

Studies of Work and the Workplace in HCI

Concepts and Techniques

Synthesis Lectures on Human-Centered Informatics

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Graham Button and Wes Sharrock

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ABSTRACT

This book has two purposes. First, to introduce the study of work and the workplace as a method for informing the design of computer systems to be used at work. We primarily focus on the predominant way in which the organization of work has been approached within the field of human–computer interaction (HCI), which is from the perspective of *ethnomethodology*. We locate studies of work in HCI within its intellectual antecedents, and describe paradigmatic examples and case studies. Second, we hope to provide those who are intending to conduct the type of field-work that studies of work and the workplace draw off with suggestions as to how they can go about their own work of developing observations about the settings they encounter. These suggestions take the form of a set of *maxims* that we have found useful while conducting the studies we have been involved in. We draw from our own fieldwork notes in order to illustrate these maxims. In addition we also offer some homilies about how to make observations; again, these are ones we have found useful in our own work.

KEYWORDS

work, workplace, organizations, ethnomethodology, ethnography, situated action, interactionism, design, computer supported cooperative work, human–computer interaction

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Introduction

This book is an extended version of a chapter entitled “Studies of Work in HCI” first published in the work of Carroll (2003). The extension relates to three of its parts. The first is a more detailed discussion of the provenance of studies of work and the workplace in human–computer interaction (HCI) and extends the “scientific origins” section of the original version. In the original version, there were three sections: “ethnography,” “ethnomethodology and conversation analysis,” and “situated action.” This extended version retains those sections, but considerably elaborates upon them. We have done this because those whose work forms the backbone of our discussion of studies of work and the workplace in HCI are thoroughly immersed in these origins, yet most considerations of studies of work do not articulate them in any depth. Many of the people whose work we refer to take these origins utterly for granted, and, therefore, if people coming to studies of work for the first time are to properly appreciate them, a more thorough understanding of their intellectual origins is appropriate. For those who may just be interested in studies of work as part of a rich methodological array in HCI, however, this chapter may be more than they require. But for those who may be embarking upon studies of their own, this chapter is intended as a foundation upon which a deeper understanding of what is involved can be built.

The second and third extensions to the original chapter involve two new sections, which are specifically oriented to those who are intending to develop studies of work themselves. We are often asked by students who are embarking on fieldwork or ethnography for the first time, “How do you do it?” We take it that this question has nothing to do with their reading and understanding of studies of work or of the literature behind them, but the practical question of how they take that understanding and make it turn in the real world they may observe around them as they develop their own studies. We have therefore introduced two new sections into the original consideration, which articulate some analytic *maxims* that, in the course of our own investigations, we have used to open up the settings and the activities and interactions we have witnessed, and some *homilies* on how to collect data from those settings and of those activities and interactions.