

Chapter 6

Seeing Is Belonging: Remote Working, Identity and Staying Connected

Kristine Dery and Ella Hafermalz

Abstract This chapter examines how workers in a distributed environment use technologies to overcome the isolation and invisibility of virtual work. We examine the working lives of remote workers and show how they struggle with maintaining those ‘informal’ connections with the organisation that are typically associated with building a sense of belonging. Our findings identify new practices that engage technologies to maintain visual and social connections across the organisation. In this way, remote workers are establishing a sense of belonging and participation across the wider spectrum of organisational activities and opportunities. Insights into how technologies are used to build an identity and a presence in a largely virtual working environment are then used to generate a series of recommendations for the management of remote workers.

Keywords Remote working • Visibility • Organisational belonging • Communication technologies

6.1 Introduction

One of the more profound impacts of mobile and digital technologies has been the move away from the traditional tethers of co-located offices. Mobile connectivity, social media and cloud-based technologies are enabling new ways of designing work to meet a wide variety of personal and professional needs. However, while on the one hand the nirvana of a workplace that is no longer limited by temporal and spatial boundaries is alluring, on the other hand organisations are facing the challenge of maintaining a sense of organisational identity and belonging in an environment where employees are rarely co-located. This raises interesting questions

K. Dery (✉)

Center for Information Systems Research, MIT, Cambridge, MA, USA
e-mail: kdery@mit.edu

E. Hafermalz

Disciplines of Business Information Systems and Work and Organisational Studies,
The University of Sydney Business School, The University of Sydney,
Sydney, NSW, Australia
e-mail: ella.hafermalz@sydney.edu.au

around the personal and organisational competencies required to effectively manage people when more remote working arrangements are in place.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the current debates around the problems associated with remote working followed by a brief overview of our research project. We then use the work of Erving Goffman (1959) on identity to develop an understanding of how remote workers ‘perform’ their identity online by developing conversations, deploying visuals and building a virtual sense of self that enables a connection with the collective identity of the organisation. We argue that ‘how you think your colleagues perceive you’ was particularly important in remote working and that building and maintaining a consistent identity is challenging and requires a redefining of what it means to be ‘visible’. We conclude by arguing that in order for remote workers to establish a sense of belonging, we need to focus on both the performance of identity and on creating a more visible organisational environment. New practices developed through the use of technology are critical to the effective management of remote workers.

6.2 Does Remote Working Work? An Ongoing Debate

There are differing views on whether distributed working models are effective. There is on the one side the argument that flexibility and mobility enable new ways of working with benefits for talent acquisition, new workplace design, global connectivity and other advantages that can be gained when time and space no longer constrain the design of work. However, on the other side, debates are surfacing that suggest that the lack of co-located engagement is detrimental to creativity and team dynamics. This debate surfaced more publicly in 2013, when CEO of *Yahoo!* Marissa Mayer recalled all her employees back to the office, citing the importance of corridors and water coolers in sparking creativity and collegiality.

The memo that was sent to staff read, ‘We need to be one *Yahoo!* That starts with physically being together’ (Keller 2013). New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg came out in support of Mayer, calling remote work ‘one of the dumber ideas I’ve ever heard’ (Daily Mail Reporter 2013). Richard Branson, founder of Virgin Group PLC, had a different perspective, deeming Mayer and Bloomberg’s views a sign of ‘old school thinking’ and predicting that ‘In 30 years’ time, as technology moves forward even further, people are going to look back and wonder why offices ever existed’ (Branson 2013). Adam Pisoni, co-founder of the Enterprise Social Networking platform Yammer, in his work on *The Responsive Org*, suggests that this debate arises out of the tensions created by traditional organisational forms trying to accommodate new ways of working (Responsive Org 2014).

Despite this debate raging on, we are still seeing a significant shift to more distributed working models, and it would seem that remote working is here to stay. Companies who want to extend their geographical reach without the need for expensive offices for their employees are increasingly looking to hire talent to work from home or other locations separate from a central office (Fried and Heinemeier Hansson 2013). In a recent report from Deloitte in their ‘Building the Lucky Country’ series,

it is estimated that Australia, for example, stands to gain between \$1.4 and \$1.9 billion annually if just 10 % of employees were to work remotely for at least 50 % of the time (Deloitte 2012, p. 4). As a geographically large country, disparately populated and located a long way from major markets, technology will be critical to get access to the talent required to be innovative and productive. If the best person for the role lives on the other side of the country, or even on the other side of the world, they can still be hired and work productively for an organisation that may not even have physical headquarters.

The question therefore becomes not “does remote working work?” but rather “how do we manage remote workers more effectively?” We need to move away from the centre of the ring, where the punches are landing on the chins of the new versus the old ways of working, and illuminate the dark corner where issues such as identity and belonging are lurking. The corridors and the water coolers establish ways of seeing and understanding each other as more than just working cogs and build that sense of belonging (corporate engagement). Albert et al. (2000), Knippenberg and Schie (2000), and Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) are just some of the many academics who posit that workers with a strong sense of belonging or ‘organisational identification’ are more likely to contribute positively to the effectiveness of the organisation. As intimated by Branson, the ongoing development of technology is critical to remote working capabilities, and it is the new and individualised ways in which employees are using this technology to create a sense of identity and belonging that is significant in this ongoing debate.

