Organizational communication and the virtual work environment

Organizational Communication

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Agenda

- **Discussing the challenges and benefits of remote work and virtual working**

- **Sharing research results on "what works" in virtual work environment**

- **Practical implications**

Development trends in working life

- Working in the company office

- Traditional working hours

- Being in "physical touch" with coworkers

- Collocated teams
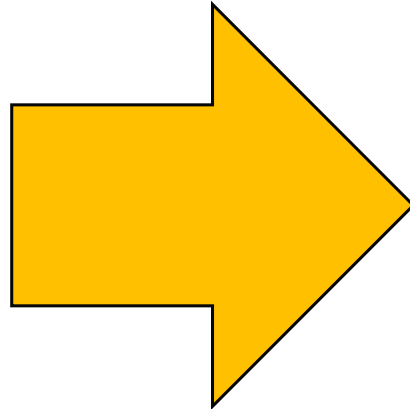
- Working anywhere

- Working anytime

- Being in "digital touch" with coworkers

- Dispersed teams

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Needed skills

- Self-management/self-leadership skills

- Tech skills – knowledge and competence in using e.g. social media platforms and online platforms for effective communication

- Strong written communication skills – remote work and working in dispersed teams typically means increasing amount of written messages

- (New) interpersonal skills – e.g. more and more collaboration between people you haven't met physically (calls for faster social adaptation than in "traditional work")

Remote work/virtual work

- In 1979, five IBM employees were allowed to work from home… in 1983, the number was 2000

- Late 1990's, garage startups mushroomed (not having the budget for office spaces or setting up the administration)

- Since the beginning of century, the percent of people doing remote work increasing relatively slowly:
  - Before COVID-19, the percentage of workforce doing remote work in e.g. Finland was appox. 14%, the UK approx. 5%, the US below 4%.

- Future & present
  - Examples: in 2022, 27% of Finnish employees work either fully or mainly remotely; 26% of the US employees work (mainly) remotely
  - Statistics suggest no significant changes in numbers

Advantages of virtual work

Flexible time: virtual work allows for a greater amount of flexibility and autonomy in terms of time management - i.e. the employees are in charge of their own time. This allows them to structure their work schedules according to their workload and project priority.

Work from anywhere: workers can access their virtual office from anywhere in the world, which gives them the freedom to choose their physical work space. Today, many digital nomads claim to be more productive in a virtual work setting as compared to being in an office…

Saving money: By not having a physical location, the company saves money that would have usually been spent on office space and facilities, utility bills, technology, and furnishings. Similarly, the virtual worker or team itself saves money (and time!) on transport to and from the workplace.

More comfort: Working from home or from wherever a virtual worker chooses allows for a greater comfort level, from minor aspects like the way they are dressed, all the way up to the person's choice of a preferred workspace and timetable. The lack of the typical office buzz can also improve focus and allow for a greater deal of efficiency.

Digital work is greener: no transportation fumes and lesser printed documents (paper waste)

Challenges

Physical distance: with no face to face contact, relations can get impersonal, which can in turn bring about a lack of motivation

Time zone differences: virtual workers may struggle to find a meeting time they can agree on.

Communication: miscommunication or lack of information is the most common problem in the virtual world.

Routine: one of the main enemies of motivation is routine, and this poses a major risk to productivity, especially in the virtual medium. Long hours in front of a computer can lead to exhaustion, stress and a bunch of unmotivated employees.

Personal life and work life imbalance: the flexibility offered by virtual work can help in achieving work-life balance, but not having a separation between working space and living space can disrupt it, which leads to an increase in stress and a decrease in efficiency.

Diverse multicultural teams: virtual teams are often made up of individuals from different cultures, each of which has their own customs, values and work habits. This can pose a challenge if each person automatically follows their own way of working and interacting with others.

Challenges in practice

- **What challenges have you encountered when working (or studying) remotely) – on an online/virtual environment?**

- **Write one or two challenges down in post-it notes**

Remotely and online: what studies say (have said)

- Virtual workplace negatively affects communication and interaction with co-workers and managers (e.g. Hill et al., 1998)

- Poor communication – caused by virtual work environment - correlates with lower commitment, reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher turnover (Hargie et al., 2002)

- Employees in a virtual workplace experience lower levels of job satisfaction and manager-subordinate trust while experiencing higher levels of job stress, all correlated with lower quality communication (Staples, 2001)

- Workers in virtual workplaces experienced diminished work experiences that could be attributed to less frequent communication, reduced quality of information communicated, and a loss of contextual information (Ramsower, 1985)

The Allen Curve

There is an exponential drop of frequency of communication between engineers as the distance between them increases.

