“I Work Here”: Cross-channel, Blended Spaces, and the Challenges of Digimodernism

Andrea Resmini
Jönköping International Business School, Sweden
E-mail: andrea.resmini@ju.se

From the shop facing the street in the thatched houses of medieval Paris to the assembly line factory of early nineteenth century London, from the office of corporate America in the 1940s to the ubiquitous open plan of the 1960s and 1970s, the western idea of what “workplace” means has undergone quite a transformation. The accelerated digitization of these past four decades has introduced new, sometimes puzzling specimens: people working on their phones while driving, typing away at portable computers on the beach and in coffee shops, or managing communication strategies on Facebook.

Clearly, the way we work today is not the way we used to work just twenty years ago; “I work here” is a simple phrase, hiding the fact that many would find defining exactly what that “here” means terribly difficult. In the service industry and in other types of employment, work hours often do not follow a 9-17 rule, loosely spilling over into evenings and weekends. Personal smartphones, tablets, laptops are often used in combination with company-sanctioned devices. The office identifies less and less a dedicated space, as any place offering the right affordances, be it the home, an airport, or a train, is the right place for work. Generational gaps separate digital immigrants and digital natives and the way they project technology into their lives.

Surprisingly enough, the idea of the “workplace” itself seems to have changed little in mainstream practice. Our spaces are still designed as if all the technology needed is desktop computers and telephones. If we exclude a few visionary pioneer efforts, the average workplace of today is not that different from what we used to experience in the early 1990s. While digital technology, including screens and sensors, is definitely considered as part of what goes “into” the workplace, it has certainly not produced the remarkable changes that the introduction of electricity, for example, produced more than a hundred years ago. These might be the years of consumer-grade augmented or virtual reality, but conference rooms are still mostly set up for face-to-face meetings, with the added bonus of a projector and wi-fi access for teleconferencing.
This is a problem. Our processes and routines have been deeply transformed by technology, with many activities being transferred from physical space to digital space, and many requiring constant, seamless movement between the two. The workplace, and what it will become in the next fifty years, sits at a critical junction; the workplace is both a powerful agent of change and a major friction area.

The steady merging of digital technology into the physical environment of the workplace calls for a fundamental rethinking, one that turns what is currently fragmentary, colliding, disjointed workflows into a smooth experience seamlessly moving across places and processes, a blended space of action where digital information is comprehensively integrated from the beginning into the activities that generate the workplace itself. This workplace does not stop at the physical boundaries of the traditional “office” but rather supports the way people arbitrarily connect physical and digital elements in accordance to personal patterns of use as they move from a mobile app to a human agent to a physical appliance and back at will, as they do every other moment of their lives. This workplace willingly extends into the devices we use, turning homes, trains, and airport lounges into a distributed space of action for carrying out work activities.

In the course of a study (Tan, Resmini, Tarasov, & Adlemo, 2015) carried out between 2014 and 2015, researchers at Jönköping University’s School of Engineering and International Business School in Jönköping, Sweden worked together with a public organization and a private firm based in Småland, Sweden, to assess how digital technology was shaping their current workplaces and to identify related trends having a positive or negative impact on the work experience. The study, conducted through contextual, semi-structured interviews and on-site, passive ethnographic observation, intended to capture and describe digital / physical processes, behavioral patterns of use and appropriation, and the general user experience of employees. It framed the relationships between people, their workplace, and digital technology in the light of three fundamental and well-documented shifts:

1. The design shift leading from usability, ergonomics and performance to user experience and satisfaction. Attention was devoted not only to investigating whether activities were carried out correctly or on time, but to how these played out in terms of positive engagement.

2. The social shift from postmodernism, citationism and authorship to digimodernism, onwardness, evanescence, conversations, and multiple anonymous ownership. Digimodernism is the product of computerization on culture and society, a different type of textuality best represented in social media and one in which we all participate.
3. The demographic shift from a population of digital immigrants to one of digital natives, bringing along a different outlook on computing, not as a goal but an enabler, and the post-digital world in which “digital is trivial” and “the compost for new ideas” Nicholas Negroponte (1998) was describing in his famous “Beyond Digital” op-piece for Wired.

The study highlighted a number of technological, spatial, applicative and organizational stress points touching on a number of very different needs, wants, and concerns, from the reduction in private space for employees in both digital and physical space to legal constraints impeding a “bring-your-own-device” approach, and the general inadequacy of the seams transforming digital into physical and physical into digital. Trends such as the introduction of proactive, context-aware computing collide with well-proven but often cumbersome legacy architectures. Organizational shifts from formal, desk-bound structures to emergent, ubiquitous co-operations are hindered by hierarchy and the need to control and quantify. Portable personal devices belonging to the firm and assigned to employees are seen as ambiguous and conflicting with one’s own digital identity.

As activities and artifacts merge into complex, blended experiences and millennials and “digital natives” increasingly work side by side with “digital immigrants”, these currently disjointed, misaligned, and often conflicting pushes and pulls need to be resolved in order to turn the workplace into a fully transformative, information-based ecosystem, where technology, as Mark Weiser and John Seely Brown (1998) suggested a few years ago, is calm, invisible technology that disappears into behavior.

The study concluded by positing that this blended, distributed workplace configures a semantic and not a physical construct, as work can be performed anytime and anywhere. It is a blended space part of an ecosystem of actors, tasks, and information channels. It is many different, individual, overlapping workplaces, and a place always open for business, 365 days a year.

References