3. Understanding 21st-Century Workplace Writing Communities: An Ethnomethodological Study of Phatic Communication in Large Corporations

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Abstract

This chapter examines how phatic communication is used to build community in large multinational corporations (MNCs). Drawing on ethnomethodological research and interviews with employees at nCino, a global software company, the author shows how phatic communication helps writers build networks through goodwill to support and manage complex writing projects. As companies adopt more agile and distributed organizational models, employees must cultivate networks of relationships to work together effectively. This chapter explores how employees deploy interactive technologies like Slack, Jira, and whiteboards to build community for both work- and non-work-related purposes. The ability to build community through phatic communication is an important soft skill for the 21st-century workplace. This research provides insights into how we might prepare students to navigate the social complexities of modern work environments.

Keywords

phatic communication, ethnomethodology, multinational corporations (MNCs), agile organizational models, soft skills, networks

As companies continue to navigate the complex terrain of distributed workflows, writers and employees must work together to establish stronger networks of collaboration through phatic communication—the type of communication that builds connections through goodwill, identification, and playful fun. Drawing on examples from multinational corporations (MNCs), I will analyze how phatic discourse is used to create community and reshape workplace dynamics. We can use this understanding to build strong writing cultures in the classroom and prepare students for writing in these networked environments.

In the college classroom, students create a social environment mostly through in-class activities and learning management systems (LMSs) like Canvas that do not accurately represent the way that professionals collaborate in most workplaces today. By becoming familiar with distributed writing environments like Slack and Microsoft Teams, students will be better prepared to foster relationships in

the workplace by adapting to new and emerging collaborative tools. To prepare my own students, I take many classes on visits to actual workplaces and introduce them to the programs and software that they will likely be using after they graduate. This gives students opportunities to see how writers create culture and collaborate through writing in these distributed environments.

In fall 2019, students from my honors class Writing and the Art of Problem-Solving visited a multinational software company called nCino, headquartered in Wilmington, North Carolina. Our main goal was to explore different ways employees solved problems through writing, but we also discussed how institutional contexts influenced collaboration and the writing process. As I expected, many students were impressed by what they saw and how it contrasted with their imagined versions of corporate life. Yes, there were lots of cubicles. But there were also free beverages and snacks, a game room, ping pong tables, comfortable chairs, and even surfboards to borrow (see Figure 3.1).

These observations seemed irrelevant to the work nCino does with cloud banking—possibly even counterproductive. Several students discussed in class how skeptical they were of this ethos . . . was nCino trying too hard to have fun? But as we became acquainted with nCino and its employees, "having fun," one of nCino's six core values, appeared to be crucial to productivity. As shown in Figure 3.2, nCino's web page on workplace culture lists six items:

1. Bring Your A-game
2. Do the Right Thing
3. Respect Each Other
4. Make Someone's Day
5. Have Fun
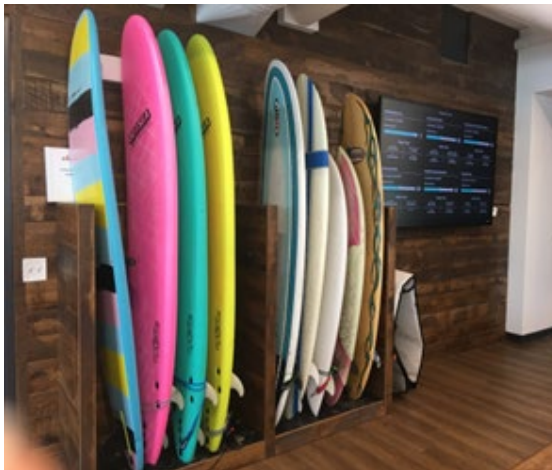6. Be a Winner (nCino, 2020).

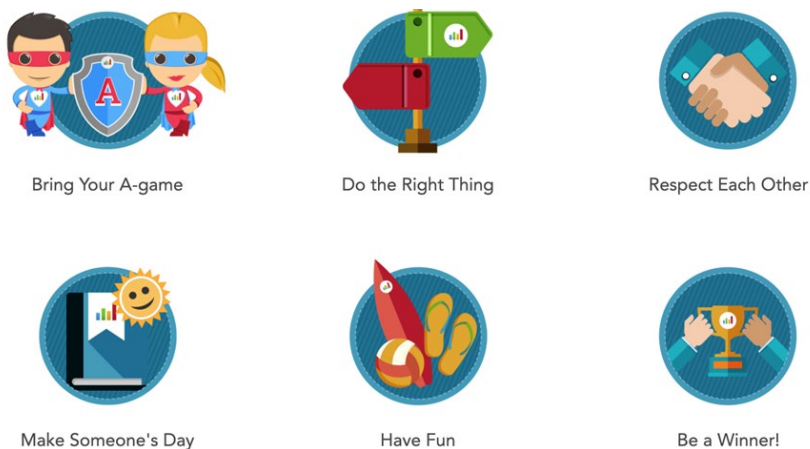*Figure 3.1. Surfboards to borrow at nCino. Author's photo.*

Figure 3.2. Six core values from nCino's web page on workplace culture. (nCino, 2020). Used with permission.

Only two of these can arguably be oriented towards productivity and achievement: "Bring your A-Game" and "Be a Winner." The rest of these are about how employees connect and treat each other, which plays out through all kinds of phatic discourse, but especially in environments like Slack.

nCino works hard to cultivate networked and multi-directional relationships — horizontally, vertically, and diagonally. For students functioning mostly in a hierarchical (and vertical) structure like a university, this seems strange and unfamiliar— suspect even. I imagine new employees may have similar reactions, though mixed with the anxiety of needing to fit into this new job and its communities. Without context, these values seem vague and meaningless. But for nCino employees, these slogans carry deep meaning because of the daily interactions they produce around these values. To fully understand these cultural values, one has to participate in their making. The leadership team may have come up with these phrases, but it is the workplace writers that build their meaning every day. Interviews with employees repeatedly reinforced these values, as many of them could recall them from memory and connect them to interactions in their community both online and in person.

Anyone outside the community may indeed be skeptical, especially when focusing on positive and successful examples. I will not be arguing that these workplace communities are flawless. Communities of goodwill and communication channels break down every day, which only underlines the importance of examining successful moments where students can see phatic discourse at work. While this workplace culture works well in one organization, it may not be applicable in others. These cultures are something that any workplace must actively cultivate and maintain within its own context. But by studying and analyzing successful examples, like nCino, we can learn how phatic discourse can be used to create communities of goodwill, not as a model to emulate, but as an example for reflection.

