

Towards Community-based Collaborative Workplaces

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Nowadays, there are many scenarios, based on new technologies, explaining how people will be able, using a wireless device, to remotely turn on/off car and house heating, how people will get a call for a milk empty alert from their refrigerator and so on. Is it going to contribute to a better society? Someone may answer “not really, it is simply making life easier.” Once, it was said that the way of using technology reflect the maturity of our society. So, instead of simply making life easier is there a way to use wireless technology for accessing community based knowledge and practice services?

Looking at the actual success of digital photos, either taken with a digital camera or simply with a mobile phone, it seems there are many people who are fond of sharing with others belonging to the same communities. Is it a sign showing that the border between private and public life become very tiny? Is it meaning that socialising with others that are far away becomes feasible?

Social activities and working activities have always been considered as separated periods of time. However, several studies demonstrated the importance of the social activities within the creativity and innovation process. This could explain why the coffee machine area is so important place for socialising and discovering or maturing new ideas. It is not a conventional area but much more a place where conviviality is the main or only rule to make sure anyone can enjoy the discussion and feel very confident. Patricia Vendramin (1) discussed an important challenge for the future of work: how to develop flexible telework or mobile work patterns avoiding a deterioration of working conditions? What can be a social scenario of flexibility?

flexibility?

Actually, there is a trend suggesting that organisations are in a transition towards more flexible arrangements in the workplace (see above figure). An interesting question is certainly to know who will be benefiting of those arrangements and what will be the role of ICT. However, categorising workplaces shows an evolution from individual



workplace to team workplace and then from team workplace to community based workplace. At the same time people mobility needs have pushed a technology transition from fixed to mobile solutions. So, it was for the evolution of services from individual needs to team needs and from team needs to community needs. For sure, a project team is bound by a business contract that rules relationships among team members while community members are not bound by any business contract so far.

Mobile workplace could be interpreted as people moving from one working location to another one. Our interpretation or vision is rather a single workplace everywhere at anytime, which follows the worker wherever he is. There is no more need to carry on documents or heavy lap-top and to look for power socket and network socket to plug-in your computer. You just bring with you a small wireless computer device, fitting in the pocket of your jacket or on your wrist like a watch, which enables instant connection to the Network wherever you are and whenever you need it. Wireless connectable flat screens are available almost everywhere, airport, aircrafts, stations, trains, hotel rooms, home and so on, that could be used instead of the small screen of the wireless computing device. The Network becomes the working place. You can easily set-up teleconferencing or videoconferencing with other project community members to discuss about concepts that are represented by virtual reality objects.

This mobile workplace gives a lot of flexibility as there is no more need to be located on a specific place for being able to carry on activities. At the same time, it brings the opportunity for global socialising with far away people and local socialising with people on the same geographical site having common interests. Instead of working inefficiently for hours, there could be breaks for social activities. Everyone can decide his working time-slots and breaks during the day. Somehow, it is an approach to integrate together working, learning and social activities for a more balanced way of living. No more need to travel every morning to your office and every evening back to your home. This is certainly the dream of most of the people living in big cities where travelling to and from office is a total nightmare without to mention the positive impact on decreasing considerably traffic jam, pollution and transportation stress.

One direct consequence is to gain more time to spend on social, learning or sport activities for a better family life.

Another interesting trend is the emergence of communities of knowledge and practice on the Internet, suggesting that workers are in a transition towards a new working place in between their organisation and the communities they belong to. In the eighties, organisations were expecting Artificial Intelligence and expert systems to be able to collect workers know-how, their knowledge and good practices, before they go away. It simply failed. During the last decade, Knowledge Management (KM) constituted the next try to make knowledge becoming a resource available to every worker. Unfortunately, KM still requires a lot of effort to maintain the huge amount of information for a low level of potential re-use inside the organisation. Furthermore, even when the knowledge information is existing, identifying the adequate knowledge information consume a lot of time as this information is not built on concepts or real meaning. This is exactly the point where communities of knowledge and practice are emerging as a single place collecting workers experiences in a specific domain and turning it into re-usable knowledge built on conceptual foundation and into library of shared information like vision scenarios, roadmaps, case studies and practices. Business concepts are developed and maintained by those communities as a mutualisation of effort among community members. Communities are then turning inside-out knowledge and practices in offering services to its members. One of these services could be in the form of training courses where beginners gain new competencies. Community of knowledge and practice are reflecting the new paradigm of “knowledge everywhere anytime”. Mobile access to community knowledge services (2) should dramatically speed-up the elaboration of a shared vision and common understanding as well as emergence of innovative solutions.

Last but not least, there is another trend suggesting that firms are in a move towards networked business organisations in order to support a more pro-active collaboration over the entire product, service and organisation life-cycle. This enterprise paradigm shift confirms that workplace definitely need to become mobile and have to have PnP (Plug & Play) capabilities to deal with concepts and information coming from diverse competencies involved along the life-cycle stages.

Looking at these trends together, suggest that workers will be virtually somewhere in between their organisation, the communities they belong to and the networked businesses they have to collaborate with. There will be more flexibility in working, learning and social activities that should be considered as a systemic approach. A mobile workplace could be composed of an Individual workspace and many different communities' workspaces. The individual workspace has private, semi-private, semi-public and public areas. The private area contains personal information either in the form of concepts, data or document files. Personal data could be provided by internal and external indicators. Semi-private areas are intended to host projects information. Semi-public areas are dedicated to communities' knowledge and practices. Public areas contain published documents like papers, articles, a publication list and biography. For example, a worker can publish his own competencies from his private area into the semi-public area to make them known for the members of the communities he belongs to. He can do the same into the public area whether he wants to make his competencies known by everyone. A community workspace is, for example, composed of projects and topics spaces where members can collaborate. Virtual meeting spaces for brainstorming or conferencing and conviviality space for socialising with others are among the other possible components of a community workspace.

Community based Collaborative Workplace looks like a promising research area where Mobility, Knowledge and Collaboration issues have to be considered within a multi-dimensional approach. This multidimensional approach has to be combined with several integrated perspectives such as human and social aspects, business model and organisation aspects, ICT aspects as well as legal aspects and societal transition aspects to give more chance of being successfully innovative.

References

- (1) P. Vendramin, G. Valenduc, FTU Foundation Travail-Université, *Telework in the scenarios for the future*, Telework'98
- (2) P. Pulli, P. Antoniac, M. Pallot, A. Stanescu, *Modelling scenarios of Innovative Mobile Services, Proceedings of 8th International Conference on Concurrent Enterprising "Ubiquitous Engineering in the Collaborative Economy", Rome, Italy, 17-19 June 2002*