



# Informal Socialization in Virtual Work Environments: A Narrative Inquiry

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Note: Adopted Image from (Watercoolers Direct, 2020).



Note: Adopted Image from (Microsoft, 2020).

# Why Work Virtually?

## Benefits for Employees

- Team members and groups can achieve innovation, creativity, and job satisfaction while working virtually (Hahm, 2017).
- Flexibility of work in terms of location, schedule, and the opportunity for better work-life balance are additional benefits (Bathini & Kandathil, 2019).

## Benefits for Employers

- Obtaining talent on a global scale (Eckhardt et al., 2019).
- Cost reductions including real estate and travel budgets (Nurmi & Hinds, 2016).
- Improving their environmental footprint with a reduction in transportation costs and fuel usage by employees.

# The Problem & Purpose

- The problem is there is a lack of existing knowledge around informal socialization, including the engagement and transfer of information that occurs organically between employees in virtual organizations (Makarius & Larson, 2017).
- The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore the experiences employees have with informal socialization in virtual working environments in the insurance industry. The aim of this study was to understand what it takes to increase informal socialization in virtual work environments.



**Insurance Professionals**  
**1.2 Million**

**Working Virtually**  
**284,400**

**Participants**  
**5**

# Research Questions

## **R 1. How do employees in the insurance industry experience informal socialization in virtual working environments?**

- a. What feelings do participants associate with their experiences engaging in informal socialization in virtual work environments?
- b. What influences employees in the insurance industry to engage in informal socialization in virtual workplaces?
- c. What informal social experiences do employees in the insurance industry attribute to their adaptation of cultural norms in virtual work environments?



# Relevant Literature

## **Communication & Collaboration**

- Current studies related to virtual work focus on trust, collaboration, technology, communication, and cultural differences (Schulze & Krumm, 2017).
- Employees must be deliberate about how they communicate virtually (Maes & Weldy, 2018).
- When individuals feel as though they do not know their co-workers and have stress or anxiety when communicating with them, or when they have poor or underdeveloped relationships with their peers, communication is not effective and collaboration is difficult (Panteli et al., 2019).

## **Digital Communication Technology**

- Darics and Gatti (2019) found employees learn to utilize technology, complete work, collaborate, build relationships, and develop a team culture with the use of communication technology.
- Employees not only use communication technology to complete their daily work tasks, as a platform to build relationships and to share space for informal interactions (Larson & DeChurch, 2020).

# Relevant Literature: Socialization

- A lack of socialization or social presence in the work environment leads to the inability of individuals to develop relationships and interdependencies which are paramount to success (Panteli et al., 2019).
- Comin and Pauli (2018) argued socialization is a continuous process.
- Dube and Marnewick (2016) described social presence as an awareness of others, having a sense of engagement with others, and feelings of co-presence, with co-presence meaning employees feel that they share an emotional closeness with team members, have mutual understanding, and communicate as a cohesive unit.
- It is no longer a debate that social ties between employees lead to psychological safety, employee well-being and to employees who engage and work better (Bloom-Feshbach & Poyet, 2018).