To understand how these communities work, we also must consider how the workplace has become more distributed, undergoing several hierarchical shifts to accommodate work that is fast-paced and constantly in flux, especially in multinational corporations (MNCs) and companies in the tech industry. These workplaces continue to deploy more horizontal project management systems like Agile, Scrum, and Kanban to stoke creativity and increase adaptability for handling timely and unexpected troubleshooting with software and equipment. A more collaborative atmosphere is essential for these businesses to succeed, requiring workplace writers to create and maintain a community of goodwill.

Scholars in technical and professional communication have tangentially explored these project management systems to prepare students for deeper forms of collaboration in the workplace (Pope-Ruark, 2014; Ranade & Swarts, 2019; Rooksby & Ikeya, 2102). Though understanding how these new collaborative processes and technologies influence the writing process and productivity is important, this shift also requires new kinds of communication around writing focused on creating and maintaining relationships—not necessarily on getting work done.

Many of these systems create deeper writing communities and networks that go beyond project management. They also require a new set of phatic communication skills for employees who work in these contexts. How writers create and maintain networks is crucial to our understanding of 21st-century workplace writing and how to prepare students for the human side of technical communication.

◼ Phatic Communication in the Workplace

In "Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical *Eunoia* to Personal Artificial Intelligence," James Porter (2017) re-orients professional communication theory around phatic functions that open channels of communication and cultivate ongoing relationships within collaborative networks (p. 174). Scholars in linguistics have spent the most time developing theories around phatic communication, mostly looking at conversational interactions that establish personal bonds instead of conveying actual meaning (Malinowski, 1923). Though definitions of communication vary greatly, we most often see the workplaces through a transmission lens first articulated by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1948), based on their work at Bell Telephone Labs. The transmission model often overlooks phatic communication, de-emphasizing many seemingly unimportant communicative events, like "water cooler conversations." Any action that does not convey information is insignificant. According to Porter, though, phatic communication derives its purpose from *ethos* rather than *logos*. These types of interactions are required to "create goodwill, trust, cooperation, partnership, harmony" (Porter, 2017, p. 175). When looking at how people collaborate in the workplace, understanding these phatic forms of communication is key. Telephone metaphors no longer provide a complete picture of the communicative work writers are doing in networked environments.

The ability to deploy phatic discourse in the workplace is a "soft skill" that is not always highlighted in our writing research, but is necessary for understanding modern workplace writing, where work and writing is more distributed across networks. The U.S. Army first used the term *soft skills* to describe any skill not related to the use of mechanics or technology (Silber & Foshay, 2009). More recently, workplace managers define soft skills in terms of interpersonal and organizational skills that transcend specific roles or professions. Hard skills in writing refer to the use of specific software like Microsoft Office and Adobe Creative Cloud, usually focusing on a writer's ability to develop effective content for specific digital or print environments. For a workplace writer, soft skills refer to their ability to collaborate, manage complex projects, and solve complicated problems. Being able to develop and maintain networks of goodwill with other writers and stakeholders is an important soft skill in the MNC workplace, especially when the organization tends towards a more distributed workflow where projects and tasks are spread out more horizontally across networks. Charles Darah (1994), one of the first scholars to observe a more distributed organizational structure, describes this workplace as a "heterogeneous workplace held together by networks of assistance with expertise distributed throughout" (p. 80). We cannot assume that all workers require the same skills in the same way, but distributed expertise requires social skills and the ability to adapt to new organizational structures.

Navigating formal and informal forms of writing in the workplace has become a key soft skill in any workplace where genres or communication tools can be used across a spectrum of formality registers. For example, email was one of the first forms of writing to introduce more informal modes of writing to the workplace. Early research into email focused on the hybridity between written and oral discourse, and the potential for communication breakdown resulting from the lack of contextual cues. At the same time, the informal nature of email made room for innovation by allowing ideas to flow more easily in ways accessible to more people across hierarchies, gender, and race (Sims, 1996). Even in its earliest forms, email performed many of the phatic functions that messaging apps use today. For example, a 1996 study of two corporate contexts found that many writers would decorate their emails with images, emoticons, and unconventional spelling/punctuation (Sims, 1996). All these elements are seemingly irrelevant to the transmission of information or project development, but they play a key role as workplaces develop more flattened hierarchies that rely more deeply on collaboration.

In work environments that depend on distributed forms of writing, theories of phatic communication must be re-articulated as the focus of workplace writing (rather than just tertiary). Though Porter focuses on virtual teams, intercultural communication, and user help forums, all forms of phatic communication are important in MNC cultures that encourage flattened hierarchies and a more distributed work process. If we take a second look at nCino's cultural values page, we can line the values up with each critical element of ethos (Table 3.1), as described by Aristotle (as cited in Porter, 2017, p. 177).

Table 3.1. Elements of Ethos in nCino Values

Element of ethos	nCino values
Eunoia (goodwill)	Make someone's day; Respect each other
Phronesis (practical judgement)	Bring your A-game; Have fun
Arête (virtue)	Do the right thing; Be a winner

To encourage more efficient distributed workflows, MNCs work hard to develop an ethos-driven community that creates goodwill between employees and keeps channels of communication and collaboration open. For nCino, this means having game rooms, snacks, comfortable chairs, and good-humored fun—those elements that students find the most surprising when first visiting nCino. But to really understand how phatic communication works in specific communities of goodwill, researchers and students need to become a part of that network. Ethnomethodological approaches to research in the workplace can help both researchers and students explore these communities in authentic ways.

■ Methodological Contexts

To explore how writing in the workplace is changing under these networked conditions, I spent several years visiting MNCs in Wilmington, North Carolina and Kraków, Poland. This project emerged from my efforts to create more collaboration between professional writing students and employees in MNCs. Providing UNCW students with more cross-cultural experience (both remotely and as a study abroad) prepares them for writing in the global workplace, which is increasingly collaborative, digital, and cross-cultural. Some activities involved

- virtual visits from writers in Kraków, Poland;
- tours of nCino, a software company in Wilmington;
- student analysis of texts from MNCs;
- applied learning projects with MNC partners; and
- undergraduate research projects.

