

ECSCW: Where Are We?

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1. What was it that ECSCW set out to do?

CSCW has many roots. In North America, CSCW was a direct continuation of CMC research under another name. It was also an extension of HCI research traditions on to the new problems of multi-user applications.

However, the most important source was the disappointing experience of the office automation movement. This led to the involvement of social science research in addressing conceptual problems of technological development.

Why? Because experience had shown that it was necessary to unravel the status of office procedures and other kinds of representations in action: How are procedures, plans, schemes actually made to work? This becomes especially acute when such procedures, plans, schemes are computerized, that is: *mechanized*. What happens then? How do we design for that?

This problem is CSCW's central problem. All the other problems we're studying are subordinate to that. Or should be.

It is because of this problem that ethnographic studies play such a central role in CSCW. In order to understand how machines can be used in complex work practices to regulate interactions in those settings, we need in-depth studies of how work is actually organized and coordinated. We need to understand how *mechanized plans* are — or could be — made to work in situated action.

2. Now, where are we?

Modern workplaces abound with cooperation technologies, that is, computer-systems that integrate and regulate cooperative work:

- accounting systems, banking, trading, booking, ticketing,
- computer-aided design, computer-aided manufacturing,
- shop-floor production planning,
- electronic patient records,
- configuration management systems; scientific laboratories

Nonetheless, although CSCW, especially ECSCW, was motivated by the problems of mechanical regulation of interaction, it has proved difficult to stay

focused on these problems. We have not managed to stay involved in the development of these technologies. And it shows! The problems of mechanical regulation of interaction are largely ignored. Workflow management systems research, for instance, has proceeded in complete disregard of CSCW and is only now beginning to address the fact that there are workers in workflows.

So, in reply to the question: *Where are we?* — the answer is: We are not deeply involved in these technical domains.

Is this other people's fault? *Sure!* There's the issue of funding, there is always that! And the fact that funding agencies suffer from acute attention disorder. Perhaps our concerns are too difficult to explain to the funding fathers. Perhaps the engineering community doesn't want us to complicate what (in their view) is already complicated enough.

Could it also be our own fault? *Absolutely!*

Let me point to a couple of things that may handicap us:

1. Ethnographic studies of cooperative work in complex professional settings require a huge investment up front of time and effort — and one doesn't know in advance if it pays off. It's a high-risk strategy. It's not for the faint-hearted. Studies of simple activities in familiar settings are surely less hazardous...

2. It is similarly less straightforward to build experimental systems that have to interoperate with large-scale collaboration systems. Small-scale prototypes for well-bounded settings are preferable.

Has the ECSCW community become risk-averse? It would seem so.

3. But there may also be a third impediment: It is a CSCW dogma that work practices are essentially *ad hoc*. This dogma may hold us back from engaging in the development of technologies and systems that regulate interaction in cooperative work settings. At least it sometimes seems as if such research is considered as something evil...

I have spoken [and saved my soul]