# Conceptual Framework

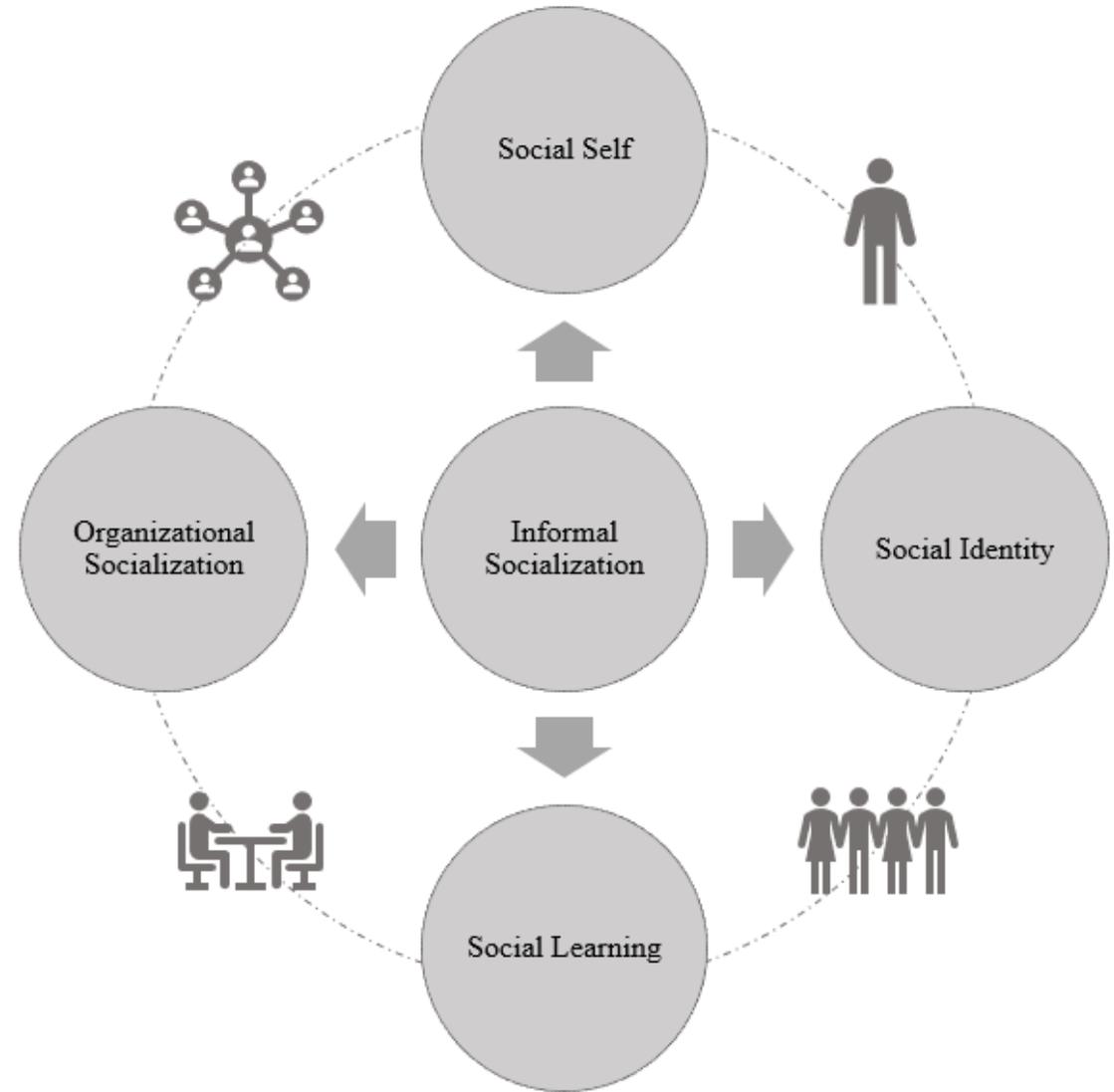


Figure 1.0. Cycle of Socialization and Conceptual Connections to Informal Socialization

# Research Method & Design

## Qualitative Methodology

- Qualitative researchers seek to understand and gain insight into problems through the perspectives of participants to make a difference in people's lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
- Qualitative research is appropriate when researchers search for meaning by asking “how”, “what”, and “why” questions to explain the interpretations individuals have of their social world due to their lived experiences (Nassaji, 2015).
- The aim of this study was to explore “how” employees experience informal socialization and “what” motivates them to participate in informal conversations using digital communication technology.

## Narrative Inquiry Design

- Narrative inquiry is not simply listening to stories from participants but is about generating an understanding (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and a holistic viewpoint by exploring stories through a three-dimensional lens and context of temporality, sociality, and spatiality (Clandinin et al., 2017).
- Narrative inquiry is practical when the researcher wants to explore the events and actions individuals experience in their lives, primarily through their verbal narratives (Allen, 2017), and is useful in generating new possibilities for innovation (Price et al., 2018).
- Telling stories is universal and researchers can pull the stories in their entirety to report this information in chronological order, without fracturing, adding to, or fragmenting the story, which is the case with narrative inquiry (Riessman, 1993).