The main reason I chose nCino and Kraków, Poland, is because those are the communities I am already networked with through classroom collaborations, field trips, conferences, and study abroad trips, all of which allow students to experience community in new ways (Cummings, 2021).[1] Kraków in particular is a special place to study workplace writing because many MNCs have developed European headquarters there due to the low cost of living in Poland, as well as the high-quality employees available there. In fact, *Soap!,* one of the most well-known conferences on content writing in Eastern Europe, is held in Kraków and

1. To learn more about the writing community in Kraków, Poland, see Marsh, 2017 and Johnson, 2017.

is famous for its tight-knit community. This is how I first became interested in how writers in these environments build communities. This project was also interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and relies mostly on eight Zoom interviews made during that time. That said, I will be drawing data from all these sources (each of which are covered by separate IRBs).[2]

Being a part of these communities of goodwill builds trust between the researcher and participants. In a typical interview, participants might be tempted to paint a positive picture of their company or skip over negative examples from their experience. But when they know and trust the researcher, they are more likely to share both the good and the bad. This is especially important when studying phatic communication, which often involves informal and personal elements that might not be immediately obvious to an outsider. That said, this project focused mostly on how employees successfully built company culture using the technology around them, so that students can observe successful practices not visible in the writing classroom. Being a part of these communities means participating in how the cultures, or social orders, are being built, thus making ethnomethodology ideal for identifying these moments of agency.

According to Barbara Schneider (2002), ethnomethodology assumes that "all social order is organized from within the social situation." In other words, the social structures that constrain writers are not imposed from the outside but emerge from the writing situation itself. Structure and agency are constitutive of each other, and writers are constrained by social structures while also participating in their creation or reproduction. Ethnomethodology, then, is a way to identify interactive points of agency available to writers in the workplace that might otherwise be hidden by a more all-encompassing understanding of social organization. Simply put, workplace writing is best understood as interaction that creates community and culture, not just communication. Of course, MNC values and mission statements establish shapes and boundaries, but ultimately, it is the workplace writer that makes those values and missions reality. For many in the field of technical communication, ethnomethodology has a practical bend (Rooksby & Ikeya, 2011). The goal is not to find hidden structures but to examine the interactions around writing and how people think about them, which enables both researchers and practitioners to improve technologies, methods, and processes.

The goal of an ethnomethodological study is to have writers identify and reflect on how they experience writing, often focusing on the interaction between structure or social context. Typically, ethnomethodology relies on two methods of analysis, either interviews where writers discuss the decision-making around writing or think-aloud protocols where writers speak their thoughts out loud

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2.   IRB# 20-0125 Exploring Phatic Communication in Multi-national Corporations, IRB# 19-0209 Global Communities of Writing: An Ethnographic Study of Tech Writing in Poland

during the writing process (Schneider, 2002). For example, an early ethnomethodological study by Stephen Doheny-Farina (1986) traces the development of a new mission statement at a nearby organization, mapping out the interaction around the document and how it influenced the shape of the growing company. At that time, most of this interaction happened in a board room. How this works today looks much different and requires us to adapt these methods to more networked and digital environments. Though this chapter does not focus on a single document, my goal is to explore how workplace communities understand the networked nature of their writing by specifically looking at the discourse that happens outside and around the more formal forms of writing. At first, these phatic forms of communication look incidental and irrelevant, but this chapter will argue that they are necessary for understanding how teams and members create the community and contexts around them.

Most of the interviews for this chapter focused on writers and content specialists at nCino because I had already met or worked with most of these interviewees. Though the methods I use cannot be considered true ethnography, as I did not spend extensive amounts of times in any single location, I am taking what's been called an ethnomethodological approach. But instead of understanding the ethnographic site as an office building, the research site is an extensively networked community of writers and communicators that cannot be contained by a single location. The nexus of research in workplace writing often revolves around the individual, when most writing—at least in MNCs— is highly collaborative and distributed. To truly understand workplace writing in the 21st century, we need to understand the workplace as a network, not just a physical location.

▮ New Collaboration Models in the Workplace

Phatic forms of communication are embedded and shaped by new organizational models that have been developing for decades. Since the 1990s, scholars in technical communication have noted a shift in organizational structures that redefine writing in the workplace as a participatory and distributed activity that restructures power dynamics and how meaning is created (Slack et al., 1993). Globalization has created a faster form of capitalism requiring corporations to decenter power, flatten hierarchies, and create more fluid work processes (Henry, 2006). Workers must take more responsibility for the organizational discourse produced in corporate networks, adapting quickly and collaborating with effective communication around writing (Gee & Lankshear, 1996). In other words, many MNCs have found that giving employees ownership of their workflows not only increases productivity, but also quality. This requires both researchers and practitioners to look beyond a transmission model of communication, which focuses mostly on information, to see how knowledge and discourse is created through networked interaction. New technologies and services require constant

and quick innovation, which happens best in these flattened, collaborative networks—at least, according to many of the project management philosophies now being deployed in MNC workplaces.

To leverage these new organizational models, successful companies in the software and technology fields have restructured their team organizations around *agile* project management principles that encourage a more human-centered response to systemic problems and constant change. Unlike our traditional understanding of text, documentation and products in software and technology are never finished, so MNCs need to account for the constant change and diverse user contexts that come along with growing technology. Agile approaches to project management focus less on a unidirectional workflow (often called "waterfall") and more on an iterative process that remains adaptable and flexible. It is better to draft a small section of a document, a small piece of code, or an interface sketch for immediate feedback, rather than drafting an entire text or product only to find out you are way off track.

Agile is one of the primary project management systems used to create more user-based designs through short, iterative cycles called sprints (Pope-Ruark, 2015). The four guiding principles can be found in the Agile Manifesto:

1. Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
2. Working software over comprehensive documentation
3. Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
4. Responding to change over following a plan (Agile Software Development, 2001)

Though the purpose of this chapter is not to delve into the details of agile project management, these guiding principles clearly show how the shift in workflow moves from product-oriented to process-oriented, requiring more networked forms of communication. The introduction of agile into these organizational structures has created a culture of innovation around the collaborative and distributive writing process that ultimately promotes community.

