Contextualising information practices and personal information management in mobile work

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Traditional, centralised offices and workspaces have provided a common setting for information practices research (Courtright, 2007; Harris and Dewdney, 1994). One specific line of information practices inquiry concerns personal information management, individuals’ daily activities of “acquiring, organising, maintaining, retrieving, using, and controlling the distribution of information items” (Jones and Teevan, 2007), both physical and digital, that they encounter. As personal information management is equally applicable to professional and non-professional instances, it might be considered an apt lens for studying mobile work; individuals who perform mobile work navigate various boundaries—spatial, temporal, social, informational, and otherwise (e.g., Kakhara and Sorenson, 2001; Urry, 2007)—so to access, use, and store their professional content successfully, and also plan and corral artefacts in order to enable their work in and across various settings (Perry, O’Hara, Sellen, Harper, and Brown, 2001) and configurations (Olson and Olson, 2014; Sorenson, 2011). (Here, the term mobile work is used to denote the professional work tasks of individuals who are required or enabled to transit more often than episodically between disparate locations—offices, homes, and coffee shops, for example.) Further, mobile work not only depends upon informational considerations like these, but is often itself inherently ‘informational’ and knowledge-based (Davis, 2002).

Yet, despite this seeming congruence between the aims of information
practices scholarship and the realities of mobile work, there is little
discussion of the intricacies of information practices and personal
information management activities in the context of mobile work. This
short paper briefly reviews the largely socio-technological scope of
mobile work research thus far, points to three possible dimensions of a
more ‘informationally holistic’ view of mobile work—accounting for
various interactions beyond the technological—and describes a project
now underway that is exploring mobile workers’ information practices
and their management activities. What shapes do mobile workers’
information practices and activities take?

To date, information-related discussions of mobile work have been
approached mainly from technological angles, often in the subfields of
human-computer interaction and computer-supported collaborative
work. Recently, Ciolfi and Pinatti de Carvalho (2014) and Erickson,
Jarrahi, Thomson, and Sawyer (2014) have stated that studies of mobile
work ought to account for work practices, mobility issues, technological
concerns, and work-life boundaries as interrelated parts of mobile
workers’ day-to-day realities. Even inclusive of these four elements,
however, research will still risk an incomplete, potentially abstracted,
picture of mobile workers’ experiences, presuming one is interested in
gleaning more holistically informational insights of mobile work,
beyond the technological. Three potential (equally interrelated) avenues
by which information practices approaches could illuminate the growing
body of mobile work research are outlined below; these suggestions
represent only three possible dimensions of many within this particular
context and should be altered and extended as research in this vein
progresses.

First, as existing mobile work research and theorization remains
relatively nascent (Pica and Kakihara, 2003), individual workers are not
usually considered beyond their immediate work situations. Yet no one
enters the professional realm an empty vessel, without the same sorts of
“personal information infrastructure” that Marchionini (1995) notes
affect information seeking; mental models, past experiences, and
specific abilities are brought to and continually shaped through information encounters. Information practices and management preferences and tendencies manifest as personality traits (Massey, TenBrook, Tatum, and Whittaker, 2014), “styles” (Berlin, Jeffries, O’Day, Paepcke, and Wharton, 1993), and dynamics (Heath, Knoblauch, and Luff, 2000) that come to bear in social and collaborative situations, common features of mobile work. Taken up by information researchers as group information management issues, these ideas may serve as a springboard for further investigation of the virtual settings of mobile work, or may even find application to considerations of the physical settings of mobile work.

Second, mobile work research has yet to probe the information activities and strategies of individual mobile workers. Instead, information-related discussions occur at higher levels, with a technological purview, not often delving into the roles of non-digital artefacts over the long-term or across different settings and situations (independent, collaborative, and collocated work, for example). Similarly, individual mobile workers’ “meta-level” (Jones, 2008) activities, such as information organisation, storage, and discarding, across devices and formats, remain to be examined.

Lastly, mobile workers encounter and use information across multiple physical locations, and while some existing mobile work research accounts for setting (e.g., Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Liegl, 2014), such discussions are not often detailed in their attention to sociospatial contexts, so key to information practices investigations (see Mervyn and Allen, 2012, for a review of such literature). Liegl (2014) found that settings influence work processes like creativity, and Spinuzzi (2012) showed that different individuals perceive of the same setting differently, raising questions of whether and how individuals’ information practices and activities are nurtured or confined, implicitly or explicitly, depending on the “psychological and social ecology” (Marchionini, 1995) that different locations engender. A mobile worker interacts with settings in ways that extend beyond logistics of resources
and technologies, and ‘informationally holistic’ studies could account for this.

This short paper has identified three potential crossroads between information practices scholarship and the context of mobile work, which are currently being investigated, altered, and refined in an exploratory pilot project that involves approximately 35-50 mobile workers in the United States. As mobile work itself and mobile work research are relatively new phenomena, this pilot study is gathering data from individuals across both diverse professions (consultancy, design, and academia, for example) and locations. At present, semi-structured interviews are being conducted that centre on—among other issues—mobile workers’ professional needs; their salient information tools and artefacts; their information formats, upkeep, organisation, and storage; as well as their workspaces and their information activities therein. Interviews are expected to conclude in June, and a subset of this data (from 15-20 interviews in one state) will be analyzed thereafter, affording findings about the information practices and activities of mobile workers at a more encompassing yet finer level of detail than seems to currently exist. A formalised study, including interviews, observation, and a diary component with a targeted mobile worker population, will follow. Given that a small percentage, if any, of the present workforce consists of true “digital natives,” such an informationally inclusive investigation of mobile work seems appropriate.

References


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