For the purposes of this study, we have defined remote workers as knowledge workers who work for an organisation and do the majority of their work away from a central office (as distinct from a teleworker, who may work from home once or twice a week or when it is inconvenient to come in to the office). Remote workers may work from home or from cafes, the park or whatever location suits the task at hand while meeting their needs for connectivity (see Kolb et al. 2008). This kind of remote working is relatively new and is different from freelancing or being self-employed. Unlike freelancers and the self-employed, remote workers are typically salaried employees with long-term employment commitments. They work in teams, report to managers or may be managers themselves. As distinct from traditional working arrangements, the space in which work is performed is reframed. Remote workers are infrequently, if ever, co-located with other members of the organisation and rarely have a dedicated working space in the organisation. While the organisation may have a physical office where some staff regularly work, this is not the primary place of work for the remote worker. In a sense, they are defined by their absence from the traditional workplace with distance from other organisational members being the norm rather than the exception.

We were interested in what remote workers find difficult about this arrangement and how they are using technology in innovative ways to overcome those challenges. A theme that emerged from the research is the problems associated with being *invisible*. We found that remote workers and managers develop new ways of working together and that technology is used and adapted in a variety of ways to make the invisible visible in order to establish a sense of identity and belonging.

6.3 The Case Study

The findings in this chapter are from a pilot study which focused on an Australian organisation called Elevate (names and identifying features have been changed) as part of a wider study of remote working in Australia. Elevate employs approximately 100 people, with a focus on formulating and delivering educational workshops for a variety of ages. Elevate is a young organisation that has grown from a handful of employees (educators) to over 100 in the past 5 years, with the majority of employees under the age of 35. The educators deliver scripted workshops with convincing energy and enthusiasm, sometimes as many as six times in a day. Employees are often travelling to different locations, and while they see plenty of students and teachers, their interaction with the organisation they work for is largely virtual. Elevate have a small head office in Melbourne, with almost all of their staff working remotely. The majority of their employees work from their homes and on the road, full time. Teams stay in touch using their company-issued smartphones and laptops.

Our guiding research question was focused on understanding what the challenges were for these remote workers in staying connected and engaged with their organisation. To address this broad research question, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and coupled this data with our existing knowledge of the organisation's operations from observations. Our interviews were conducted over the phone and in person and focused on the lived meaningful experience of the remote workers and their managers. This research approach is interpretivist, a research tradition that 'takes *human interpretation* as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world' (Prasad 2005, p. 13).

The interviews were then transcribed and coded into themes. These thematic codes were then compared with relevant academic literature on identity to inform the analysis. The single-case study design is a result of the exploratory nature of this qualitative pilot study research, and the findings are not intended to be generalisable; however, we believe that the experiences and analysis included in this chapter are credible and to a certain extent 'transferable' (Guba and Lincoln 1989) in that they offer an initial insight into the lived world of remote workers – a topic that is relatively unexplored and which remains the focus of our ongoing research.

Through our semi-structured interviews with both remote workers and their managers, we gained a new perspective on how remote workers are overcoming the challenges of their unique position. We were interested in what remote workers find problematic about distributed work and how they were using technology in innovative ways to overcome those challenges. A major theme that emerged was the problem of being *invisible* and establishing an *identity*. In the following section, we examine a selection of interviews that illustrate some of these key findings.

6.4 Making Identity Visible

When Beth started working for Elevate in the mid-2000s, she was a part of a core team of facilitators who planned 'to change the world'. Her induction into her role as an educational life skills workshop facilitator involved living 'big brother style'

with a group of colleagues in an apartment in Melbourne, Australia. Amongst this initial group were the company's founders. Together, they learned workshop scripts, received training in public speaking, marketed their brand new educational program and ate meals together in the early hours of the morning. This intensive experience was formative for Beth, and she went back to her home city (545 miles from the head office) with confidence in knowing that she belonged to a supportive and untiringly dedicated team. As the company grew, however, Beth began to feel less secure about her place in the organisation. She would hear names attached to faces she had never seen. When speaking about other founding members of the firm, she was confronted with question marks and blank stares. While Beth was in constant email and phone contact with her initial group of colleagues, the organisation itself was becoming something else, something that was difficult for her to grasp, and her confidence in her place within it began to destabilise.

While working remotely was an arrangement that she greatly valued, she began to experience the drawbacks of having little physical contact with her parent organisation. The growing number of new people, whom she had never met and had little 'sense of' was unsettling for Beth. More unsettling, however, was that these new employees had no sense of who *she* was. As a founding member of Elevate, Beth was accustomed to being a part of the organisation's narrative – she was aware of the mission, the heroes, the struggles and the accomplishments. But as the organisation grew nationally, the cohesive picture that she held of the organisation was less clear, and Beth's sense of identity within the organisation began to fade. This issue of invisibility and collective identity in an organisation is familiar to many – however, it seems to be amplified and negotiated in unique ways for remote workers. While this is the story of Elevate and some of its workers, many of the issues explored here and lessons learned are relevant to other organisations that are dealing with the transition to distributed work.

At the core of this issue for Beth, and for other remote workers we spoke with, is the problem of invisibility. Beth struggled to understand the organisation because she had not 'seen' its current members. She could not 'see' the head office in Melbourne, where decisions were being made. And, most frustratingly for Beth, she knew that her new colleagues had never seen her. What happens to our reputation and, as a consequence, our identity, when we are not visible to others? While it could be expected that an endorsement of Beth's work ethic and past dedication to the company would occasionally arise in conversation, there was no way for Beth to see or check in on this, or to review the nature and content of the message. When we consider that identity is a complex phenomenon that involves not only our version of our own story but also those stories told about us by others, it can be imagined that for the remote worker, who relies on electronic text and phone calls with a combination of close colleagues and near strangers, a sense of identity in relation to the company is constantly at risk.