Take for example Jamf, an Apple-based software company created in 2002, with their European headquarters in Katowice, Poland. Certainly, there is a traditional corporate hierarchy with CEOs on top (Jamf, n.d.b). But if you look at the online profiles for the senior leadership team, you will see a "Fun Facts" section on each page. We know, for example, that Dean Hager, the CEO, grew up in a small farm town, has swum from Alcatraz to San Francisco and has been hit by a car twice (but still loves biking) (Jamf, n.d.a). Of course, none of these facts are useful in a strictly business sense, but they invite readers to see a more flattened hierarchy where CEOs share their "humanity." According to David at their Katowice, Poland headquarters, Jamf prides itself on building the company based on people, where teams are the "smallest unit of organization," giving each person a strong sense of ownership. This is what project management specialists call a "horizontal team culture" (see Figure 3.3).
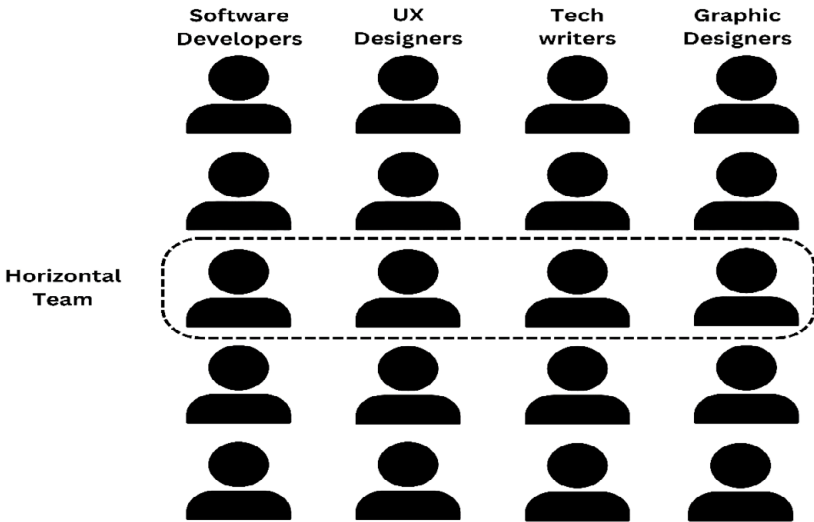
Figure 3.3. Agile team structures (Hawks, 2017).

Rather than managing a large team or department as seen in traditional organizational charts, each manager has people in different teams (or departments), allowing for more cross-functionality that encourages knowledge transfer (David at Jamf). Since most texts circulate extensively through these team networks, no single individual is to blame for a faulty text, and everyone celebrates success together. For example, at nCino, every team has a name and mascot, and they often celebrate together when successfully completing a project. But if something doesn't go right, they don't waste time blaming people; they discuss what went wrong and how they might fix it for next time. Working in these environments requires a good deal of critical thinking and reflection skills.

Though originating in the software industry, where documentation and code is constantly being written, other industries, including education, are adapting Agile and other forms of lateral project management for their own purposes. To understand how writing in the workplace has changed in MNCs, we need to contextualize communication within these more networked environments. Effective employees need to do more than communicate to their immediate supervisor or departmental team (vertically); employees need to communicate in all directions—horizontally, vertically, diagonally, etc. This is true even for employees not directly integrated in the Agile structures. Even in organizational contexts where Agile is not being explicitly deployed, understanding Agile helps us understand these new writing contexts as they develop in different ways across the workplace world. For these systems to work effectively, participants must become adept at creating and maintaining networks. Using forms of communication less focused around work becomes a key feature of workplace writing and helps create bonds that make these new project management systems work.

■ Phatic Use of Technology

Of course, phatic forms of communication are nothing new in the workplace. Several studies have already shown the importance of interaction when collaborating, especially in environments that require more innovation. For example, John Rooksby and Nozomi Ikeya (2012) note key interactions in conference rooms (especially around whiteboards) that contributed to successful sessions:

- paying attention to each other
- maintaining a shared focus
- sketching out ideas
- being open to each other's ideas
- seeking agreement and acknowledging disagreement
- maintaining a sense of humor

None of these interactions are strictly about conveying information; they are more about keeping communication channels open and promoting interaction between participants, because innovation and new ideas tend to emerge from these collaborative environments.

Often, this phatic work means leveraging tools and technology in new ways. In her study on more cross-cultural situations, Tiina Räisänen (2020) found that participants draw on the available means around them to create interaction, develop rapport, and get things done (pp. 170-176). Multimodal resources have become important tools to help participants create more interaction through active listening, back-channeling, and textual/visual brainstorming (Räisänen, 2020, p. 173). In other words, objects and technology around employees participate in the "production of action, social meaning, and subjectivity" of these writing communities (Räisänen, 2020, p.176). The ways employees use whiteboard technology illustrate how available technical means can both convey information and serve phatic purposes.

At nCino, nearly every whiteboard and even window becomes a potential space for interaction and collaboration. These are considered important spaces for sharing information, making new connections, and developing new ideas. But for most employees, they are ephemeral spaces that augment other more digital means for managing knowledge. Becka, a technical writer at nCino, admits that she avoids using whiteboards for project management. Important information can be accidentally erased, so she keeps or transfers important information into a digital project management system called Jira. From a technical writer perspective, it's important to have what is often called "a single source of truth," or a place where all the important technical knowledge can be accessed.

If you walk through the halls of nCino, though, you'll also see that whiteboards serve important phatic functions, unrelated to knowledge and information. Brianna, a senior knowledge platform manager, sees the whiteboard as an interactive space between her and a content specialist that shares her cubicle:

> Whenever we want to talk through something or strategize, we go to the whiteboard. So, if you were to go into nCino, you would see that our whiteboard is completely covered because we are white-board people. I'm also a visual person. So, I like to draw things out. And she does too.