The Allen Curve, 1974
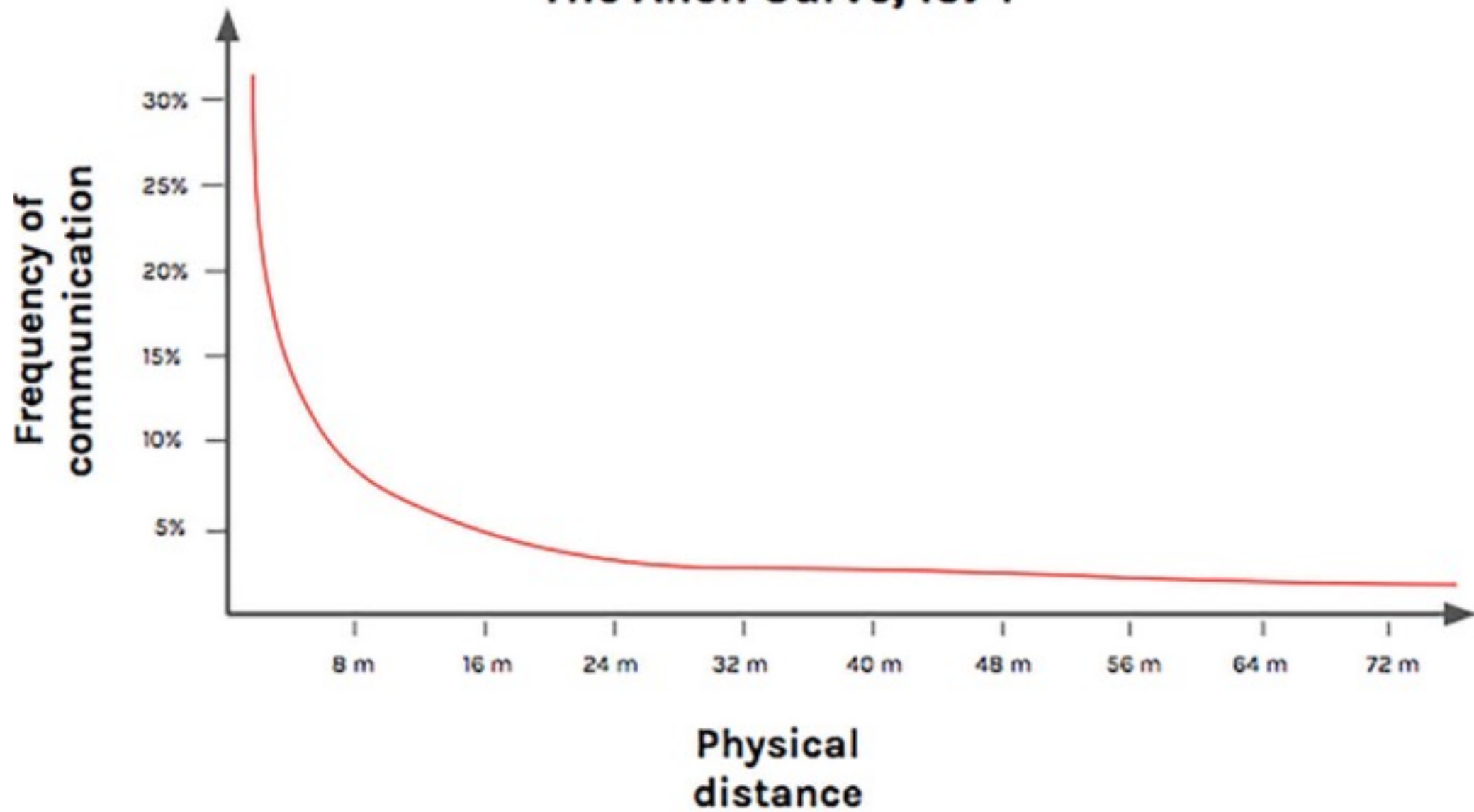
More recent studies affirming the Allen curve from 1970's?

- In light of the fast advancement of technology, does the Allen curve still apply?
  - Allen (2007) argues that the effects of frequency still hold true based on a 1986 study of email and a 1989 study of frequency of communication between "sites of a geographically dispersed computer manufacturer".
    - [1] *"For example, rather than finding that the probability of telephone communication increases with distance, as face-to-face probability decays, our data show a decay in the use of all communication media with distance*
    - *"We do not keep separate sets of people, some of whom we communicate with by one medium and some by another. The more often we see someone face-to-face, the more likely it is that we will also telephone that person or communicate by another medium."*

…cont'd

- A study done in MIT (Claudel et al. 2017) suggests: "stop emphasizing virtual meetings and find ways to get them together in physical ways". (The study found a persistent relationship between physical proximity and intensity of collaboration.)
  - (Research sample was published papers (more than 40 thousand) and patents (more that 2 thousand))

What makes virtual or remote workers happy (and productive)…? (Some research findings)

- Good tech support and tools (hardware & software)

- Training

- Organizational structure aligned with the demands of virtual office (e.g. management-by-results reward system, shared leadership)

- Formalized communication channels and protocols

- Socially engaging tactics (such as e-cafes, chat rooms)

Akkirman & Harris (2005). Organizational communication satisfaction in the virtual workplace

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Some more complicated findings (Wang et al. 2022:Achieving Effective Remote Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Work Design Perspective)

- **Individual characteristics matter**

  - Esp. self-discipline/self-management

- **Work characteristics matter**

  - Outcomes better in complex tasks with low task interdependence, and high job autonomy
  - Outcomes worse with simple tasks (procrastination, postponing tasks and duties occurs more) and highly interdependent tasks

- **Social support makes a crucial difference**

  - Social support correlates positively with all perceived challenges in remote/virtual work environment (e.g. procrastination, loneliness, ineffective communication)

- **Quality of communication as a key**

  - Arranging (also informal) social interactions, using motivating language, sharing information

You already wrote down some challenges you experienced in working (or studying) remotely and virtually

Now, write down a possible solution to that (or those) challenge(s)