

(Work) communality in the COVID-19 era

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In the middle of the COVID-19 autumn of 2020, I was asked in the Talentia magazine's quick poll what had made me laugh at work the last time. That seemingly simple question led to many little insights about the remote work of an information worker in the COVID-19 era. It also highlighted observations that often remain hidden in everyday life about how work communities are built and maintained – perhaps even about communities in general.

My own work communities are diverse. The most concrete and long-term one – and also the most traditional one – is my work community at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Eastern Finland. I am one of the many off-site workers: in the so-called normal situation, I spend some time in Kuopio, but even then I work remotely from Helsinki most of the time. My other work communities include associations formed as a result of me being a researcher, such as the Saimaan Teatteri summer tour theatre, wherein I am a researcher member, and the Puhekupla and Rikkovat rajat research collectives. They are communities of researchers (and artists) who, like my university community, are not determined by institutional ties, but rather by the appeal of personal interests and some sort of like-mindedness.

Remote work era

During the COVID-19 pandemic, information work has largely become work at home alone where remote meetings set the work pace. It often seems that there is one common factor in different remote meetings: people usually do not want to spend any more time in them than is absolutely necessary. At the same time, meetings of the work community – almost the only ones in remote work – have begun to be increasingly characterised by a factual focus and a constant sense of hurry. The desire is to get things done quickly and efficiently. The next remote meeting is looming ahead and you need a moment before that one.

It has not occurred to me until this COVID-19 era how important those, at this point already distant, moments are where you meet a colleague in the corridor on your way to the same meeting and you exchange a few words about a child's schoolwork, a parent's illness, a weekend skiing trip or just about any trivial matters. Those moments just before the meeting starts, while you wait and have a few words with the person sitting next to you. Or when, at the end of the meeting, we end up having tea together to talk about both work-related and non-work-related matters – to linger together, forgetting the hurry for a moment. Laughter is closely linked to all those moments in my memory. And just maybe, I miss laughing together the most when it comes to my work community.

Those passing encounters, meaningful social moments in everyday working life, build a sense of belonging, which is a key component of communality. The experiences of communality and belonging to a community make our lives – and our work – meaningful.

Digital encounters

My more informal research communities have been like oases in the everyday life filled with effective Zoom meetings of the COVID-19 era. We have not made a conscious decision to act in a certain way, but the operating model for meetings has become, as if on its own, a lingering encounter in one small community after another – as a counterbalance to the hurry and efficiency that otherwise prevail in remote meetings. None of those meetings start without a long and winding exchange of news. Those are the moments when we often laugh – and cry – together. We face each other as whole persons, not just in our work roles.

I have given a lot of thought to what makes the remote meetings of my research communities different. The number of participants explains the differences to some extent, but not enough. More importantly, my research communities have been built – like communities often are – around a strong common interest, and they are characterised by a lack of hierarchy and even a declared desire for a balanced and equal dialogue. Therefore, they are more close-knit communities to begin with, and this carries encounters also in remote environments.

A typical work community, on the other hand, is almost always “less of a community” to begin with: we do not usually choose our colleagues ourselves, even though we share similar interests with them. Indeed, the work community is often characterised by a certain amount of

randomness, wherein also lies its greatness and strength. We also end up working together with people we would not otherwise have encountered or who we would not voluntarily choose as part of our immediate circle. In a broad sense, the work community surpasses the exclusion often associated with communities, even though many small communities and exclusionary cliques are of course formed in the workplace. However, the randomness of the work community means that building and maintaining its community character requires more work – for example, those small acts, such as occasional conversations in the corridor or sitting down for a cup of coffee. Now, those little communal acts are often forgotten in the Zoom hurry.

It has been predicted that experiences of the COVID-19 era will cause even a comprehensive upheaval of some sorts in the practices of information work. Remote work and, consequently, remote meetings are predicted to continue to increase and travel due to individual meetings is predicted to decrease. This trend is a good and welcomed one particularly from an ecological point of view. At the same time, a huge number of small encounters go missing from our everyday lives, which are the very building blocks and glue of the work community.

Could we learn from the theatre?

Since spring 2020, the Brazilian theatre group Os Satyros, based in São Paulo, has been developing digital theatre practices by preparing performances directly for Zoom. Actors perform in their own boxes, each from their own home, and the audience is all over the world at its best. Every performance ends with a conversation. First, the audience and performers who remained in Zoom are divided into small groups and, in the end, everyone gathers together: to hear the work group's thoughts on the performance, to ask questions and to share ideas. In those moments, the sense of togetherness is exceptionally strong – involving even a momentary sense of community. The faces in the Zoom boxes may be separated by 10,000 km in real life, the people present have not met each other live and are unlikely to ever meet again, not in real life or in virtual spaces. However, they have just spent time with the same performance, they have been invited to take it all in together and they have responded positively to that invitation. They are together and they have both the time and the desire to float in that sense of togetherness for a while.

Perhaps we should view these forced remote work meetings like the digital theatre performances by Os Satyros. First, there is the scripted part, played by us, the performers,

according to our roles. And that is usually where our meetings end. However, it is not enough in the digital world, because we do not have any spontaneous encounters or facilities for sharing news, such as theatre cloakrooms and workplace coffee rooms, after the event. Os Satyros has realised that when the audience is not physically in the same space, something special must be done to build a sense of presence and to enable encounters. It has required the recognition of the importance of encounters and a little extra effort. Encountering efforts are also needed in remote meetings: less substance, more presence. This may mean, for example, free-form small-group discussions included in the meeting schedule or a completely new way of thinking about meeting practices. Above all, it means that we all understand the significance of lingering together and that we want it – forced encounters do not build a community. If we simply go from one meeting to the next, our work community will soon suffer the fate described in philosopher Martha Nussbaum's concern over education emphasising efficiency and putting aside humanities and creativity: we will become efficient components in a well-lubricated machine, losing our soul – and shared moments of laughter.