Whiteboards also serve as a space to build community. For example, when Brianna walks over to see a friend in another building, she'll often leave a little message on the friend's whiteboard. When there are new hires, employees will leave a welcome message on their whiteboard, along with stickers and other fun stuff. According to Brianna, sometimes employees even leave little jokes or pranks on each other's whiteboards. Chase, a graphic designer manager, says he's never seen a serious note on a whiteboard in his department. His team mostly uses them for fun. Many of these activities have moved into Miro, a digital whiteboard app used for brainstorming and organizing projects. In Figure 3.4, you can see how participants added fun memes alongside various brainstorming notes.
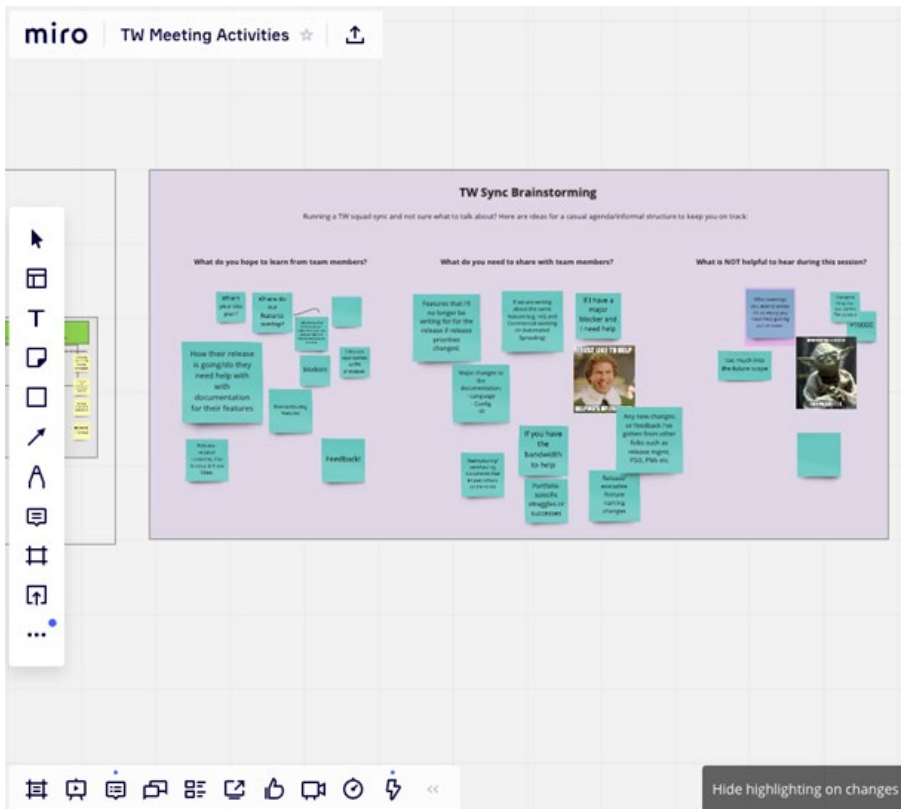

Figure 3.4. Digital whiteboard used for remote work.

During my interviews with employees at nCino, physical proximity played a key role in keeping channels of communication open and building community, even though much of that still happened in digital spaces. Since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic began just as I started this project with nCino, most of my interviewees talked about how they felt the absence of their office space while working remotely. They missed the ability to "pop your head over the cubicle" to say hello or just chat. Even if you did not end up talking to any neighbors, there was some comfort in knowing that you could. Several participants also mentioned how "chat breaks" were important to their creative process. Occupying one's mind with something else often helped inspire new ideas. During the spring lockdown in 2020, they tried to simulate these kinds of interactions with Slack calls and video meetings, but these lose the kind of spontaneity and informal atmosphere that comes in the office. Because nCino is designed for collaboration with an open office layout, employees could just turn around and talk to someone about a question or issue, instead of having to schedule a time or bug them via email or chat. Becka noted that "there's definitely something to be said for communication that can happen without the need to have it scheduled and just have it flow whenever you feel the need for it." This kind of "flow" can only happen when strong collaborative networks are cultivated and maintained.

Scholars have already pointed out the difficulty of maintaining distributed work groups in online contexts. Building trust is essential for these networks to work (Vealey, 2016). We often ignore that working remotely or online can have negative consequences, for example, triggering feelings of isolation or even paranoia (Larbi & Springfield, 2004 Rice-Bailey, 2014). These are far from network-building attributes. Danielle, a senior marketing analyst, misses the opportunity to laugh or catch up in the mornings before getting down to work, but says that much of this has shifted to Slack, a popular enterprise social network (ESN) that workplaces use as a messaging app (like Facebook just for the workplace). Danielle mentioned that she would be worried that she is missing out on something if she were the only one working remotely. But since everyone is working remotely, she doesn't feel that way. That said, she thinks employees at nCino will be more considerate of remote counterparts once the pandemic is over. In a separate set of interviews, employees at Electrolux in Poland noted that they met international collaborators "face-to-face" for the first time as a result of the pandemic because they were forced to use video chat in Microsoft Teams.

Though this project did not start as a study of digital communication and collaboration during a pandemic, everyone across the world was forced into remote work situations just as I began the core elements to this study. I still do not consider this a study specifically focused on remote work during pandemics. That said, having a pandemic highlights many of the digital practices that MNCs are already using to create collaboration and community, as well as opportunities to reflect on and enhance these tools and strategies. Given the importance of nonverbal communication, adapting multimodal resources in digital spaces is key

to effective collaboration, pandemic or not. The same can be said for phatic communication. What was done on whiteboards or across the cubicle walls must now be done digitally. The interactive elements that can be found in conference rooms can also be deployed in ESN environments (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Transference of Phatic Elements to ESN

Interactive element	In person	In ESN
Paying attention to each other	Interjections, eye contact, not checking phones	Short acknowledgement, emoji
Maintaining a shared focus	Using whiteboards, sticky notes, etc., create group focus	Kanban boards, Jira, tickets
Sketching ideas	Sketching, drawing, creating flowcharts	Jira, screenshots, captured drawings
Being open to other's ideas	Asking questions, giving the floor, tentativeness	Slack messages and calls, soliciting questions on Blue Jeans, emojis (😀)
Seeking agreement	Talking directly about disagreement, finding common ground, considering company mission	Direct messages, asking questions
Maintaining a sense of humor	Making jokes, laughing at mistakes	Gyphs, emojis, created emojis

According to most interviews with nCino employees, physical interaction in social spaces was a key element in maintaining connections, but it was undergirded by several informal back-channels like Slack. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most interviewees discussed the challenge of maintaining these core interactions from a distance, and much of this shifted to Slack. These collaborative spaces have become key spaces for building, resisting, and changing company culture and community, while also getting work done.

■ Taking Responsibility for Workflows and Networks

The flattened hierarchies and virtual team structures that we find in MNCs like nCino give employees more responsibility and self-accountability. During the stay-at-home order in 2020, employees did not feel pressured to "be online" or "clocked-in" during certain times of the day or even for a particular amount of time. There was no sense of management looking over their shoulder making sure they were not wasting company time, because employees had accepted their share of responsibility. But employees must be even more intentional about creating those networked interactions that keep communication and collaboration going. Doing this in fun ways is a key motivator for cultivating these networks. Moriah

Yancey describes this in her interview:

> nCino is just a very open and fun place to work. They want you to have fun while you're working, and I've seen productivity that I've never seen before just by working in a place that values having fun and having the space to just . . . It doesn't have to be just beat, beat, beat, beat, beat. You know, no one's eyeing me at any one time when I come in or watching how long I take a lunch. There's a lot of accountability that you have to take with yourself. And people trust you irrevocably to just do your job, no matter what. No one is questioning you.

