# HOTDESKING:
## A Potential Link in the eWorker's Information Chain

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**Abstract**: One of the major challenges of the flexible workplace is sustaining workflows while enabling mobile work. Hotdesking is intended to facilitate work in temporary workspaces in a mobile work environment. This study explored trends in information behaviour supporting work tasks through hotdesking in Canada and Ireland. Hotdeskers participated in semi-structured interviews about their information behaviour. Hotdeskers in both countries similarly identified access to electronic resources, reorganization of information, storage, permanent workspace, and mobile technologies as key items for successful hotdesking. The findings point to a particular information seeking behaviour among hotdeskers and suggest areas for future development of hotdesking arrangements.

**Keywords**: eWork, Hotdesking, Information Behaviour, Mobile work, Mobility

## 1.     INTRODUCTION:

   Mobile work can take place in a variety of contexts, including working from home, on the road, in hotels, in airport lounges, etc. Regardless of how work is located, however, a major challenge remains sustaining workflows through information access. The hotdesk model of working, traditionally a work environment designated for temporary use by multiple persons, is reputed to offer the eWorker the opportunity to reconnect with the organization, while simultaneously allowing the organization to reduce space requirements for permanent offices. By exploring the hotdesking work environment, we can increase our knowledge of the role hotdesking plays in the creation and adoption of information structures to facilitate information

flows. The object of this study was to increase our understanding of the information world of employees working in flexible work arrangements which include hotdesking. An examination of Canadian and Irish experiences with hotdesking was arranged through a government research partnership to facilitate research between the two countries and offers an important point of comparison between well-established and newer hotdesking arrangements.

## 2.      HOTDESKING AND EWORK:

Alternative methods of working are features of work in both Canada and Ireland. While up-to-date information on the numbers of people working in alternative work environments is not always available, some organizations have attempted to count people engaged in different forms of work, and figures are available for the recent past. The Canadian Telework Association estimates that the number of eWorkers is approximately 1.5 million (CTA, 2001).[1] *Telework in Europe* (2000) identified one million or 7.1 per cent of working Canadians as eWorkers and ranked Canada as 6th worldwide for penetration of eWork in the workforce. The same report ranked Ireland 7th overall for implementation of eWork, with 40,000 eWorkers or 2.9 per cent of the working population involved in eWork. The Electronic Commerce and Telework Trends (EcaTT, 2000) study found that a higher number, 4.4 per cent, of the Irish workforce eWorks. Although Ireland has not experienced the same degree of implementation of eWorking arrangements as Canada, there is a movement toward increased adoption in Ireland, championed by key public officials (e.g., Noel Treacy, Minister for Science, Technology and Commerce, speech delivered at TWI, 2001). Hotdesking is seen as one means of supporting eWork initiatives in Ireland (TWI, 2001).

Hotdesking, or hoteling as it is sometimes called, provides a system of working in a shared work environment. Characteristically, the employee can access the equipment and technology necessary to perform work tasks or may plug in a laptop to access the organization's resources, but no one person has ownership of a given workstation. However, hotdesking may also be configured to allow working in temporary spaces in home, client, and organizational contexts. Through hotdesking, eWorking employees have the flexibility to work at a remote location for a period of time, returning to the organizational workplace to perform particular work functions, such as attending meetings, gathering information, etc.

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[1] Figures on the numbers of eWorkers are difficult to estimate and information is not always gathered at regular intervals through formal channels. The numbers cited in this paper reflect the most current information available at the time of writing this article.

The hotdesking model may offer a valuable gateway to information for the mobile worker.  The question of information exchange, both among eWorkers and between eWorkers and other organizational members, is seldom addressed in studies of eWork. Indeed, eWork still represents a relatively new phenomenon in work arrangements and little is known about the effect of this alternate work organization on information flows. However, Fulton (2000) revealed that one of the problems associated with remote work done from home has been isolation from resources, including colleagues and information. This study showed that information professionals working at home were often unable to complete work tasks because they lacked information. Since work tasks require access to information which often must be timely, changes in information access, as well as in information organization and storage, are extremely important to the work done by eWorkers. Hotdesking has the potential to provide a critical link in their information seeking, connecting eWorkers to information they are missing or cannot access in other work environments.