A person's collective identity in an organization is based on what others know of them. Over time, we build a reputation, which is informed by our role in the organisation and what we do, as well as by how our past actions have been perceived by others. It is harder for the remote worker to influence or even know their own reputation. When Beth started at Elevate, she shared a collective experience with the founding team in Melbourne that cemented her reputation in the founding group.

When new members began to join Elevate, there was no way for these new employees to access that past experience, and as a remote worker, Beth's past became invisible. While one could expect stories of these 'early days' to be shared by senior members of the organisation, remote workers have little control over or knowledge of how their presence in the company is being represented to others, and as a consequence, their sense of identity is vulnerable.

The need for continuity of identity – to be known by others in the same way that we know ourselves – has long been a preoccupation of philosophers and scholars. Erik Erikson (1983) thought of a healthy identity as 'a multifaceted but ultimately coherent sense of self that is personally satisfying while at the same time being recognized and affirmed by the surrounding community' (Gardner and Davis 2013, p. 66). There is an inward-looking aspect to identity, which is concerned with knowing oneself, but it is also important that others know us in the way we would like to be known. Nietzsche (2007), for example, was concerned at feeling keenly misunderstood by his colleagues, famously declaring, 'Listen to me! for I am thus and thus. Do not, above all, confound me with what I am not!' This yearning for consistency of identity between how we think of ourselves and how we are perceived by others is associated with the importance of reputation, an ever-present concern in the business environment, as evidenced by the popularity of networks like LinkedIn.

Beth was concerned that how she thought of herself as a founding member of Elevate was no longer matching the view that new organisational members held of her. She described to us her experience of losing her sense of place in a growing company, and how this discontinuity left her feeling invisible and like she needed to rebuild her identity and reputation:

I don't remember everyone, I can't see them, no one knows me, because, previously being a crucial part of the team, then everyone knows you and respects you and knows your work ethic, but with new people, you have to begin again, you have to go, this is who I am within this organisation, and rebuild your identity, because you lose that.

In the early stages of her role with Elevate, Beth felt like a 'crucial part of the team', and knew that everyone in the small organisation knew and respected her strong work ethic, an aspect of her self-image that is particularly important to her. Combined with the lack of physical and visual contact between herself and new members of Elevate, Beth felt that this important part of her identity was threatened by the growth of the organisation.

Beth's first full-time job was as a remote worker with Elevate, so she emphasised that perhaps this experience of losing your identity was a normal part of organisational change and growth. Certainly, all group dynamics involve constant identity shifts, and much research has been conducted looking at teams in the context of organisational change. What interests us as we explore the experiences of Beth and other remote workers is the issue of invisibility (when your colleagues 'can't see you' and you 'can't see them') that is added to the processes of creating and maintaining an organisational identity. We were interested to hear how over the years, as communication technologies have become more functional and accessible,

Beth and other remote workers have found ways around this problem of invisibility, by creating and using technological tools to enable remote workers and their colleagues to ‘be seen’. The following section theorises how technologies relate to the way in which remote workers and other employees ‘perform’ their identities online in an ongoing struggle to become and remain visible.

6.5 Performing Identity Online

In his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) employs the well-known metaphor of the stage to examine how everyday human interactions are negotiated in the manner of a performance. Expanding on this metaphor, Goffman outlines the difference between the *performer* and the *character* in a play. In essence, the performer is the person engaged in ‘staging’ the performance, while the character is the impression or image that the performer wishes to portray (Goffman 1959, p. 244). Here, Goffman explicates the subtle difference between who we are and who we communicate ourselves to be. Although Goffman is talking about interactions in everyday physical life, the analogy remains relevant and even illuminating in thinking about how remote workers perform their character in a more virtual communication environment.

Goffman explains that the aim of an interaction with another person is for the performance to resonate as natural – the character needs to be accepted by the audience so that they can suspend their disbelief and get engaged in the story. The successful ‘staging’ of a performance, in which the character is accepted by the audience as fairly much synonymous with the performer, depends on the success of the ‘whole scene of his action’:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character...The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman 1959, pp. 244–245)

Goffman’s notion of the self as a ‘dramatic effect’ and ‘a performed character’ is interesting in the context of technologically mediated interactions, and the metaphor of ‘staging a scene’ takes on a new complexity in the context of remote working. For a person working hundreds of miles away from their colleagues, the interactions that they have with those colleagues are primarily virtual, and the channels through which a credible impression can be made are limited, or they were at the time when Beth started at Elevate in late 2006.

In 2006, Facebook and LinkedIn were in their infancy in Australia, and these platforms certainly did not play a significant role in professional life for a young organisation like Elevate. Phone calls, text messages and email were the media through which remote workers at Elevate would sustain relationships and manage the impressions given to create and maintain a sense of self as part of a collective.

The 'scene' in Goffman's metaphor was being 'presented' through visually limited means of communication, and the capacity of these technologies to suitably present the self were, for Beth, inadequate. She not only struggled to see the other players of the scene (her colleagues), but the totality of the scene itself was unstable – what was this organisation that she was now a part of?

To get a better sense of who now made up Elevate as a company, Beth envisaged creating a platform not unlike Facebook or LinkedIn that could be used to display employee profiles. After several years of discussion, this platform was created in the form of an intranet that displayed a profile photo accompanied by brief information about the employee's role and involvement at Elevate. Beth describes thinking of these profiles as being a way to communicate past contributions within the organisation:

We had little profiles of ourselves...because, if people don't know who you are they don't know what you've contributed to the program...and that was always a challenge, going – no one knows how much work and effort went in at the original time, and if there's no one having that conversation with these people, then you're just another person, that they don't know. Whereas, in my mind, it's a formative, crucial part of an original team identity that I have that other people don't have.