In short, nCino employees are responsible not just for the work they do, but also for creating and maintaining the relationships that improve the quality and efficiency of their work. During these interviews, it became clear that ESNs like Slack were key to deploying phatic forms of communication before the pandemic. With the loss of physical phatic channels, these ESNs have become the primary way employees keep communication channels open. Though employees did mention the importance of video meetings in Zoom or Blue Jeans, these were not necessarily the main tool for this kind of communication, because these needed to be scheduled ahead of time and tended to focus on business. nCino did try to emulate their Friday "cocktail hour" on video chat with mixed results.

When formally asked to describe methods of keeping communication channels open, the first thing most interviewees addressed was work-related communications. As one would expect, getting input about projects, working together on new ideas, and finding the knowledge needed to complete a task are key elements to collaborating online. In a vertical team structure, interaction is key to pulling information together and organizing that information for different purposes. This usually means that workplace writers are controlling the writing process and are responsible for making sure that the process is working smoothly. This sometimes means innovating the writing process, using tools in new ways, or simply making connections through the available means within these tools.

These innovations might be something as simple as developing a peer review system. For example, during the development phase of the tech writing department in Kraków branch of Motorola, the writers realized themselves that their writing would be more consistent and efficient if every piece of content was peer-reviewed a few times. They created a simple worksheet to track the peer-review process, which eventually led to the adoption of a more complicated content management system (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6).

Taking ownership of the writing process can range from simple additions like this to more complicated technological solutions. For example, in several interviews, Pawel Kowaluk discusses how he made his work less tedious at Guidewire by creating coding scripts that helped him reuse content across delivery systems.

Figure 3.5. Peer review worksheets.

Taking ownership of the writing process also means keeping lines of communication open and creating goodwill. For example, a more specialized collaboration software called Jira is an important space at nCino where tasks can be shared, commented on, and tracked. As with many collaborative tools today, the key affordance of Jira is the ability to network across departments and teams around specific projects. Under vertical team structures, projects may or may not be owned by a single team, but even though responsibility lies with one team, the resources and knowledge certainly are not contained therein. Moriah talks about how she needs to have subject knowledge experts comment on drafts of articles she is working on, and Jira allows her to solicit and track those comments. Additionally, this process helps these experts see what other people have written, so that no one is "doubling-back." She's even seen conversations with themselves in the ticket:

> Oh, she forgot to add this. Oh, she probably didn't have the information about that. Oh, I don't think we ever talked about this beyond a small group. So let's put all the information here or tag her to the ticket that it's on.

She also mentioned that sometimes they'll even answer questions that previous people left.

Before the pandemic, collaborative spaces like Jira enhanced face-to-face sessions by allowing the same kind of whiteboard interactions in digital spaces. Since the move to universal work at home, most of this interaction has shifted to these spaces. Teams can use these tools to maintain focus, pay attention to each other, explore ideas, and seek agreement on projects. Though these can be done on video conferences, those are much more difficult to organize than random meetings in the office. Other ways of cultivating relationships through fun and interactivity happen a lot more in Slack.

▋ Understanding Phatic Communication through Emojis

Invariably, when asked if they ever saw off-topic conversations in these spaces or fun interactions, interviewees would excitedly talk about emojis and different

Slack channels that are just for fun. Though there are certainly work-focused channels at every level, nCino has hundreds of extra channels not related to work, ranging from cat lovers to pandemic baking. In professional writing, emojis have a reputation for being trite or unprofessional, but in these MNCs, emojis are thriving. Several of the interviewees mentioned an initial reluctance to use emojis, seeing them as "cutsie" or useless. But workplace writers soon find out that emojis make phatic forms of communication easier, as described by Becka:

> It saves a ton of messages that are just like, "Great," "Sounds good," "Thank you," "No problem." Like that sort of little polite response that will give people whenever someone's agreed to do a task for someone else. So you can just like respond to a message with like thumbs up or like smiley face.

To be an effective writer in today's workplace, you have to know not only how to use emojis, but how to read them. At nCino, you even need to know how to create new emojis.

Of course, this means adding inflection to short messages that might be misinterpreted. Each interviewee could give an example of miscommunication on Slack. For example, Becka recounts a time when a fellow employee sent a message in a very public Slack channel, explaining how another employee had done a spreadsheet wrong. According to Becka, he's never been a rude person, but the message came across mean and ungrateful . . . and he didn't use any emojis. Not only did this message endanger open channels of communication, it also stained his ethos, especially for people who had never met him. Learning to interact in these spaces is now key to the success of new workplace writers. Brianna remembered a time early on in her career when she tried to be super formal on Slack, adding to her message something like "at your nearest convenience." This came across as "sassy" or "snarky." She has since learned the range of formality differences that occur between communications like email and Slack messages. A phrase like "at your nearest convenience," can easily be replaced by an emoji that will be taken less personally.

Becka uses smiley faces a lot to fill in gaps left by the lack of facial expressions in physical communication. She even has several smiley faces that communicate different levels of happiness.

> But I think that adding emojis cannot replace what was gone, but to a certain degree, help communicate a little bit of what's missing. So if you're saying something that someone could interpret as harsh and then you just add a smiley face. . . . I definitely use a ton of smiley faces when I'm asking people to do things for me. And I think it comes off a little bit friendlier and at least in my opinion, reminds everyone that we are actually on the same team. We're all trying to create a good product. I'm just trying to do my job. You're just trying to do yours. I'm not mad at you. I just want you to do this for me.

Emoji Scale of Happiness

(sad panda): feeling sorry for you or myself

(double facepalm): blatant annoyance

(grimacing): gritting my teeth through something I don't want to do, but it's not worth complaining about because it's my job

(upside down face): annoyed about something, but I'm pretending like everything is fine

(potato smile): express bonding through sarcasm or irony, sometimes over something annoying

(slightly smiling): add warmth to a request to communicate teamwork or friendship and reduce the chance of misinterpretation

(relaxed): humbly accepting a compliment (signified by blushing)

(grin): general happiness or excitement

(party blob): both happy and proud, usually of a completed task

(joy): laughter, reaction to something funny

(tada): congratulations (edited)

Figure 3.6. Emoji scale of happiness.