# Data Collection & Analysis

## Instrumentation

- The researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013).
- Interviews and diary entries were instruments used to collect data.
- A semi-structured interview process proved useful to engage participants.
- Participants described their experiences, completing diary entries for five days.

## Data Analysis

- Inductive, thematic content analysis utilized to analyze data.
- Data analysis method chosen replicates that of Braun and Clarke (2006).
- Thematic content analysis is advantageous as researchers become very familiar and close to their data when using it and the data analysis is highly reliable using this process (Renz et al., 2018).

# Themes & Research Questions

## Research Questions

- a. What feelings do participants associate with their experiences engaging in informal socialization in virtual work environments?
- b. What influences employees in the insurance industry to engage in informal socialization in virtual workplaces?
- c. What informal social experiences do employees in the insurance industry attribute to their adaptation of cultural norms in virtual work environments?

## Themes

1. Employee's Emotions Vary Based on Their Levels of Connectivity
2. Staying Connected Enables Employees to Maintain Bonds and Unity
3. Digital Communication Technology Makes Connecting Easy
4. Multi-Communicating is an Effective Technique to Get Work Done
5. Creating an Office-Like Atmosphere is Possible by Establishing a Culture of Connectivity



# Theme 1

## **Employee's Emotions Vary Based on Their Levels of Connectivity**

- Feelings participants associate with informal socialization while working virtually change based on their levels of connectivity each day.
- Higher levels of engagement produce feelings of happiness, joy, pride, and camaraderie.
- Connectivity decreases with heavier workloads and periods of high PTO.
- Positive emotions correlated with diary entries on days when participants had higher levels of connectivity.



## Theme 2

### **Staying Connected Enables Employees to Maintain Bonds and Unity**

- In the past, participants felt discouraged from staying connected with co-workers.
- Currently, participants are encouraged to socialize informally.
- Co-workers stay in touch and maintain relationships through informal socialization.
- Employees stated that informal socialization maintains team cohesion, team unity, and member bonds.
- Maintaining team unity is a motivator for employees to engage in informal socialization in the future.



## Theme 3

### **Multi-Communicating is an Effective Technique to Get Work Done**

- Holding multiple conversations at one time is an effective way to get work done quickly.
- Participants engage in informal socialization before, during, and after meetings.
- Insurance professionals discuss projects, answer questions, manage urgent work during informal conversations.
- Multi-communicating is efficient, employees start their work immediately following a meeting instead of planning when meetings end.



## Theme 4

### **Digital Communication Technology Makes Connecting Easy**

- Employees utilize digital communication technology to stay connected, get work done, maintain team bonds, and work efficiently.
- Participants utilize multiple communication platforms instead of choosing one medium.
- Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Outlook are the platforms of choice for the participants.
- Employees engage in instant messaging, individual and group chats, calls (with or without video), and send emails to communicate.
- Digital communication technology is easy to learn and adapt to and quickly becomes second nature.



## Theme 5

### **Creating an Office-Like Atmosphere is Possible by Establishing a Culture of Connectivity**

- It is possible to create a culture of connectivity and maintain an office-like atmosphere.
- Screen-sharing and other digital communication technology capabilities contribute to an office-like atmosphere and make employees feel as though they are co-located.
- Engaging in informal socialization keeps the culture intact.
- Respondents argued that informal socialization while working virtually is a necessity to support both team and organizational culture.



# Significance of the Study



- The goals of this study were to contribute to efforts targeting the reduction of barriers to productive and successful socialization in virtual work environments.
- This study may add to existing knowledge around remote work and promote steps to managing the existing challenges within this type of employment.



# Study Limitations

- The first is the introduction of COVID-19 into the workplace, causing changes to the way employees experienced working from home starting in March of 2020.
- Three participants had only a few months of experience working virtually full-time and were in the early phase of transitioning from periodic or part-time work at home.
- Additional limitations were based on the demographics of the participants.



## Recommendations for Future Research

- A recommendation for future research is to expand the study to multiple industries.
- This research study included four female participants and one male participant; future research could include a larger number of male participants.
- Increasing the number of participants by conducting a quantitative version of this research may improve the generalizability of the study findings.
- An additional expansion of this study could occur at different points in time past the introduction of full-time work from home due to the pandemic.



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