Several theoretical models of information seeking behaviour reveal patterns of information access and use that are relevant to the workplace, including the processes by which people recognize and resolve information needs. Wilson (1999) has shown that a person in a particular context who engages in information seeking behaviour may be challenged by such intervening variables as role-related or environmental factors. Cheuk (1998) notes that workers proceed through seven information seeking and using situations in the workplace: the beginning of a new task, the recognition of the need for understanding about the task, the development of ideas to execute the task, verification of ideas developed, problems with conflicting information, finalization of ideas, and the exchange of ideas with others. Leckie et al. (1996) also emphasize the central role of work tasks in the information seeking behaviour of professionals, noting that information needs arise from work tasks. In the case of eWork, employees who work in more than one location often alter their information seeking strategies to accommodate the movement of work to a different context (Fulton, 2000).

**Approach:**
This study explored the following question: *What role does hotdesking play in the information chain of eWorkers?*  This research question raises other important issues. For example, what particular resources do employees use in the hotdesking environment, which they cannot access in their remote workplaces? How does hotdesking support the information seeking of eWorkers?

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in multiple hotdesking cases to build a detailed picture of the information world of the eWorker in a hotdesking environment. Interviews

were organized around the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), a method of gathering important facts concerning behaviour by focusing on a defined situation, used in this case to explore participants' information behaviour while hotdesking. Changing patterns in information exchange were explored by asking participants to review, step-by-step, their use of information in their work.

A total of sixteen information professionals, divided equally among three different, large organizations and between Canadian and Irish workplaces, participated in this qualitative study. The number of participants in the study falls within the guidelines provided by qualitative research experts, such as Miles and Huberman (1994). Most often, participants were male (70% male; 30% female), were in mid-career, and had achieved high levels of formal education. All participants were employed in some form of information work spanning various organizational levels. Two of the organizations had established hotdesking practices; the third organization was experimenting with hotdesking and had completed a hotdesking pilot study. In the majority of cases, participants used hotdesking in combination with other forms of working, including home-based and mobile eWork.

**Information Behaviour in the Hotdesking Environment:**

Participants identified an array of resources as critical sources of information, including email, the Internet, company Intranets, and electronic databases. Participants also valued verbal contact with colleagues and clients, as well as certain print resources, such as business reports available only in printed format; however, electronic information held particular importance to participants as information that could be transported easily from workspace to workspace.

Although hotdesking was intended to facilitate information access, participants frequently identified situations where they were missing information, particularly electronic information. Remote electronic access was not always possible, nor easy; for instance, participants might not have direct access to electronic company files when working remotely. A common strategy for overcoming gaps in information was to keep multiple copies of documents in paper and electronic formats. However, creating multiple copies of information items also necessitated keeping track of one's most recently updated files.

Participants reported that they missed regular verbal interactions with colleagues, especially when colleagues were also hotdeskers. To fill in information gaps, participants relied upon their colleagues, and in particular, colleagues with permanent workspaces within the organizational office; however, hotdeskers were conscious of interrupting their colleagues, both when hotdesking at the central office and when working remotely, and reserved this option for more information critical situations.

Participants further attempted to cope by reorganizing their information environment. In particular, hotdeskers moved away from paper-based information sources whenever possible, since paper is heavy to carry and requires storage space. Laptop computers were especially important for information storage; hotdeskers relied upon their laptop computers to facilitate their movement from workspace to workspace within and outside the organizational office. However, only participant actually managed to implement a paperless office. Participants generally maintained printed files that were critical to current and ongoing work processes. These printed sources were stored for convenient access, in some cases in general office archives and at other times in assigned lockers and small filing cabinets. It was also common for hotdeskers to turn to their colleagues for additional temporary storage. In this way, hotdeskers managed their information in a wider physical context than simply leaving materials in a traditional office or cubicle workspace. This physical spreading of information within and beyond the confines of the organizational office meant that hotdeskers spent considerable energy managing and coping with their information environments. The need for storage led to greater assertion of ownership over workspaces, with custody of a workspace expressed through such acts as displaying a nameplate or reorganizing shared materials on the hotdesk. Greater nesting occurred when participants stored boxes under the desk in their workspaces, posted notes on the cubicle divider, and left materials on the desk for extended periods of time.

## Including Alternative Forms of Working in Our Modeling of Information Behaviour:

Although hotdesking is considered a mode of working that should facilitate mobile work, the information seeking and coping behaviour adopted by hotdeskers in this study showed marked similarities to that discovered previously among home-based eWorkers (Fulton, 2001). Fulton's (2001) study found that eWorkers missed sources, including people sources, when working from home and that they experienced different information gaps from their at-office counterparts. The current hotdesking study shows further how those gaps reveal different barriers to information seeking which are not necessarily resolved by temporary desking.

