Hoffice: Social Innovation through Sustainable Nomadic Communities

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Abstract. This paper presents an ongoing ethnographic study of the Hoffice Network in Stockholm, Sweden. The concept Hoffice (Home + Office) relates to the emerging phenomenon of people opening up their homes as shared workplaces, and to the related organizational framework enabling the creation of co-working spaces. We focus on *sharing* and *caring* as two overarching values emerging from our preliminary data analysis. In doing so, we discuss three main themes characterizing the socio-cultural practices around the Hoffice, namely: a concern for other people, a concern for implicit norms and cultural aspects inherent in the Hoffice structure, and the role of the facilitators and organizers in making Hoffice a sustainable, self-organizing practice. These themes allow us to develop an initial understanding of the notion of nomadic culture and to connect it to a view of the collaborative economy that values sense of community, mutual trust, support and continuity over time.

1 Introduction

Research on nomadicity and mobile CSCW has focused on the variety of technology-mediated practices people (mostly workers) enact in order to mobilise

work. This body of work has drawn attention to how mobility is achieved practically (Luff and Heath, 1998; Perry et al., 2001; Su and Mark, 2008; Weilenmann, 2003), to the mutual interactions between place and work and how they shape each other (Brown and O'Hara, 2003; de Carvalho, 2014; Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007), to the use of constellations of technologies to manage and distribute work to several locations (Rossitto et al., 2014) and, more recently, to the range of motivational factors underlying mobile work practices (de Carvalho et al., 2017).

In this paper, we revisit the notion of nomadic work and connect it to the broader notion of nomadic culture. *Nomadic culture* entails a variety of economic, social, cultural and technological practices enabling and constituting nomadic practices. As such, we argue that it provides a more contemporary understanding of nomadicity grounded in recent empirical changes, such as the spread of wireless connectivity and the rise of the so-called collaborative economy.

As the application area of mobile computing moves at a fast pace, working "anytime, anywhere" (Kleinrock, 1996) has become an everyday practice rather than merely a vision. The broad variety of mobile services, apps, and devices available has contributed to the emergence of dedicated, public or semi-public places enabling work on the move, or at a variety of locations. This includes, for instance, "COffices", airport lounges and dedicated co-working spaces. Work activities in such places are highly technologically-mediated, and often associated to the promise of individual empowerment and flexibility (Gray et al., 2017). However, there are now critiques questioning the purported freedom that these arrangements, detached from traditional workplaces, entail (Gregg, 2013). Flexibility is desirable for some, and an unwanted burden for others. Recent research illustrates how reasons for engaging in nomadic work can range from choice to opportunity and obligation (de Carvalho et al., 2017). Moreover, even individuals who willingly embrace flexible work sometimes long for a work community, or miss the comforts of a structured place and time for work.

In this paper, we present the case of the Hoffice network, a self-organized community with the main goal of providing a shared social context and a sense of belonging, as well as enhanced productivity away from "traditional" workplaces and office arrangements. In its current state, the main technology adopted by the Hoffice in Stockholm is a Facebook group, mostly used to advertise and organize Hoffice events.

2 Case study

The Hoffice network was founded in Stockholm in the beginning of 2014, with the main goals to: i) enable its members to access and collectively use physical resources which are otherwise typically used only individually, and ii) provide an organizational framework enabling the creation of facilitated co-working spaces.

The H in Hoffice stands for "Home", a physical resource that in modern, urban societies is often underutilized (at least in Western countries). As *sharing* is one of the core values, the Hoffice Network is often associated with the ongoing discourse within the sharing economy addressing the access to goods and services as a way to enable a more sustainable utilisation of resources and, thus, an alternative social model. At the moment of writing this paper, a total of 1950 people are members of the Hoffice Facebook group in Stockholm; their professional backgrounds vary, including entrepreneurs, freelancers, students, retired people, job-seekers, and employees of companies or universities who have the possibility to work away from their "regular" offices.

2.1 Data collection

During the first phase of our project (July 2016-April 2017), we have carried out an ethnographic investigation of the Hoffice Network. A number of qualitative methods have been used, particularly *participant observations*, *interviews*, and a *focus group* with regular Hoffice participants. Furthermore, we have conducted *digital ethnography* in order to understand emerging activities and personal interactions in the context of the Hoffice Facebook group, and artefact analysis of the Hoffice website.

While the first and the second author of this paper have been involved in the data collection, the third author, who is the founder of the Hoffice Network, has facilitated our introduction to the setting and has also been an informant in the early stage of the study. For the second phase of the project, we are organizing two design workshops aimed at tailoring an existing social platform for the Hoffice Network. This will move our project more towards a research strategy that could be characterised as Action Research.

3 Preliminary results

Hoffice events are usually advertised on the local Facebook group of the network. Once an event is created by a member who is willing to share his/her home as a workplace, any member can show interest and sign up for it. The *organizer* of the event usually sets the number of people who can attend, which is, in most cases, determined by the size of the apartment and the number of work stations available there. When an event takes place, guests are free to work on anything they want, and activities are not restricted to what is strictly defined as work. The host is usually responsible for introducing and keeping the *structure* (this is a core concept to the community) of the work day. This is referred to as *facilitating* the event, including timing the alternation of 45-minute long work sessions and short breaks, usually taken together with the intent to socialise with each other and to meet new people. As a common practice, in the beginning and in the end of each

working session, each participant states his/her goals for the upcoming session, and then tells everyone what has actually been accomplished. The motivation for this practice is to help participants to formulate a clear and explicit goal that is actually feasible within the timeframe provided. A regular day spans from 9.30 to 16.30 but this time is not fixed, and people are allowed to come and go as it best suits them.

