Documenting Work:
From Participant Observation to Participant Tracing
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This paper explores the methodological aspects of studying distributed work by focusing on tangible aspects of this work, namely documents. Focusing on documents creates a lens into work practices of organizational members in general, and those working in heterogeneous and distributed environments in particular. This paper views documents as artifacts that reflect social, material, temporal and spatially structured communicative practices. Documents can be standalone artifacts of what work has been done. They can also provide traces of ongoing work practices. The focus of research surrounding documents has moved from studying them solely as representations of work to examining the dynamic processes and activities in which documents play a role.

It is commonly agreed that research cannot consist of an analysis of documents as the main source of data. Therefore, the research focuses on the documents as well as traces left behind by document practices, especially in digital environments. The approach to data collection in this research builds on the basic assumption that documents are central elements of organizational infrastructure and provides evidence of unfolding coordination over time.

The mapping of documents is framed by two overarching questions: (1) Where do your documents live? (2) How do they support your work practices? Initially interviews were conducted by informants to help determine key participants, organizational goals and structures, and tools. The next phase of data collection was spent with key informants to detail their document arrangements across both physical spaces and digital spaces. This phase includes participant observation, interviews, document sampling and classification. As the research continued, broad questions transitioned into inquiries regarding specific documents associated with particular work practices of interest.

After initial interviews and data collection, the process of tracking document work revolves around four data gathering techniques. First, there is a system for automated gathering of digital traces. Software tools allow for a range of choices, from tracking change in specific folders, to using screen recording software. Second, through the ongoing analysis of digital and behavioral traces, a small number of key documents were identified that play a central role in the scholars' coordination activities. These could be heavily distributed email attachments, frequently edited Powerpoints, or documents highlighted by informants in interviews. Third, the participants' activities were tracked through behavioral inquiries. The fourth data collection strategy is more closely related to traditional participant observation.

The document-centered methodology developed in this paper offers a new perspective on work in technology dense environments and a call for revised research strategies. Traces available through digital

environments present valuable opportunities to examine not just the content of the documents, but the rich contexts and processes that surround the creation, modification and dissemination of documents within and across organizations.