Figure 1 illustrates the route to information that hotdeskers followed in this study. Hotdeskers experienced imperfect access to information, caused by a lack of or complicated electronic access to information, the need for enhanced technology for seamless connectivity, and lack of storage space. Hotdeskers worked around these barriers to access by gathering and keeping information around them, traveling to information sources, and relying on colleagues for assistance. As instances of hotdeskers circumventing the usual workplace route to information increased, hotdeskers were also more likely

to make that alternate route to task-related information a permanent part of their information seeking.  For example, building and maintaining a bank of information in anticipation of future information needs was a very typical means of pre-empting interruptions of information flow by barriers to information, and this collection of information very quickly became a trusted, first choice among resources for information.   In this case, hotdeskers actually nearly approach the information seeking process in reverse order, accumulating information they may or may not use in the course of completing a given work task.
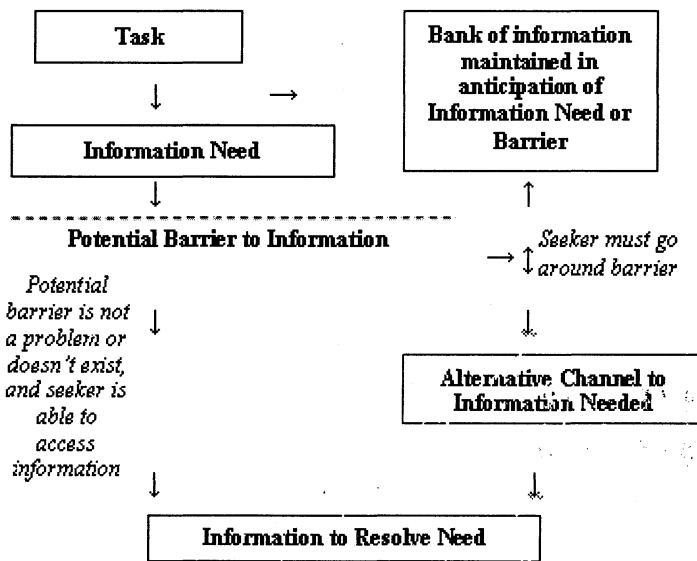


*Figure 1.* Hotdesker's Information Seeking Behaviour

While it might be argued that general information seeking models provide a looping back to renegotiate or revisit a previous step in the process, it must be noted that hotdeskers are not merely circling back to revise their approach.  Hotdeskers may revisit a previous step, but they most often explore a way or ways around the barrier, which stands between them and the information they need or want.  An alternate route might include a different channel to or another source of information.

**Best Practices for Hotdesking:**

Understanding the alternative routes to information taken by hotdeskers is useful in creating strategies for information provision and best practices in alternative work arrangements. In this study, hotdesking was often combined with other forms of eWork, such as working from home or in other remote work locations. For employers, hotdesking offered a means of minimizing real estate, while maximizing use of available space and distributing labour to areas where and when it was needed. For employees, hotdesking provided a workspace in temporary work contexts in the organizational office, as well as in the home and on client sites.

Was hotdesking a link in participants' information chains? Participants reported various ways in which they adapted their information seeking strategies as a result of hotdesking. They reorganized and reformatted information to suit their mobile worklives. They carried information with them to help them complete work tasks and they visited particular work locations where they had stored information to collect that information. Instances of missing information were frequently related to the extent of hotdesking in an organization; indeed, participants who had greater and immediate access to electronic information were less likely to identify serious problems with information seeking and information storage. Participants who relied on a mixture of sources experienced a dispersal of information among storage locations, which, in turn, increased feelings of blurred boundaries between work locations for some participants. On the other hand, hotdesking also provided a vital link between other forms of working, such as working while traveling and working from home, providing a focal point for work, if only temporary.

The hotdesking experiences of both Canadian and Irish participants suggest several best practices in continued hotdesking arrangements:

- Provision of information in electronic format;
- Provision of tools which facilitate seamless connectivity;
- Evaluation of work roles and information access and exchange within those roles to accommodate working in temporary spaces;
- Provision of some form of "home base" for hotdeskers to foster feelings of inclusion and to provide adequate archival space for electronic and print information sources;
- Full, immediate access to work-related information through electronic networks, as well as time-sensitive access to paper-based work information.

Many of these best practices were seen in hotdesking arrangements observed in this study. However, the implementation of these recommendations for hotdesking depended on the extent of hotdesking in particular organizations, and hotdesking arrangements varied widely between organizations. Hotdeskers would benefit from a more systematic

implementation of this work form, incorporating these points for best practice as a foundation for improved future hotdesking.

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