

## Working on the Move: Flexible Work and the Role of Mobile and Wireless Technology

“the most productive people... have developed ways to work outside offices, not in them.”

Stewart Brand, co-founder of the Global Business Network and founder of The Whole Earth Catalog (*Fortune*, March 22, 2006)

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

Yet, mobile phone advertisements exhibit a rhetoric of working and being connected "anytime, anywhere" that disregards the extent to which mobile work practices are situated in *particular times and particular places*

### 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, and
- 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:

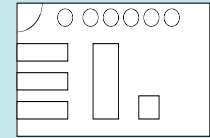
- work and play,
- online and offline,
- public and private,
- presence and co-presence,
- individual and community, and
- local and global.

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

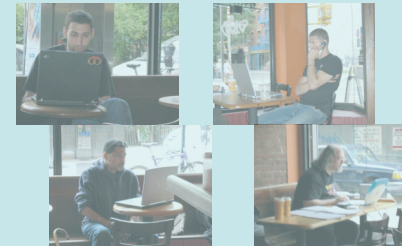
### Cafes

I conducted over 20 hours of ethnographic observation at an Internet café on the Lower East Side in New York in May 2006 between the hours of 11AM-9PM in which I studied the café as a "mobile work place". I found the following aspects most interesting:

•Mobile work places allow for flexibility in space as well as in time. The peak working hours at the café were from noon to six p.m. with people staying for one to two hours at a time and sometimes for the entire day. At the end of the day, instead of getting up and going home, people often remained in the café for a drink with other "regulars", had dinner with a friend in the other part of the café or moved to another café to continue working. In addition, people often move from table to table until their desired work location is achieved and get up frequently to visit with other "regulars" working at the café.



The floor plan of a Lower East Side Internet café.



•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.

•I witnessed 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.

•In my informal interviews, I uncovered individuals who reported that they worked at the café specifically to get *offline* since the Internet is available at home (this reverses conception that people go to wireless cafes only to use the Internet).

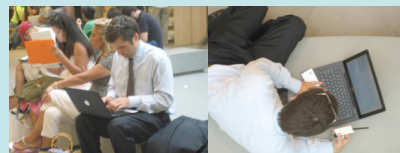
•The café that I studied has a core group of ten or more "regulars" who work at the café on a daily or almost daily basis, usually at the same times of day. The regulars are a community who often address each other and the staff by name, socialize together and perform a monitoring function of each other's 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.

### Parks, Public Spaces, Train Stations and Airport Lounges



Brooklyn Bridge Park (May 2006), City Hall Park (September 2003) and Sony Center, Berlin (June 2006)

Oslo, Copenhagen, Dresden and Berlin (June 2006)



Apple Store Fifth Avenue, New York (August 2006)

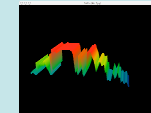
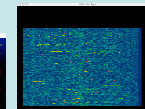


Bryant Park  
New York (August 2006)

### Spectrum Analysis



The red dashed line above represents the average of all of the wireless network traffic.



On a rainy afternoon in June, I conducted research at City Hall Park. While there was no one 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 were not physically co-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.

### Reality about Working on the Move

•Mobile work spaces are hybrid spaces that blur the boundaries of work/play, private/public, physical/virtual, online/offline.

•Multiple technologies are used to regulate these boundaries i.e. iPod, cell phone, laptops.

•Mobile work -- while offering new forms of flexibility and availability -- is difficult, frustrating and awkward.

•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 work places 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.

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