With the creation of profiles on a company intranet, the scene (as the organisation) and its characters (the organisation's employees) became visible to Beth for the first time since she was brought to Melbourne to meet her co-workers during the company's inception. While Beth laughs remembering how 'highly unusable' that first incarnation of the intranet was, it has led to the development of a far more sophisticated system that is operational today. Elevate's new intranet is now run on the Microsoft SharePoint platform, which connects with an Enterprise Social Network, Yammer. Together, these tools allow users to display their profiles, interact publicly and privately and show what they are working on. While such shared platforms are quite common in companies today, the example of Beth's request for a visual directory is indicative of a remote worker's need for visual displays of identity.

When thinking about the creation of online profiles for employees, Goffman's distinction between performer and character is again relevant. In a virtual world, it can be argued that the connection between the performer and the character is at greater risk of becoming tenuous. This also has implications for understanding trust in a virtual working environment. While traditional literature on trust in virtual environments focuses on how much one individual trusts another individual in an online environment, our research suggests that a less explored and yet important issue is the remote worker's perception of how much trust is being placed in their *performance of themselves* – how successfully is their character being performed? Beth can now use Yammer, group messaging applications, email, phone, text messages and other applications to make an impression of her character. But how well this performance 'comes off' is still harder to judge than in co-located settings. However, as we improve the capacity of technological tools to provide feedback in the form of likes, comments and other communications of emotion, and learn how to provide continuous feedback, the remote worker is becoming more included in and aware of the organisational scene.

6.6 Performers and Their Avatars

Since the reality that the individual is concerned with is unperceivable at the moment, appearances must be relied upon in its stead. And, paradoxically, the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances. (Goffman 1959, p. 242)

Goffman wrote about the performance of identity long before we began carrying powerful personal computers in our pockets. He posited that reality is unperceivable to the individual in the present moment, because of the complex interaction of performers and the characters they are performing. Goffman uses the metaphor of the stage where reality consists of every performer's intentions and motivations as expressed through the character they are playing, and it is therefore impossible to grasp the 'whole picture' while you are 'on stage' yourself. For example, most of us have experienced the misreading of a situation where we didn't have sufficient information to understand what was really going on. Rather than being frozen by this knowledge that information is incomplete, we rely on appearances – on what we can see. This makes it all the more important that we have some control over what we *show*.

When Beth first started at Elevate, there were very few means of *displaying* her identity to others in the organisation with whom she did not have an established relationship. Before intranets, social networks and smartphones made the display and sharing of identity-related images and impressions a common part of everyday organisational life, remote workers relied on limited information from which to construct their sense of organisational reality and had scant tools with which to take part in performing their own images and impressions on the organisational stage.

In Beth's case, the introduction of an intranet marked a new era at Elevate, in which employees who had never physically met could represent themselves to the organisation. They began to be able to perform their characters in more visible and nuanced ways. This capability has now evolved to include Yammer, video broadcasts, an extended intranet system based on SharePoint and several instant messaging applications used on smartphones. As well as using these digital tools for connecting on a daily basis, the company also continues to hold a bi-annual company-wide conference in Melbourne, in which all members of Elevate, whether they are based interstate or internationally, are flown to stay together in a hotel for several days during which they socialise, receive training, plan, problem-solve and reconnect.

Most of the year, however, is spent interacting virtually as an organisation. Each employee (remote workers especially) is engaged in the complex activity of performing their identity in the context of the organisation using communication technologies. There was a lot at stake in this performance – advancement and the associated increases in remuneration and responsibility depended on being noticed by the right people for the right reasons; reputations depended on communicating successes and attributes deemed desirable within the organisation; collegiate support rested on being perceived as a good team member; meaningful personal connections

relied on being able to effectively communicate a consistent and amicable personality. For remote workers, the tools at their disposal for achieving these feats were, in most cases, a smartphone and a laptop and the myriad of applications that these devices afford.

While the remote workers who have more recently joined Elevate had the advantage of easy access to technologies such as smartphone applications that could be used to quickly and easily communicate images and text, they still grappled with the physical distance between the performer (the person working out of a distant location) and the character that appeared on screen. For example, Selma, who also lives and works remotely as a facilitator for Elevate, said that she sometimes forgot that she was a remote worker. The high level of social contact that she had in her role running workshops for students, and the constant messaging and phone calls shared between her teammates often created a sense of proximity that overrode the distributed nature of her work.

There were times, however, when the easy manner of relating to her colleagues facilitated by digital tools was interrupted by a realisation of distance:

I definitely have that sense every now and then, that everyone's an avatar and so am I, in terms of my work team... we have a lot of contact every day, we're on [the smartphone messaging application] Kik all the time, and I think that's incredibly positive, and it's like 'what am I having for dinner' and 'oh my goodness this thing was annoying' and it's completely all the things you'd chat about if you were passing someone in an office together. Then other times I have this little moment where there's this sudden realisation that we're actually millions of miles away and they're in Perth and I'm in Sydney and we're only ever looking at each other's typed text and little picture.

