Book Review


The central theme of this book is workplace studies and how they can be used to successfully influence the design of collaborative technologies. The editors argue that “it may seem surprising that technologies explicitly aiming to support collaboration, often with considerable attention being paid to how they will be used, appear to be so ill-suited to the contingent, emergent and collaborative aspects of the work they aim to support” (p. 9). This is a collection of chapters from a diverse set of authors provides detailed examples of workplace studies, attempts to explain why they are often are not effective (or used at all) to inform design, and offers some suggestions as to how studies of the workplace can be more influential in the design process.

Following the introduction (chapter 1), the book has been organized into two sections composed of six chapters each. The first section “exploring the workplace” contains four chapters that present workplace studies conducted using a variety of approaches including ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, and course-of-action analysis. These four chapters illustrate the use of different methodologies for understanding the way that people organize their work and coordinate with others to accomplish their goals. Following the first four chapters in section 1 are two essays that discuss the role of workplace studies in CSCW. The second section “the interface between research and design” contains chapters that consider the relationship between workplace studies (and those who conduct them) and the process used to develop technology. These chapters explore the mismatch between these processes and identify ways to build a bridge between workplace studies and design.

There are many strengths of this book. First, it deals with an issue that is central to the success of CSCW. If the work of the CSCW community does not influence design and a separation continues between “researchers” and “designers” or those doing workplace studies and those building collaborative systems, then the value of workplace studies to organizations may be limited. Second, the chapters in this book emphasize the importance of social as opposed to cognitive aspects of coordination (although cognitive components are not absent). For example, to
understand how workers use an expert system, Jack Whalen and Erik Vinkhuyzen (chapter 5) highlight issues of motivation and collaborative learning exemplifying and underscoring an important movement toward examining the social, often situated, aspects of work and coordination in CSCW.

Although all of the chapters in this book provide distinct and interesting perspectives, there are several that help to illustrate the contribution and diversity within the book. The introduction by the editors (chapter 1) is well worth reading. It is a well-considered essay on the challenges of creating collaborative technologies without understanding the context of use, the variety of approaches used to understand the workplace, and the contribution of workplace studies to a variety of fields. Lucy Suchman’s chapter (chapter 2) stands out as an excellent example of a workplace study that results in challenging basic assumptions about how work is organized. She examines practices around the production and processing of documents within a law firm and, through this, challenges the idea that “knowledge work” and “routine work” are separable. Jacques Theureau and Geneviève Filippi (chapter 4) report on observations made in a traffic control room of a rail transportation system in France. This chapter stood out for me because of the strong and explicit link they make between observation and design, their emphasis on and insights into the collaborative process, and their well-reasoned and explicit analysis. Although his short essay was somewhat hidden between longer chapters in the book, Kjeld Schmidt’s chapter (chapter 6) on the critical role of workplace studies in CSCW also was a highlight for me. He articulates not only why workplace studies are important in CSCW, but also how they should be used to aid in fundamentally reconceptualizing “common-sense conceptions of cooperative work” (p. 145) by uncovering the ordering activities that generally go unnoticed. Chapters 11, 12, and 13 were tantalizing essays. Each of these essays presented ideas for how to bridge between workplace studies and the professions that produce technology. For example, Thomas Erickson (chapter 13) proposes the use of pattern languages (taken from architecture and urban design) as a means of communicating the findings of workplace studies to designers. Because these were short essays, I was left with the feeling that I wanted more.

Although this book makes an important contribution to the field of CSCW and to proponents of workplace studies, there are several hopes I had for the book that were not fulfilled. First, after reading the book, I am not much wiser about how to transform studies of work practice into design. I better understand the problems and have a few partially formed ideas, but do not feel more prepared to bridge this gap. With the exception of the Theureau and Filippi chapter, the authors of the workplace studies barely touch on design recommendations. Whalen and Vinkhuyzen (chapter 5) offer design recommendations, but admittedly at an abstract level. The remaining authors talk generally about how to bridge the gap between workplace studies and design without providing adequate guidance for execution. As the editors point out, “there is no method which transforms a study of a workplace into a set of design guidelines . . .” and perhaps “the development