In Figure 3.6, Becka laid out her most-used "happiness" emojis, set up as a range from less happy to the most happy. Some of these are standard emojis, some are Slack-only emojis, and some were created by her or another employee. Each of these is a slight gradation that she has found useful in keeping people apprised of her status, while also bringing some humor to the situation.

In her work as a knowledge platform manager, Brianna uses spaces like Slack to "invest back" in the authors that contribute to her knowledge base. To coach authors who may not be professional writers, she likes to add emojis to her comments that soften any criticism or encourage the writer to revise or write more articles. For example, Jira allows emojis and Moriah noted that emojis were a great way to add inflections to comments. Oftentimes employees that know Moriah well will leave a joke. Figure 3.7 shows where a fellow tech writer left "BABA-YYYYYYYYY!" in the notes section, referencing a catchphrase they often use together. Whenever they see each other, she always says, "What it do ba-bee" as a reference to a popular video of a basketball player, Kawhi Leonard, who said that statement shortly after winning the 2018 NBA championship.

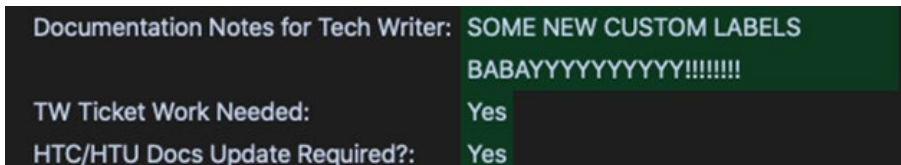| Documentation Notes for Tech Writer:	SOME NEW CUSTOM LABELS BABAYYYYYYYYYY!!!!!!!!
TW Ticket Work Needed:	Yes
HTC/HTU Docs Update Required?:	Yes

Figure 3.7. Notes section in Jira.

Emojis are key to creating a team culture at nCino. In Slack, employees can make new emojis, which has become a key element of phatic communication. For example, Moriah is a member of the Potato PotĀto team, which has created a range of potato-themed emojis. Team members have also created posters and shirts. Moriah even dressed up like a potato at one point to celebrate the end of a sprint (a small two- to four-week project; see Figure 3.8). The color-coded potatoes are used to represent work status. For example, the red potato means that you are "blocked" and in need of assistance. The heart potatoes are used to convey caring, thanks, or general affection. The gold and silver potatoes express the quality of a product or functionality.

Figure 3.8. Potato post.

Figure 3.9. Potato emojis.

The name of the team itself references previous teams that were named potato (but each with different pronunciations). In many of these cases, these phatic forms of communication are created by previous interactions. To understand and navigate these networks, you need to be participating. The cultural value "Having Fun" can mean many things, but these employees are clearly building that discourse from the inside out.

■ Phatic Communication within Hierarchy

Though phatic communication is key for lateral and team collaboration, it also serves an important role within the hierarchical structure of MNCs. Flattened hierarchy doesn't mean an absence of hierarchy—it means that channels of communication are open between all employees, not just through the "chain of command." Having these multiple-branched networks in place is key to creating an environment where all employees feel comfortable working with management to solve problems and get work done.

For example, Becka described many meetings where communication was definitely unidirectional (most of which were big video conferences). "All hands" meetings usually involve 100 or more people, and asking questions would "disturb everyone's day." Questions are definitely encouraged on other platforms, especially with managers, but only because they have kept these channels open:

> So, we've already built a relationship of trust, and she reaches out frequently during stressful times and asks me if I'm doing okay or if I need more support. Is there anything she can do for me? I already know that I will be supported by her so it makes it easier to ask tough things.

For managers, this means deliberately asking for questions or even phrasing the questions in specific ways, according to Becka. Usually, her manager will send her a message via Slack, for example: "Hey, I know that release time is really intense. Here are some things that you should be doing. If you have any questions, please reach out to us. We're here to help you." Such messages convey very little information, but keep communication channels open, while also developing an ethos of goodwill. When working in the office, Becka feels comfortable just coming by her manager's desk to talk about whatever needs she has. During the pandemic, this has been replaced by "Slack calls" or video chats.

Danielle mentions that she feels like she can be the most direct with her manager because they already have a strong relationship. Being direct about criticism, problems, or ideas is a key interactive element that helps participants find points of agreement and common ground. This process is much more efficient and clearer than having to constantly "sandwich" criticism with what Danielle calls "niceties" that she is more likely to use with people outside her immediate

team. But the ability to be direct is supported by the hard work of building and maintaining the relationship between her and the manager.

> Many times, people in the professional setting feel like gossip is negative when I'm talking about how I'm frustrated with some other person or I'm talking about something that somebody said, and whether it's humorous to me or offensive. Either way, you want to go with it. People think of that as breaking down the morale, but if I didn't have that relationship with my manager and I wasn't able to have those kinds of conversations with him, where we're honest and just have a little bit more fun with it, we wouldn't be as good at our job.

Because they understand their shared goals and have spent time talking about unrelated topics, the tough aspects of collaboration become more manageable. Skilled use of phatic communication is key to creating this kind of openness.

How managers strategically deploy phatic communication was noticeable in the two interviews with managers. When asked about how they might talk about personal topics in work channels, they had less to share, even though they do discourage this kind of openness. Katie, manager of knowledge and technical writing, made it clear that she didn't want to force employees to be open or to have fun, if they aren't interested:

> I would never want someone on my team to feel like they have to share something personal or difficult or even super-exciting or great going on outside of work. We don't have to be a place that combines work, family, and personal life . . . or where we need to bring our full self to work no matter what, even if it doesn't feel comfortable. That's not what I'm saying. But we do try to have an atmosphere where it is safe to be yourself at work and to share experiences so that your team can celebrate those good things with you and help you with the more difficult things.

When talking about having fun with employees, Katie described an intentional effort to keep the fun contained in particular spaces, for example, at social gatherings put together by nCino (like volleyball tournaments and cocktail hours) or specific Slack channels meant for fun. How she participates with other employees on Slack is related directly to how those relationships have been cultivated in the past:

> As a manager, I want to make sure that I'm having fun and showing my personality, but also I'm not necessarily going to be the first person flooding a channel with funny GIFs or something like that. When I'm talking to people, fellow managers or people that I'm really close to, I've tried to show my sense of humor and be myself.

