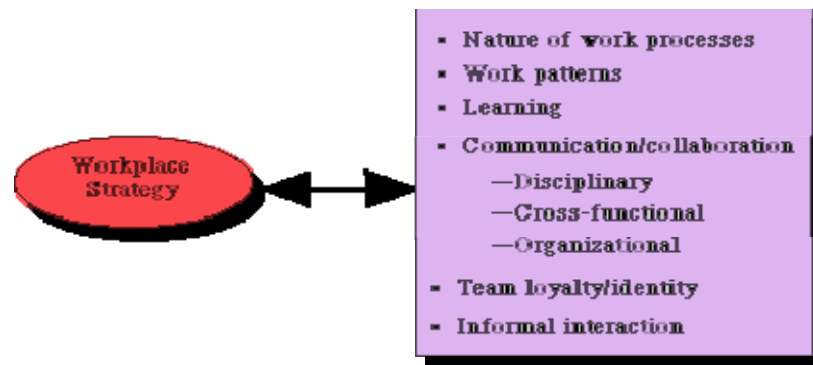# *The Ecology of Collaborative Work*

Excerpt - **Virtual Workplace Strategy**

Becker, F. (1995) Collaborative Team Environments: *The Ecology of Collaborative Work.* New York: Cornell University International Workplace Studies Program (IWSP).
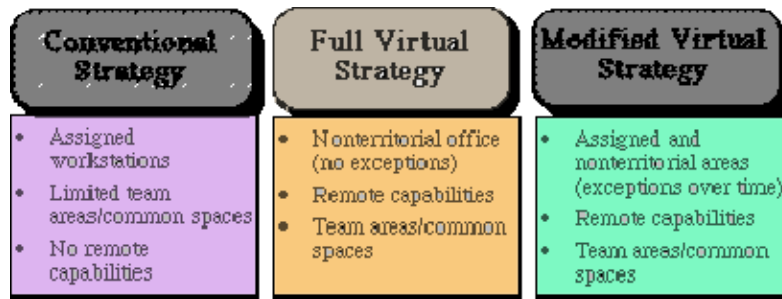

The specific research questions addressed in this study included:

- How do different forms of a virtual workplace strategy, where location and time of work are flexible and relaxed, affect people's ability to work as a team?
- More specifically, how are tasks such as communication, meetings, problem-solving, and coordination accomplished in various virtual officing approaches, compared to a more conventional office?
- Does the workplace strategy influence the work processes? For example, does the strategy dictate how certain tasks are completed?
- How do work patterns vary as a result of the workplace strategy?
- Does working virtually hinder employees' ability to work as a project team?
- How, where and when does learning occur under different forms of virtual officing compared to a more conventional office environment?
- What factors influence that learning?
- To what extent can the workplace strategy promote informal communication and learning, idea generation, and cross-functional communication?
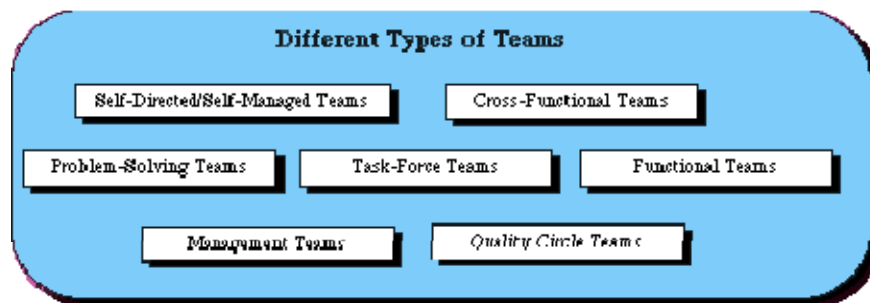
Three of Chiat/Day inc. Advertising's offices in North America were the research sites.

Conventional Strategy	Full Virtual Strategy	Modified Virtual Strategy
• Assigned workstations • Limited team areas/common spaces • No remote capabilities	• Nonterritorial office (no exceptions) • Remote capabilities • Team areas/common spaces	• Assigned and nonterritorial areas (exceptions over time) • Remote capabilities • Team areas/common spaces

Teams and the "Relay Race" vs. "Rugby" model

Until the last decade, managers traditionally approached a complex problem like product development by breaking it into smaller individual parts, and then later recombining the individual efforts into a whole (Van de Ven, 1986). The premise behind management of part-whole relationships--also called the "relay race model," being similar to one runner handing a baton to the next--is that the "sum of the parts will be greater than the whole" (Becker, 1990; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986; Van de Ven, 1986).

Team structures in this strategy tend to be functional, in which membership is based on the team's particular area of expertise. The functional team model, popular in the past, is now shifting. The "relay race model" of linear product development has serious disadvantages that could ultimately destroy the organization:

Different Types of Teams: Self-Directed/Self-Managed Teams, Cross-Functional Teams, Problem-Solving Teams, Task-Force Teams, Functional Teams, Management Teams, Quality Circle Teams

Cross-functional teams are one team approach embraced by organizations in the current business climate. Van de Ven suggests that, instead of breaking down product development into functional areas, organizations combine functions that influence the total development cycle, such as research and development, manufacturing, and

marketing. Using this strategy, organizations witness parallel or simultaneous development, rather than linear development.

Called simultaneous engineering, concurrent design, or the "rugby model" (Becker, 1990; Becker & Steele 1995; Funk; 1992; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986), the premise is "to bring all the players in the process together as a team at the project's inception" (Becker & Steele 1995, p. 70). The model emphasizes teamwork that cuts across discipline and departmental boundaries, on free-flowing and serendipitous face-to-face communication, on clear goals reached by taking advantage of unexpected ideas and opportunities, and on information and ideas circulating among all players from the very beginning of the process and not in some preordained sequence (Becker, 1990, p. 237).

Cross-functional Collocation

All three offices in the study benefited from cross-functional collocation of the core team members. Through use of project rooms by the core disciplines, there was very fluid cross-functional communication among disciplines within account teams at both virtual offices. This affect can be attributed to users' feelings of project rooms as "home base."

[The virtual office has] heightened the importance of relationships and counting on people and teamwork. I used to relate almost exclusively with my cubicle partner. I'm interrelating with more people on the account team now on multiple levels, which is good. --Account Planner

Team Cohesiveness

The virtual office project rooms, by bringing the primary disciplines together and giving them a "home base," enhanced team cohesiveness. While the team was close in the previous environment, they had an increased sense of team unity in the new environment.

I feel much closer to the team than I did in the [old environment]. You have to be. I mean, I work side-by-side with them all the time. You had your own place before.... You'd go to your desk. You'd have someone sitting this far away from you, but they might not have been in your group. Now we're sitting at one table, because that's what we have. It's much closer.
--Media Planner