Notions of awareness?

This position paper draws attention on ways to mediate presence and awareness of others in a distributed workplace, i.e. Stockholm County Police Call Centre.

Being aware of each other

Employees create ways of indicating what is going on, who is doing what, who is available for a discussion and/or luncheon. Sometimes it is just to give a hint of each other, sometimes it affects a work in a various ways. For example at the transnational company Apple the feeling of belonging to the company and awareness of each other was worked on several ways and on several levels, like in the company's vision, promoting contacts within the company as well as through stickers saying for example "Walk on the Mac side - You'll never Mac alone – Let's Mac together" (Garsten, 1994, p.25).

Boyle et al (2000) write that the glue behind casual interaction is informal awareness. People track and maintain general sense of who is around and what others are up to as they work and mingle in the same physical environment. Casual interaction become problematic in distributed communities, interaction drops with distance. Awareness of others and consequently opportunities for interaction diminish when people are out of sight.

Several groupware systems have been developed in order to increase possibilities for casual interaction and awareness of each other. For example media spaces, always on video have been seen to promote casual interaction (for compiled material of research finding see for example Boyle et al, 2000)

Organizational setting: Stockholm County Police Call Centre

The setting for the fieldwork reported in this paper has been the Stockholm County Police Call Centre[1], located on three islands in the Stockholm Archipelago: Arholma, Sandö, and Ornö (Lenman et al, 2002)[2]. The Call Centre started first in the autumn of 1999, and has been in full use from June 2001. Opening hours are during the weekdays from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and during the weekend from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. The Call Centre is a common resource, which is organized and managed as a single unit. It has a total of approximately 40 employees. The primary task is to handle telephone reports from the general public concerning committed crimes (except ongoing crimes) as well as general questions. In December 2002 the Call Centre handled 7.959 reports, i.e. 55% of all telephone reports to the Police in Stockholm.

Although the workplace is distributed, staff works together, sharing and following up on the same tasks, as well as creating a common work schedule. There is no fixed working hours or schedule to follow but every staff member can plan the hours in accordance that suits the person best. Communication and co-ordination between the three sites is required. Currently co-ordination is accomplished mainly by telephone calls and e-mail. There is also a strong need for face-to-face meetings. However, the employees seldom meet, because of the large distances and problems with transportation. For example, an entire day is needed for a regular meeting in the city.

The locales of the workplaces are similar in their function on the three islands, however they look a bit different. The staff members have no individual workplaces but choose a desk that is free in open-planed office. Kitchen facilities are located in meeting quarters, which are also, in various degrees, used for dining.

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[1] The names of the organization and locations are used openly as agreed with the staff and leaders of the Stockholm County Police Call Centre.
[2] Some parts of the general description of the workplace and the pre-study follow the description given in the paper to PDC 2002 where the pre-study is reported (Lenman et al, 2002).

Background for the project

An independent consultant who had worked on establishment of Call Centre brought about contact between Stockholm County Police and CID (Centre for user-oriented IT-design) in August 2001. Reason for the contact was the video communication installation, Videocafé, at CID. From the initial assessment a pre-study was conducted with an aim to investigate if it would be feasible to establish a media space[3] between the three places? The answer was positive and a research project was started in September 2002.

Ways of mediating presence

Rubber boots by the door, identification card with pictures to log in the computer system, expressions on the fellow staff members faces, way of sitting, greetings and their attention to the work as well as the notes on the white board are examples how personnel get information. The initial information insinuates how their working day is going to be, whom they are going to work with and about the workload ahead. The information is essential since the workload is regulated by number of incoming calls and number of persons working. If the general public needs to wait long time before getting through, they get irritated and this affects also the tone of the conversation. For the staff it isn't pleasant to deal with irritated people call after call. The staff plans their working hours on individual basis spanning 7 days a week from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. So, while entering to Call Centre you don't always know who and how many persons are working there at the moment.

While working in an open-plan office like the Call Centre, it is easy just look around to get an impression of what others are occupied with. It is important information in case you need assistance, need to inform of something or just need to comment on some details on the phone call. The staff members usually talk to each other between the calls. Contact like this are much more difficult while sitting in a separate offices and even more difficult while working on a distributed workplace.

Other ways of informing each other between the staff at the location as well as between the different locations are using white board, telephone and e-mail. Sometimes awareness is just to a hint of each other; sometimes it is needed to complete a work task. In the ongoing research project the aspects of awareness are one of the characteristics to make attention to while designing the video communication installation.

References

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[3] For research tradition of Media Spaces see for example Bly et al, 1993; Mackay, W.E., 1999.