While the miles are nearer hundreds than millions, the physical distance between Selma and her colleagues was clearly acutely felt, but only at certain moments. It seemed as if the work team was performing a scene in which the characters were co-located (i.e. they thought of themselves as being in the same place). Yet at times, a 'glitch' occurred in which this illusion was broken (i.e. the gap between performer and character became apparent) resulting in the realisation that 'everyone's an avatar' and thereby rendering the scene less authentic.

We asked Selma if she could identify what it was that prompted these glitches – that realisation or awareness of how, as she put it, 'we aren't physically in the same space', and she offered the following reflection:

I'm trying to work out what kind of triggers the realisation in certain moments... I think if there's ever a minor misunderstanding between the team, which doesn't happen that much, or a little miscommunication. Then I'll suddenly be like oh, we're not in the same space... I think if someone does send – I mean this is kind of a weird one – but if someone does send a big picture of themselves, even if they're just kind of being silly... and it's that realisation that I only half recognised them because they'd had their hair dyed, or they'd lost weight or something like that.

Conflict in virtual teams is more detrimental to performance in distributed teams than it is to traditional or co-located teams (Hinds and Bailey 2003). As Selma has pointed out, however, conflict is not the only source of the glitch experience. The other times when she felt the impact of distance between her and her colleagues was when she found that someone's online persona was different in appearance to their current physical presence.

Selma's use of the word 'avatar' in introducing this problem of disconnect is relevant here, as the term has several connotations when interpreting the remote worker's experience in the context of Goffman's metaphor of the stage as outlined earlier. Today, an avatar is usually thought of as an icon or character that represents a person in a computer game or online environment. A related definition is that an avatar is the embodiment or manifestation of an idea or person – an avatar is often thought of as a simplified version of the original, but with the essence of what it represents intact. This bears similarities to Goffman's distinction between the performer and character in everyday life – your character is a version of you, but it needs 'work' to exist. Similarly, remote workers need to exert effort in creating and maintaining their avatars – the multi-faceted online impression of themselves that is performed through posts, messages, emails and updates.

Remote workers are, in many ways, pioneers in forging identities, reputations and relationships almost solely in the digital realm. Terence Cave's (1995, p. 116) essay on 'fictional identities' demonstrates how this question of where identity lies has in the past been explored in Science Fiction narratives, and remains ever relevant:

Is the teleported person the same as the one who entered the teleporter? If my brain is transported to another body, am I still the same person? These narrative experiments are attempts to explore a duality or complexity which has always worried philosophers concerned with the identity of persons.

The question of who someone is has in philosophy long been debated in terms of mind/body, form/matter and, in the case of Goffman, performer/character. As can be gathered from Cave's hypothetical questions, emerging technologies mean the question of what identity is becomes at once more relevant and more complex. In a remote working environment, the duality of employee/avatar is an ongoing site of negotiation, and it is therefore important to consider how remote workers perform their own identity and how they experience the identity of their colleagues.

6.7 Collective Identity: Tethered to the Office

For the remote worker, the goal of making themselves known to others in the organisation is managed through ongoing identity work in a digital space. Daily contributions to online forums, group messaging platforms and even frequent video links with colleagues based in the head office are all strategies used by remote workers to forge relationships and stay connected on both a task and social level. These digital presentations of self are akin to those that happen in physical everyday situations; however, the dependence on technologically mediated communication requires the remote worker to constantly tend to these postings and portals in innovative ways to ensure that they are regularly 'seen' by colleagues who in turn validate their organisational membership.

An important aspect of identity depends on how we relate to others, and we often define ourselves based on our group membership (Tajfel 1982). Who *I* am in an organisation is tied up with who *you* are and, more importantly, who *we* are. In an organisational setting, the 'we' can refer alternately to a team unit, a project or geographical level, or to the organisation as a whole. The significance of this way of looking at identity is summarised by Cave (1995, p. 116):

Our subjective sense of ourselves as individuals depends on our perception of individual others, and vice versa: this subject-object interdependence, or interpersonal perception of what it is to be an individual, again posits identity as an amalgam, joining what we are inclined to think of as essentially separate or different.

Cave is arguing that without another, it is difficult or even impossible to know oneself (see also Ricœur 1992). While we might think of ourselves as having an identity distinct from that of our colleagues, it is actually our relationship with those colleagues that gives us this sense of individuality. When working for an organisation, it can be said that we depend on each other for our sense of self.

Understanding identity as involving the stories that others tell *about* you is particularly salient in the context of remote working. As has been established, being visible in an organisational setting is an ongoing challenge for remote workers. In our research, it became clear that there was a great desire amongst remote workers to be connected with their colleagues and with the organisation – technically and socially (Dery et al. 2014). While official communications about tasks and objectives were important for everyday functioning, the people we spoke with emphasised the need for *informal* communication with colleagues. Being told when to finish a project or how to fill in a leave form were not the communications that remote workers felt were most important to their sense of connectedness to their colleagues and the organisation. Identity work was more likely to be carried out in forums created through what interviewees called informal modes of communication.

Because of the directed way in which email and phone calls operate, it would be considered strange in most organisations to phone an unacquainted person to ask solely about this colleague's private life, for example, what they were having for dinner, or whether they had any pets. Yet without these kinds of non-work or non-task related conversations, the nagging feeling of social isolation threatens to resurface. Without knowing their colleagues on this more personal level, and without regular opportunities to converse in social ways, a sense of self and belonging in relation to the organisation became diminished. The remote workers we spoke with were therefore finding new ways of having more frequent informal conversations, even with colleagues they had never met in person, by using communication technologies in innovative ways.