The *structure* has the instrumental and practical goal to organize the working day. However, the synchronized alternation of working sessions and breaks is also meant to contribute to a sense of mutuality and trust among the participants and the opportunity for building a positive and supportive group. It is this sense of support, rather than the cooperation on the same tasks or activities, that characterizes Hoffice as a shared and collaborative working environment.

The organization of the participatory, shared, activities inherent in the Hoffice network can be regarded as an example of social innovation. Together with the design of current and future enabling technologies, it provides a research opportunity to rethink the role of online platforms as means: i) to establish and maintain supportive relationships between people, and ii) to enable them to come together in order to share goods, skills and various resources.

3.1 Sharing as caring

Social support, collective intelligence, continuity and flexibility in how activities take place, trust between individuals, sense of community, and openness are some of the key values that characterize not only the concept of Hoffice, but also the experience of several informants in our study. While these values are not clear-cut, and some of them are at times in tension with each other (i.e. sense of community and openness), they all connect to the idea that sharing resources (the home) and engaging in self-organising events have the potential to reposition people as central members of their local communities. For instance, a shared workspace like the one created by Hoffice is empowering for people who do not have stable offices (i.e. freelancers), as it provides a social dimension for work otherwise carried out alone. Moreover, it makes people less dependent on formal organizations, for example as they do not need to rent a co-working space from a private company.

As the exchanges with other people emerge at the level of mutual trust and reciprocal support, *sharing intertwines with caring for other people*. This point is central to our understanding of nomadic culture. While a number of studies on mobile CSCW have illustrated the challenges to manage work at a variety of places (Brown and O'Hara, 2003; Perry et al., 2001; Rossitto et al., 2014; Rossitto and Eklundh, 2007), the main characteristic of Hoffice as a changing workplace, is a concern for other people, and for managing the tension between social continuity (co-working with friends or acquaintances who are familiar with the structure) and yet being open for new members to join. This is what we refer to as

planned togetherness. We do not argue that the actual physical place is not relevant to the Hoffice. Going to a stranger's home might, in fact, be a barrier to participation for some members, and there are a number of Hoffices organised at the level of local neighbourhoods to facilitate participation. Rather, we argue for the relevance of the co-working structure and its underlying values in bringing people together. For instance, we are further investigating cases in which the structure itself has been mobilized to different contexts, such as coffee shops, virtual meetings on Skype (Voffice), and public libraries (Boffice[1]).

3.2 In-between facilitating and organizing

As mentioned above, facilitating and organizing are the two main activities of managing Hoffice events. However, as the network has grown rapidly over a short period of time, a number of challenges have emerged regarding such activities and the respective roles. Firstly, there has been a practical problem of scalability and unbalance between the number of possible participants *(guests)* and the number of people who volunteer to be organizers *(hosts)*. A second issue relates to the responsibilities inherent in facilitating an event, particularly keeping the structure without imposing it on the participants. This is experienced as a challenge, especially when several newcomers are present and the role of the facilitator (unwillingly) requires reminding other people of what the rules are, rather than just keeping sessions on time. Finally, some people would be willing host Hoffice events at their home but are still reluctant or nervous to take on the responsibility to facilitate the event.

The possibility to enable flexibility between organizing and facilitating is currently being explored in terms of technology design, particularly in terms of how tailoring existing platforms could enable a redistribution of these two roles. Other possible, partial solutions to the challenge involve organizing Hoffices in the context of public spaces, such as libraries, as well as separating out responsibilities related to running a Hoffice so that the person hosting need not be the facilitator etc., thus allowing more people to be actively involved in co-creating the event and lessening the burden placed on any one, central community member.

4 Towards a nomadic culture

While the lack of a stable workplace makes Hoffice participants an instance of nomadic workers, the physical dimension of the place and the technology available are not such a big concern in this context. People move around with their laptops and they know what type of technology will be available at

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[1] The Swedish word for library is "bibliotek" which explains the "B" in Boffice.

someone's home, as this is often advertised in the event description. What is interesting, instead, is how principles taken from the collaborative economy (sharing domestic spaces) become instrumental to recreating the social dimension of the workplace in a way that privileges reciprocal support and trust among the participants. Here, we see an example of how the notion of *"Nomadic Culture"* can be a suitable notion to talk about the Hoffice, as it entails the variety of economic, social, cultural and technological practices underlying mobility. Besides, it helps making sense as a way to establish self-organizing, local communities where members not only share physical spaces but also come together to care for each other – this is a main difference from previous studies on place-making in temporary work places such as coffee shops.

This move from nomadic practices to nomadic culture poses a number of questions that we would like to discuss during the workshop:

- Should we regard Hoffice participants simply as (nomadic) *"workers"*? There is an inherent nomadic aspect in Hoffice practices, but are participants just workers? Can participation in the Hoffice be regarded as a sign or a statement about something more? Are participants co-creators of social innovation?
- If we regard Hoffice as an example of "normalised" nomadic practices, what are the conceptual implications in terms of rethinking the workplace and co-working? How does this reflect on the design of platforms that bring together workplace practices and principles of the collaborative economy?

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