Yet, mobile phone advertisements exhibit a rhetoric of working and being connected. Brand’s quote suggests that there are deliberate strategies that allow mobile work to take place outside of traditional offices. Mobile phones, personal digital assistants, Blackberry’s and laptops are facilitating mobile work practices, which are not yet well understood. Thus, wireless hotspots at parks, cafes, airport lounges, trains and other public spaces — referred to as “third spaces” — represent new venues for the study of organizational communication and organizational behavior.

Mythology about Working on the Move

There are a number of myths about the nature of mobile work practices, which are perpetuated by advertising around mobile and wireless devices. Namely, these myths include the following:

- Mobile work is glamorous, exciting and enjoyable;
- Mobile workers are young, Powerbook-toting hipsters;
- Mobile workers are always in constant movement;
- Mobile workers can work “anytime/anywhere”;
- Mobile work spaces are hybrid spaces — liminal, transitional “third spaces” — where traditional dichotomies are blurred including the coexistence of:
  - work and play,
  - online and offline,
  - public and private,
  - presence and co-presence,
  - individual and community, and
  - local and global.

Mobile work spaces are more similar to “open offices” such as newcomers, trading rooms and Japanese-style corporate offices. Thus, people who have had experience working in these types of offices might have less difficulty working in mobile work spaces than those who do not.

Cafes

People use a wide range of technologies and strategies to achieve the levels of privacy that they need to conduct their work. For example, people usually step outside to make mobile phone calls due to noise levels and small spaces. This seems to reverse common conceptions of public and private. Normally, inside spaces are conceived of as private and outside spaces are conceived of as public, but in this case, it is exactly the opposite. In addition, iPods and laptop screens are used to create private spaces or signal unavailability for interruption.

Cafes provide a wide variety of activities taking place in the café, including working, socializing, playing video games and eating. This underscores the hybrid nature of the café as a mobile work place.

The café that I studied has a core group of ten or more “regulars” who work at the café on a daily or almost daily basis, usually at the same times of day. The regulars are a community who often address each other and the staff by name, socialize together and perform a monitoring function of each other’s possessions and laptops. In an informal interview, one regular commented that he would like to move but he does not want to be too far away from the café since he has not found another place like it.

Reality about Working on the Move

Mobile workers — while more common in some professions than others — are diverse in age, race, gender and profession.

Mobile workers spend many hours at a time working in specific locations but, this time may be more frequently interrupted.

Mobile workers may include people that are not physically present in the spaces being observed due to the nature of wireless networks and their usage patterns.

Mobile workers use various strategies to negotiate their availability and ability to work “anytime/anywhere”.

Over time, mobile workers develop new skills that allow them to conduct their work in a variety of settings.

Spectrum Analysis

On a rainy afternoon in June, I conducted research at City Hall Park. While there was no on visibly using the wireless network, an outdoor graduation ceremony was being held. However, when I used the spectrum analyzer, I found that large amounts of data were being transferred over the wireless network. Thus, I came to realize that there were users who were not physically present in the space but who were actively using the network (perhaps from a nearby building). This extended my view of a mobile work place as having members who are not physically present.

Using a spectrum analyzer, it is possible for ethnographers to go beyond what is observable and make inferences about the ways in which mobile and wireless technologies are being used in mobile work places. In short, the technical data makes “visible,” wireless network usage that was previously invisible to ethnographic researchers. In this way, socio-technical relationships can be recorded and visualized in 3-D graphs. This technical data reveals interesting contradictions that force ethnographers to rethink their assumptions about the ways in which mobile work places are being used. By analyzing the technical data, researchers can begin to understand usage patterns based on time of day and spatial, contextual and environmental factors. In addition, ethnographers can learn about usage patterns occurring inside and outside of the boundaries of the mobile work places themselves.

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