We found that these methods of communicating informally were mostly established by the remote workers themselves, rather than being installed by management. The remote workers we spoke with at Elevate, for example, were eager to have access to new ways of staying connected with their colleagues and visible in the organisation. When Beth first urged leaders at Elevate to develop an

organisational intranet, she argued for the need for ‘unstructured communication’ in the organisation. She explained that this notion of unstructured communication was important because:

It’s that ability to not just talk about work at work. When you’re a remote workforce you can’t just have that body language that goes, I know who you are, I know what you contribute, I like you, you’re a person, versus a voice out there somewhere, and I’d always had that from the beginning with my original team...so having an ability to have an unstructured like, “hey what colour is your hair” or “what, you’ve got a dog as well?” and getting to know people like you potentially could at an office space...and without a reason to communicate – if I’m not on a team call with a Blue team person, there’s no reason for me to talk with them at work, so the only reason for me to talk with them would be in an unstructured way, to get to know them.

The important distinction here is between communication with a ‘reason’ versus exploratory communication that is circumstantial and spontaneous. Marissa Mayer drew attention to this form of communication when she said it was the ‘water cooler’ conversation that could not be recreated when employees worked from home (Gynn 2013). It was this form of unstructured communication that Mayer believed was important enough to require that her employees be co-located. The remote workers we spoke with certainly agreed that informal communication was important and more difficult given their physical distance from their colleagues; however, they have found ways to replicate and re-imagine the function of the water cooler in other ways, using technology. The aim of this type of conversation is to create the sense of ‘we’ that is associated with organisational belonging.

At Elevate, Beth asked for an intranet to be developed because she wanted a representation of herself and the work she had done and was doing to be visible to new members joining the organisation. Enterprise Social Networking platforms such as Yammer and Chatter are beginning to enable employees from all levels of the company to interact in an unstructured way around non-work related topics. Remote workers want to feel connected to the organisation and are finding ways such as these to make themselves seen and heard. While it is getting easier to become visible to one another, remote workers are often still struggling to be visible where it matters, at the centre of the action – the head office.

6.8 Head Office Syndrome: Visibility at the Core

Some organisations today operate entirely without a dedicated central office space. Although this may seem radical, it was only in fairly recent history that an ‘office’ referred to the physical site of mass work that we know today – 500 years ago, an office implied a position rather than a place (Haigh 2012, p. 12). As organisational structures and management styles have moved away from more hierarchical, classical models (Nelson 1980) and towards more team-based collaborative ways of organising, so too have office spaces shifted towards open-plan, flexible layouts, with prominent organisations trialling more innovative models such as

activity-based working or Google's famous campus locations. What has remained constant, however, is the idea that an organisation will in most cases have a *hub* or a core base from which to operate. Often referred to as a head office, this is the site where most meetings are held, where the leaders of the organisation are to be found and often where activities are run that have the intention of bringing organisational members together in 'bonding' sessions and for collaboration.

Many organisations place a great financial and cultural emphasis on these spaces, and there is a strong history of management and organisational research into the effects of spatial arrangements on organisational culture and behaviour (Becker and Steele 1995; Gagliardi 1992; Haynes 2008; Kornberger and Clegg 2004; Steele 1981). Client floors are decorated with expensive artwork, and designers, architects and psychologists work together to determine which category and combination of furniture, lighting, seating arrangements and indoor plants will best stimulate productivity and lead to other organisational outcomes deemed desirable.

For companies like Google, Microsoft, Facebook and countless start-ups inspired by these technology giants, the head office is not just a place where work tasks are performed – they are imbued with a powerful mythology that draws top talent to apply to the firm, so that they too may work at the famous campus or CBD address. This mythology associated with the 'head office' challenges the remote worker's sense of organisational identity. When so much of the organisation's identity is invested in activities that take place in a designated building or set of buildings, it can be easy for a remote worker to feel 'left out' of what they imagine is happening at the centralised place of work.

At Elevate, Beth describes how, when she was working remotely, she assumed that everything that happened in their head office involved fun that she was missing out on. When she finally moved to head office to take a management position, she reflected on her time as a remote worker, when she would often think to herself,

I really want to see the office, I wonder what they do in there, I literally thought people were just coming here, hanging out, having cupcakes all day, 'cause that was kind of my lifestyle and I assumed that everyone else was like that...but then now being here, there's no time, to do anything...but apparently that only happened about a year ago, so maybe it was cupcakes before then (laughs).

This mythology of the head office being a place of constant engagement and the cupcake metaphor for greater socialisation can be spurred on by the image that those working in the office try to portray. It is then fuelled by remote workers assuming that colleagues who are co-located are automatically more sociable and enjoying each other's company. As Beth herself discovered, however, a daily lived experience of an office does not always fulfil the image that such mythologies perpetuate.

Other remote workers who we interviewed talked about experiencing versions of what one remote worker called *head office syndrome*. In essence, 'head office syndrome' refers to the way in which decisions would be made in the head office without consultation with or consideration of remote workers. One hypothetical example of head office syndrome offered to us was a group of colleagues working together,

and two of those colleagues happen to be co-located and discuss the project over lunch, thereby coming to a firm decision about an aspect of the project that is then shared with the rest of the team via email: ‘Jerry and I have discussed it, and we’ve decided...’ This practice was referred to as ‘short-circuiting’ and was pointed out as a source of frustration amongst remote workers.