> But also, I'm not necessarily going to participate in the same way as other tech writers.

Katie definitely participates in the fun but keeps it mostly in dedicated Slack channels. For example, she created a Slack channel for baking at home during the pandemic stay-at-home order. Like many of the other interviewees, she also cultivates deeper relationships in non-work spaces, like Instagram. Most of her personal connections on Instagram existed before she became a manager. Though she gladly connects to employees in these spaces, she avoids sending her own connection requests, so as not to think this kind of connection is a required part of their job.

The layering of networked relationships was true of all the nCino employees that I interviewed, but often strategically so. For example, one Black participant uses a group chat for building relationships with other Black workers. Her work team also has a Snapchat. Both of these are outside the nCino communications network. Though most of these interactions are personal, venting does occur in these spaces, and being off network offers an "extra layer" of security. But phatic communication functions differently in each of these spaces. For example, to be an active participant in the team Snapchat, participants need to be up-to-date on pop culture and slang. Making jokes is key to these interactions. But in the Black group chat, the topics focus around experiences of race and being a professional. Topics are usually much more serious, like the process of getting a mortgage. Though each network requires cultivation, participants need to have a deep rhetorical awareness about what kinds of interactions will keep that network growing.

In the end, writing in the workplace is complicated—technologically, linguistically, and rhetorically. Writers need to navigate multiple levels of interaction and formality and carefully balance an ethos that shows personality, but also keeps things professional and respectful. Most of all, to keep these networks productive, writers need to develop a habit and discipline of cultivating these networks daily. Sometimes this means having fun, sometimes it means checking in, and sometimes it just means letting people know that you are present.

■ Conclusion

The scope of this particular chapter is limited to a few people in a specific MNC, but we need to continue researching how these networks are intertwined within other networks. nCino doesn't just have networks in Wilmington; they also have them in Canada, London, Australia, and Japan. Most of the employees I interviewed work with nCino employees in these areas on a regular basis. Because of their proximity, most of my data has been drawn from a more recent project involving nCino. They have also hired several of our English majors, making it easier to participate in their networks. But much of my experience is contextualized by my collaborations with companies like Motorola Solutions and Jamf in Kraków, Poland (some of which I've used in this chapter). Most of what I've

observed at nCino and in my conversations with nCino employees I have also observed more informally in these Polish contexts to varying degrees. Though certainly influenced by local cultures, these workplace cultures still play a dominant role in shaping communication and collaboration across these networks, an element of this study worth further research.

If we think back to my students' visit to nCino and their hesitancy to accept nCino's ethos of fun, it is easy to see now how this might be. Naming conference rooms after locations in Wilmington, having surfboards in the corner, or creating an nCino emoji may seem trite. But that is because we have not been participating in those networks. The interaction between employees is ultimately what brings meaning to these phatic forms of communication. To most nCino employees, it no longer makes sense to separate "having fun" and "bringing your A-game":

> That's why I feel like that interplay with "bring your A-game" and "have a good time" is necessary. One would be unintelligible without the other. (Danielle)

Because of how MNCs are flattening their organizational structures, all employees are participating in the creation of company culture . . . and they are having fun doing it. For example, there are many variations of "Barry," an employee-created emoji that makes its rounds around the company (see Figure 3.10). Take your work seriously . . . but not too seriously.
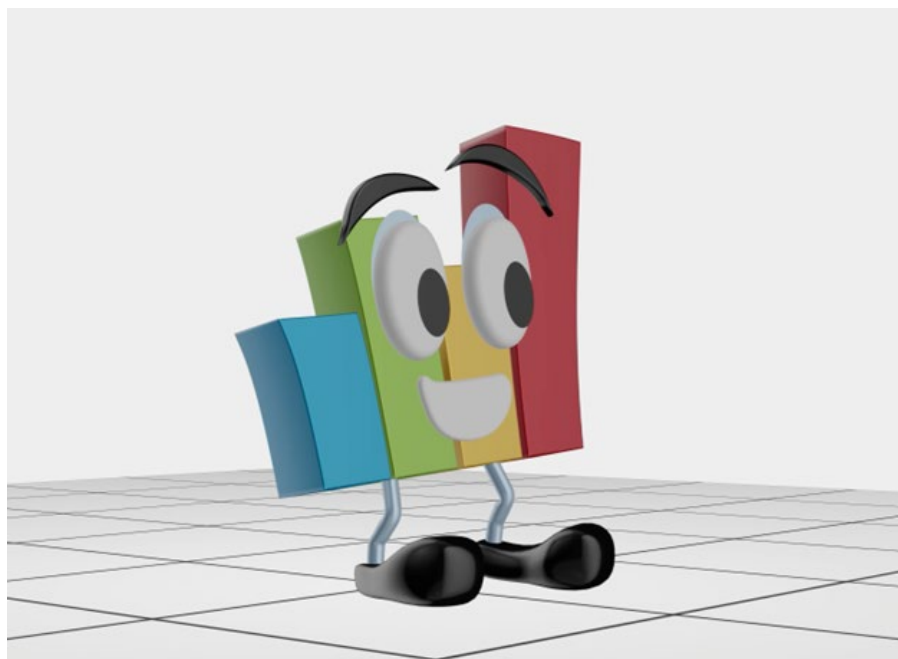

Figure 3.10. Barry logo emoji.

Though further research is required, the organizations that will best survive the pandemic aftermath will likely be those with networks of interaction in place. If employees are actively cultivating relationships and channels of communication, then the shift in circumstances simply means a shift in available means. In the end, most of the employees that I talked to felt that nCino as a company (and themselves as individuals) had successfully shifted their complex collaboration into digital spaces. No, it was not the same, and they missed many of the office elements that enable in-person networking, but they were still "bringing their A-Game":

> We are doing the same types of things just in a totally different format. So, we really haven't lost any of our meetings or our structure or connection to each other. It's just been changed into this sort of two-dimensional structure.

A workplace writer has to know how to use writing to keep channels of communication open and how to use these spaces to have fun and grow relationships. But these workplace writers must also have the ability to be flexible as circumstances and technologies change, managing multiple networks simultaneously, often with different levels of closeness or intimacy. As we've all learned so far in this century, circumstances can change drastically. The available means we have to get work done can also change fast. Phatic forms of communication are key to enabling the flexibility to adapt to these changes together.

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