

The Future of Hybrid Work: A position paper

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1. INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 pandemic has turned the nature of work ‘in limbo’, a transitional phase between the traditional on-site workplace and hybrid and remote work conditions. Set practices and rules around the institutionalized framework of “being at work” are now up for discussion and raising questions on several levels:

Collaboration and human interaction: Hybrid and remote work conditions are offering new (virtual) ways of collaboration even across different time zones. However, what does this in the long run mean for social interactions and relationships with co-workers as well as managers? How do we build trust through virtual interactions and what role do social interactions and the stimulation of senses play for the wellbeing of an employee? What are possible futures of collaboration and human interactions at work?

Embodied presence at work: Remote work gives people many new options on how to design their work life and how to be present. Some might be working from the office, others from home or even while traveling. However, in what way does this impact the connection to an organization and its values when presence becomes rather a state than a place? What are possible futures of embodied presence at work?

Differences in workplace environments: Many jobs can today be done digitally. However, there are still jobs which by its nature have to be on-site like farming or industry production. What impact might socio-material and technological differences in workplace environments have on everyday work practices? What are possible futures of socio materiality in different workplace environments?

In the course of the NordiCHI 2022 Workshop on the Future of Work I would like to challenge our thinking around finding answers to the questions raised above.

2. SCIENTIFIC PURPOSE, RELEVANCE AND NOVELTY

In the following I am presenting some of the developments within design research, participatory practices and futuring methodology which can be very interesting to take into account when thinking about the future of (hybrid) work.

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2.1 The concept of ‘work’ as a design situation

While the concept of ‘work’ traditionally is a rather political, institutionalized topic as it is one of the main economic drivers of a country and in that way one of the engines of a country’s productivity and economic wellbeing one might think that the future of the concept of ‘work’ should be decided by economists and politicians.

However, there are various strands within design research that suggest that also design, both in the form of material expression, scenarios [6, 7, 9] and other mediated artifacts [2] can be used as means to speculate about how things could be in the future. These efforts are most often framed as speculative design [1, 16, 17] critical design [10, 11] design fiction [2] or discursive design [15]. What is shared between these is the fact that they mobilize the language of designed and seemingly utilitarian objects to communicate ideas, operate as a tool for thinking through issues, and raise awareness around issues of psychological, sociological and ideological consequence [15].

2.2 The scandinavian notion of design futuring

Designers should not have the power to define futures alone, but do this together with experts, politicians and lay-people and use it as a tool for public discussion and debate. Dunne & Raby [11] argue that if speculation is used at all levels of society, designers can help increase the probability of more desirable futures, and thus discover what undesirable futures consist of, to avoid them in time. These arguments underline what Tharp & Tharp [16] refer to as the ‘Scandinavian notion’ of design futuring methods where “emphasis [is put] on participatory processes and practical, service-oriented outcomes”.

2.3 Participatory design and its ability of accessing complex research areas

Participatory design is grounded in a Scandinavian approach of involving end-users democratically into design and development processes of systems and services. Not only as evaluators or critics, but active co-designers [3]. In light of the high degree of user experience and meaning making that came with the third wave of HCI [5] understanding people and their underlying needs has gotten a main focus in the design of products and services of today. Here, methods of participatory ethnography like probes [15] design games [14] and co-creation workshops [4] promise great success when trying to make sense of complex design situations. Halse et al. [12] even claim that “there is a powerful transformative potential in creating engagement through social encounters where

distinctions between everyday life and visionary experimentation blur”.

Translating this into the complex research field around the future of work, it might not be enough to explore the experience of being part of a system under rapid change from ‘the outside’ using standardized methods and linear decision processes. It rather requires an active inclusion of stakeholders, employees and employers, in co-creation processes to understand their ideas, expectations and concerns around the future nature of work.

2.4 Ethnographic Experiential Futures

Candy and Kornet [8] have, with their field guide to Ethnographic Experiential Futures (EXF) formed a clear guide on how ethnographic inquiries on stakeholders ideas of the future can be multiplied and mediated into experiential scenarios for public and polity to interact with and reflect upon. Hereby, they are offering a design-driven, hybrid approach to foresight which aims at increasing the accessibility, variety and depth of available images of the future. As tried out by Jenkins et. al [13] in a case study circling around the future supermarket, it was found that EXF helps generate a broader understanding of future scenarios and the technologies and interactive practices that might be part of it. Also, it was found that confronting people with alternative future scenarios, to then observe and record their reactions, can be used to inform decision makers and developers of future technologies to avoid possible negative consequences of their use [13]. This, the reactions from people towards speculations of the future, is also what Auger describes as the true products of this form of design [futuring] research [1]. However, it is not known yet in what way the reflections sparked by design futuring methods can trigger change in industrial settings.

3. RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

In the course of my PhD project I propose participatory futuring as a research approach to create knowledge around the future of hybrid work and how it might unfold in practice. My hypothesis is that a participatory futuring approach can engage stakeholders from different industries in a collective development of alternative futures and thereby inform the re-thinking process of the nature of work within and across industries. Accordingly, I am in the course of my PhD project investigating the following questions:

RQ1: What are possible futures of hybrid work in terms of human interactions, embodied presence and sociomateriality in different workplace environments? How might they unfold in practice?

RQ2: How well can participatory futuring methods impact the knowledge creation around hybrid and remote work conditions within industries as well as trigger change processes?

3.1 Planned Studies

In the following three of the intended studies of my PhD project are shortly summed up. The main goal is to draw on a research-through-design approach, connecting theory on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and participatory design

with design futuring methods under the umbrella term of ‘participatory futures’.

3.1.1 Ethnographic empirical basis

Inspired by workplace ethnography and design ethnography, a qualitative study among employees of multiple industrial collaborators of the REWORK project will be conducted to identify current hybrid and remote work conditions, and to inquire into anticipated development directions of the future of work. The qualitative study includes a series of participatory design workshops where the analyzed findings will be discussed and concluded by a collection of identified design futuring opportunities to be explored in the next phase.

3.1.2 Design and Development of Experiential Future

Borrowing from a collection of futuring methods that use designed artefacts to make futures experientiable (e.g. Ethnographic Experiential Futures; Critical and Speculative Design, Design Fiction), this study is centered around the design and development of a collection of artefacts and media that manifests a wide range of future work conditions. By grounding these future work conditions in ethnographic insight, and the voices of employees amongst several industries, the collection of artefacts materializes collectively envisioned ideas on the future nature of work – in an evocative way. Here, a strong cooperation with the other university partners and their PhD students is strived after.

Afterwards, the designed and developed artefacts and media are curated into a showcase/exhibition for the industrial collaborators of the REWORK project and their employees. As such, the showcase serves as a boundary object, inviting employees from various industries to collaboratively reflect on the projected futures. The curated showcase/exhibition is used as a platform for inquiry.

3.1.3 Anchoring visions in practices

A longer period is dedicated to qualitatively assessing the uptake of the envisioned ideas on the future nature of work presented at the exhibition. Academically, the intention is to find out how well participatory futuring methods impact the knowledge creation around hybrid and remote work conditions within industries and in what way this knowledge is taken into account within the planning and execution of hybrid and remote work procedures at the collaborating industrial partners.

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