A pertinent and related example is the issue of advancement within the organisation. At Elevate, it has until recently only been possible to act as a manager from the head office location. This is why Beth moved to Melbourne, leaving her extended family and friends behind, in order to take on a new position. Selma, as a more junior employee at Elevate, was aware of this dynamic, and it informed her thinking around career progression within the organisation:

I know that there is actually a big part of me that wants to be at head office because it feels like it’s the hub. So even though like I like a lot of elements of working remotely, I know that there’s a part of me that if I think of a long-term career with Elevate – say if I think if I’m with the company in six years’ time for example, the picture I have in my head is always me at head office in Melbourne...Because I think there’s a bit of me that feels like that’s still the core of – like that’s still the heart of the company.

Selma’s reflection has implications for thinking about how remote workers identify with the organisation. While she may be comfortable defining herself as a remote worker, she was nevertheless conscious of what she was remote *from* – that is, what she perceived to be the core or heart of the business – and she did not think that this distance was sustainable in light of her mid- to long-term career goals.

As technology systems improved within Elevate, however, the need to relocate for work was changing. With the introduction of new technologies and platforms, as well as new talent management practices, it became possible for remote workers to take on management roles outside of their head office. It also became easier for remote working employees at Elevate to maintain the kind of visibility in the head office that meant that they were considered for career advancement. Beth explains,

Facilitators who want to be visible, can be. So we had a facilitator start on the Blue program in Perth, Owen, he, first day, he figured out how to use Yammer, it’s intuitive but he’s the first one who’s actually done it, within one week of starting, to his first post on Yammer and then daily he would upload quotes, and then he’d be, like, hey this is what happened in my session today. So he now has people who know him, who may never have known him because he’s chosen to become visible on Yammer and he’s chosen to put something positive out there to the whole company...but it’s definitely remote worker driven, and if they don’t see it as an opportunity or they’re not on there, still they’re not visible.

As Beth pointed out, being visible in the head office and being considered for advancement did still depend on the remote worker’s willingness and ability to be actively involved in performing their identity online. While there are more and more media for bridging the gap between the remote worker and the head office, the success of these still depends on the remote workers’ skills in online identity management. This emphasis on skills cuts both ways. As remote working becomes more popular, both employees and employers are in need of new skills and practices to help them work effectively with one another at a distance.

6.9 Contributions and Recommendations for Practice

In this chapter, we have shown that organisations are increasingly hiring people to work remotely, and have explored how the way in which this practice ‘works’ is constantly evolving. One of the critical factors that determine the success of remote working structures is the creation of a sense of belonging. Our study shows a clear relationship between visibility and the performance of identity (see Fig. 6.1) in shaping the capabilities for those employees working remotely to establish a sense of belonging in the organisation.

We have shown how identity is played out through performance of online characters that can be thought of as avatars, through the creation and active management of online presence and through the building of virtual relationships based on familiarity created through visual, voice and text-based technologies. While we have shown that it can sometimes be isolating to work remotely from other colleagues, for the most part a constant stream of messages, pictures, video and Social Enterprise Networking feeds kept remote workers connected through a flow of formal and informal communications.

However, it was clear that performative identity was only possible for remote workers if the tools were firstly in place and secondly used in order to enable continuous and dynamic visibility. The ability to see each other, particularly if the

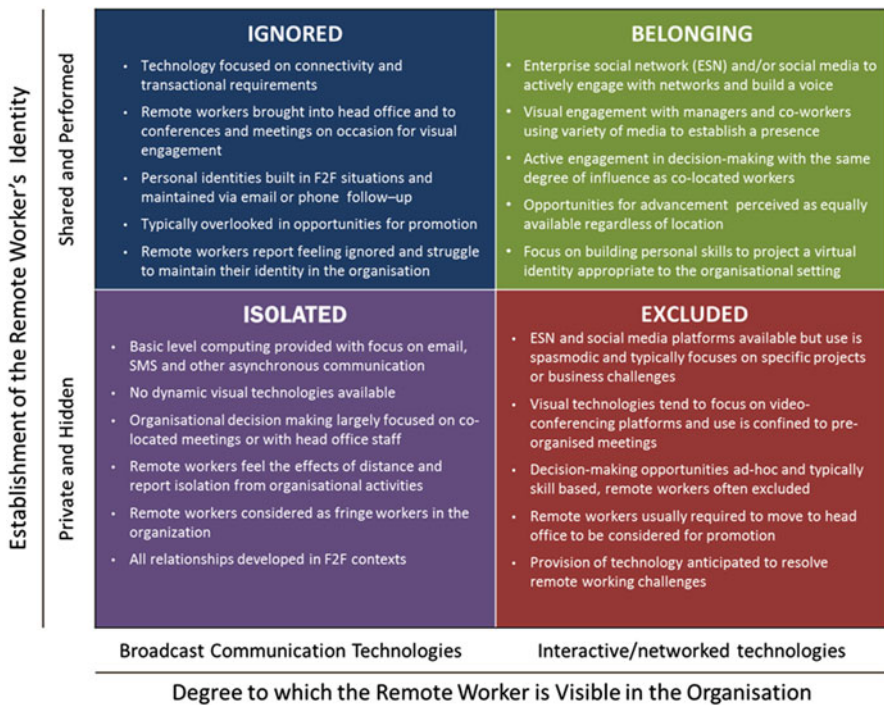


Fig. 6.1 Building a sense of organisational belonging for remote workers

seeing was in context, i.e. the office, made it easier to maintain a stable reputation and identity. Change, for example, in a colleagues' appearance or in the staffing of the organisation, could be particularly jarring for employees who place importance in fixed images (literal or figurative) of the organisation that inevitably change over time. Technology was extremely important in overcoming this kind of breakdown by developing the layers of connectivity required to build visibility to enable remote workers to both be seen and to see the wider context of their fellow workers.

