hudson’s Bay Company
has used and developed during the 150 years of its fur-trading operation.
They argue that trust and control are not, as commonly viewed, opposites
but are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing. They criticize the sim-
plistic quick-fix ideas of creating trust and suggest that both researchers and
practitioners would do well to consider the broad array of potential trust-
and control-enhancing practices.

These two chapters show the fruitfulness of a historically oriented case
analysis, in which the focus is not linear causal relationships between some
variables but the historical change in a central, unavoidable inner contradic-
tion in an activity and on the evolution of the ways of mastering this
contradiction as the activity evolves and conditions change. On the other
hand, the chapters raise the question of the content of “distributed work”.
Both articles seem to deal with governance rather than work in the sense of
producing something.

The next four chapters under the heading “Lessons from Collocated
Work” analyze collocation and proximity “to provide a basis of comparing
distributed work with collocated work”. Sara Kiesler and Jonathon
N. Cummings review a large body of research on the effect of proximity with
regard to social interaction and group dynamics. They start by analyzing the
frames of reference in which the workers’ proximity has been studied. They
recognize the social-psychological study of small groups, the production
framework in which proximity is analyzed in terms of work flow, task
interdependence and coordination needs, and the more recent ways of
looking at proximity from the point of view of mutual learning. The authors
discuss proximity in terms of presence, face-to-face communication,
shared social setting and spontaneous communication. They presume that
the effectiveness of mediated communication technologies, as remedies to
overcome the problems posed by physical distance, depends on the degree of
existing social distance or cohesion of the group.

Judith S. Olson, Stephanie Teasley, Lisa Covi, and Gary Olson analyze in
their chapter: “The (Currently) Unique Advantage of Collocated Work”
what they call “radically collocated work” in teams that do their work in a