

Exploring the Effects of Enterprise Instant Messaging Presence Information on Employee Attendance in a Distributed Workforce: An Ethnographic Study of a Large Professional Services Organization

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ABSTRACT

According to John Adams' equity theory for employee motivation, employees place great importance on relative effort or input to its outcomes at the work place. However, as actual employee productivity is often difficult to estimate, anecdotal evidence suggests that employees frequently tend to compare the average number of hours worked per day. Geographically distributed or mobile workforces are of particular interest because such employees may not easily be able to physically observe their co-workers and, thus, estimate their relative effort. Instant Messaging (IM) has recently been adopted in many workplaces; yet, research on potential effects that IM presence awareness feature may have on employee attendance in a distributed workforce is virtually non-existent. This paper bridges that gap in the literature by presenting relevant findings, which have been derived from a 12-month-long ethnographic study of a large professional services organization. The authors show that, depending on the relative employee power relationship, presence awareness information may have significant positive or negative effects on a range of employee attendance dimensions.

Keywords: Employee Attendance, Enterprise Instant Messaging, Ethnography, Interpretive Research, Presence Awareness, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that employee absenteeism has significant impacts on the economy

in general (Steers & Rhodes, 1984), and while organizations are applying a wide range of measures aimed at controlling employee attendance, many such measures have been shown not to be very effective (Scott & Taylor, 1982). According to the equity theory (Adams, 1965), employees

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place great importance on relative effort. It stems from the natural and often unconscious need to balance their input at work with the outputs they receive from it. However, as the actual employee productivity is often difficult to estimate (Ramírez & Nembhard, 2004), anecdotal evidence suggests that employees frequently tend to compare the average number of hours worked per day. Geographically distributed or mobile workforces are of particular interest (Konradt & Hoch, 2007; Liu & Burn, 2009) because such employees may not easily be able to physically observe their co-workers and, thus, estimate their relative effort. For instance, professional services organizations often place their consultants—e.g., accountants, engineers, auditors, etc.—in client organizations.

Instant Messaging (IM) has been defined as “near-synchronous computer-based one-on-one communication” (Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000, p. 2), and besides being widely used by teenagers (Grinter & Palen, 2002), it has also been adopted in many workplaces (Herbsleb, Atkins, Boyer, Handel, & Finholt, 2002; Nardi et al., 2000). Studies have shown that IM is effective at developing and improving working relationships (Cho, Trier, & Kim, 2005; Quan-Haase, 2010; Zhang, Kobler, Tremaine, & Milewski, 2010), and some companies are even using IM to communicate with their customers (Guan & Alkinkemer, 2002). One particular feature of IM—presence awareness—is of particular interest as it may provide such information as which users are online, how long they have been online, if they are active at their computers, and the like. Presence has been defined as “a person’s availability and willingness for communication at the time responses were sought from him or her” (Haron et al., 2011, p. 1). As such, the presence awareness feature is of particular relevance for distributed and mobile workforces as it allows co-workers to track each other’s attendance. As a result, this paper explores the effects of enterprise instant messaging applications—and in particular the presence awareness feature (Frossler, 2010)—on employee attendance in a distributed workforce through a 12 month

long ethnographic study of a large professional services organization.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The background section presents a comprehensive literature review on the use of IM in organizations as well as on employee motivation and attendance related literature. The methodology section describes the organization under study and explains the ethnographic data collection approach. The ‘data analysis framework’ section details the theoretical lens guiding data analysis. The ‘results and discussion’ section summarizes and elaborates on the findings. The conclusion section presents concluding remarks, and the ‘limitation and future work’ section discusses the main limitations and recommends corresponding future research opportunities.

BACKGROUND

Instant Messaging

In a 2008/2009 survey of 444 US organizations on emerging technology adoption, Gartner found that IM was ranked as the highest value emerging technology and that it was fully adopted by more than 30% of respondents (Fenn, 2009). Furthermore, Gartner predicts that “by 2013, 95% of workers in Global 100 organizations will use the IM client as their primary interface for computer-based, real-time communications” (Smith, 2009a, p. 2). While the IM landscape is rapidly changing, current market leaders in enterprise IM applications include, Avaya, Cisco, Google, IBM, Microsoft, Novell, and Siemens Enterprise Networks (Smith, 2010).

IM has its roots in UNIX utilities such as “talk” and “write” (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Nardi et al., 2000) and it is most commonly used for one-on-one communication (Quan-Haase, Cothrel, & Wellman, 2005). This is in contrast to traditional chat applications, which first required users to connect to a “chat room” before they could communicate with each other (Nardi et al., 2000). However, distinctions between chat and IM have been blurred in the recent times

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