Figure 6.1 is a useful tool from which to get a clearer picture of how this dynamic between performative identity creation and visibility plays out. The graphic aims to give a better understanding of how to build a sense of belonging and engagement from remote workers. Those who are struggling to establish visibility reported often feeling sidelined (ignored) or alone (isolated). By increasing access to technological platforms, it is possible to offer the capabilities for greater visibility from which to build some of the more informal practices associated with simply being together that engender a sense of belonging.

Remote workers also need capabilities in the building of a virtual identity that their co-workers can relate to. In other words, it is not enough just to be visible; employees must engage with each other and with the technologies in ways that make it possible to overcome distances and build meaningful relationships such that both remote workers and co-located workers have the same opportunities to add value. As research on remote working develops in tandem with new technologies and innovative use of established technologies, we believe there will be a better understanding of the needs of remote workers and that this improved understanding can lead to improved remote working and management practices.

We conclude by reiterating that there are many nuances surrounding remote working practices. Technologies are constantly evolving, and remote workers are finding ways to harness and develop various platforms that enable them to become more connected and visible – to ensure that their identity as part of the collective is known. We believe that as more and more organisations collaborate across temporal and geographical borders, the lessons we learn from further studying remote working practices can be illuminating in thinking about how work on all levels of the virtuality continuum can be conducted more effectively. Visibility in organisations is important to an employee's sense of identity, and while remote workers are finding ways of making themselves more visible, it is a collective undertaking that will only feature more prominently as work continues to become less about where we go and more about what we do, and who we are.

References

- Albert S, Ashforth BE, Dutton JE (2000) Organizational identity and identification: charting new waters and building new bridges. *Acad Manag Rev* 25(1):13–17
- Becker FD, Steele F (1995) *Workplace by design: mapping the high-performance workscape*. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco

- Branson R (2013) One day offices will be a thing of the past. <http://www.virgin.com/richard-branson/one-day-offices-will-be-a-thing-of-the-past>
- Cave T (1995) Fictional identities. In: Harris H (ed) *Identity: essays based on Herbert Spencer lectures given in the University of Oxford*. Clarendon, Oxford
- Daily Mail Reporter (2013) Michael Bloomberg backs Marissa Mayer's ban saying that he's always thought working from home is 'one of the dumber ideas I've ever heard'. *The Daily Mail UK*, 27 February 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2286900/Michael-Bloomberg-backs-Marissa-Mayers-ban-saying-hes-thought-working-home-dumber-ideas-Ive-heard.html>
- Deloitte (2012) Digital disruption: short fuse, big bang? Building the lucky country: business imperatives for a prosperous Australia. Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, Adelaide
- Dery K, Kolb D, McCormick J (2014) Working with connective flow: how smartphone use is evolving in practice. *Eur J Inf Syst* 23(5):558. doi:10.1057/ejis.2014.13
- Erikson EH (1983) *Identity: youth and crisis*. Faber & Faber, London
- Fried J, Heinemeier Hansson D (2013) *Remote: office not required*. Random House LLC, New York
- Gagliardi P (1992) *Symbols and artifacts: views of the corporate landscape*. Aldine de Gruyter, New York
- Gardner H, Davis K (2013) *The app generation: how today's youth navigate identity, intimacy, and imagination in a digital world*. Yale University Press, New Haven
- Goffman E (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books for Doubleday, New York
- Guba EG, Lincoln YS (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park
- Gwynn J (2013) Working moms wait at Yahoo. *Chicago Tribune*, 26 February 2013, pp 1–2.1. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1uuJ8Pb>
- Haigh G (2012) *The office: a hardworking history*. Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton
- Haynes BP (2008) The impact of office layout on productivity. *J Facil Manag* 6(3):189–201
- Hinds PJ, Bailey DE (2003) Out of sight, out of sync: understanding conflict in distributed teams. *Organ Sci* 14(6):615–632. doi:10.1287/orsc.14.6.615.24872
- Keller EG (2013) Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer's work-from-home memo is from bygone era. *The Guardian*, 27 February 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2013/feb/26/yahoo-ceo-marissa-mayer-memo-telecommute>
- Knippenberg D, Schie ECM (2000) Foci and correlates of organizational identification. *J Occup Organ Psychol* 73(2):137–147. doi:10.1348/096317900166949
- Kolb DG, Collins PD, Lind EA (2008) Requisite connectivity. *Organ Dyn* 37(2):181–189. doi:10.1016/j.orgdyn.2008.02.004
- Kornberger M, Clegg SR (2004) Bringing space back in: organizing the generative building. *Organ Stud* 25(7):1095–1114. doi:10.1177/0170840604046312
- Kreiner GE, Ashforth BE (2004) Evidence toward an expanded model of organizational identification. *J Organ Behav* 25(1):1–27. doi:10.1002/job.234
- Nelson D (1980) *Frederick W. Taylor and the rise of scientific management*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison
- Nietzsche F (2007) *Ecce homo: how to become what you are*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Prasad P (2005) *Crafting qualitative research: working in the postpositivist traditions*. M.E. Sharpe, Armonk
- Ricœur P (1992) *Oneself as another*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Steele F (1981) *The sense of place*. CBI Pub. Co., Boston
- Tajfel H (1982) Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annu Rev Psychol* 33(1):1–39. doi:10.1146/annurev.ps.33.020182.000245
- Responsive Org (2014) Manifesto. Retrieved 10 July, 2014, from <http://www.theresponsiveorg.com/>