3. Fieldwork in Corporate Offices

> The work environment is, perhaps, the next wave of contemporary ethnographic field research.
> (Gavin 2015: 95)

3.1. Office ethnography: Access and the role of the researcher

3.1.1. Why ethnographic research in offices?

When considering methodology for qualitative research, there are two general options for data collection. The first is to speak with agents about their practices and to analyse the corresponding documents. The second is participant observation over an extensive period of time, with the researcher present on site with access to situational practices and local knowledge(Lueders, 2000 #6: 384;Latour, 2002 #37). Extended periods of fieldwork generate results with a depth that is impossible to achieve in less time (Jordan and Dalal 2006: 362). The duration of fieldwork plays a major role in validating this method (see Section 3.2 for a discussion of the research situation); one of the main reasons for this is the involvement of the researcher. Long-term fieldwork demands high research competency, as the main instrument of research is the researcher, herself. It is in the anthropologist's interest to develop an insider's perspective, and for this, she must have exposure to situational orders and practices in order to live with and adapt to them and become immersed in the field (Lueders 2000: 91).

Several ethnographies show that the social research method of participant observation, which was initially developed to study non-industrial societies, is one of the most useful methods for studying human behaviour in general – also in the world of industry (Gellner and Hirsch 2001: 9). As participant observation is a context-related strategy of data collection through pluralistic methods, it is particularly suitable for my research area: the fast-changing and diverse setting of an MNC, allowing for participation in and observation of cultural events. Furthermore, in this setting, such observations can be complemented by interviews with employees on their opinions, memories and descriptions. The key prerequisite for such ethnographic research in the office context is, similar to all fieldwork, access to the field and establishment of a role that is accepted by the participants (Lueders 2000: 392).

3.1.2. Access to the field: Managing the gatekeeper

Once my decision was made to conduct research in an MNC in India, the Philippines or Malaysia, the next practical challenge was gaining access to a research site (Lueders 2000: 392). As I wanted to be as open-eyed as possible, I refrained both from researching the organisation I had worked in for the previous decade and from requesting any funds from the organisation I sought to conduct fieldwork in. Instead, I reached out to all of my contacts in other organisations in that region. However, about 80 emails and 20 phone calls later I was no closer to finding an interested organisation. My contacts were primarily in the business departments of the organisations, and these departments did not have the necessary links to the organisational gatekeepers, typically found in HR departments (McDonald 2005: 457). Another action I took was to contact the Frankfurt Economic Development group and join one of their "India meets Frankfurt Business" sessions. There, I had the opportunity to meet the leaders of organisations of Indian origin; but again, these contacts – while proving quite interesting – did not lead to a research placement. Rather, they requested that I "share my insights" once I was finished with my research.

In the end, a totally different strategy with a component of chance proved successful: I scanned interviews with top managers of MNCs in each of the three countries on expressions of openness to new approaches to maintaining and improving the quality of their employees. When I emailed the chief executive officer (CEO) of Advice Company in India and related my research project to an interview he had given, I received a positive response within 24 hours and was given the opportunity to explain my project in a brief phone call to his HR director. Shortly thereafter, I received a tentative email confirmation that I could conduct my "study internship", as the director liked to call it, at their offices in a major Indian city.

Having approval from the leader of the organisation proved key to passing through most gates during my research. While gatekeeper management was initially a practical issue, the analysis of gatekeeping structures proved highly valuable for learning about the processes and functions in that organisation (Morrill et al. 1999: 53). The official approval from the uppermost level of Advice Company in India was extremely helpful during the fieldwork, especially when I wanted to gain access to a new department or office location. Poorva from the HR team, for example, once commented on our way to lunch that she found my project great, yet slightly unusual. But she concluded: "You came upon the CEOs recommendation, so there are no questions asked." At the same time, my mode of entry into the organisation via the top was a circumstance that had to be carefully managed during the constant negotiation of my role during fieldwork (Lueders 2000: 392).

3.1.3. Field entry and role negotiation

Four months prior to my intended fieldwork start date I planned a three-week pilot field trip to the main office to gain an impression of the feasibility of my research project. I wrote to the HR director about the pilot study idea and potential dates in a detailed, carefully structured email spanning multiple pages. His almost instantaneous response was: "Yes, pls do come. Looking forward." On the basis of these two sentences I booked my flight and stood slightly nervous on a Monday morning at the sleek marble reception of Advice Company, located in one of the many compounds of offices and production sites that represent India's increasing commercial centres (Maitra 2008: 263). After 30 minutes, two people from the HR department, with whom I had never been in touch, picked me up from the reception. One of them greeted me with the words: "Nice to meet you! So you are the one who always writes these looong emails". I was given a visitor's card and we passed the large entrance into the office area. I was asked to explain again – "but briefly!" – who I was and what I wanted. I cut my introduction to the following: "I am a PhD student and I would like to accompany people here in the office to learn about misunderstandings." As none of my previous contact partners was present, the legitimisation I had received from the organisation's top management functioned.

I was asked to sit down at an empty desk and wait again. Apparently nothing had been arranged for my arrival. Deepika appeared again two hours later with a printout containing a list of names – the people I would accompany over the next weeks, during my pre-study, each for a day. When she briefly explained who they were, I realised with amazement that she had managed to find members of four different departments, located all across the office of 450 employees. I did not know at that moment that Deepika, with her wide-reaching ties across the organisation and her practical skills of informally manoeuvring in this setting, would be an invaluable source of information and help throughout my fieldwork. At 2.00pm that first day, I was introduced to the first team manager, who then introduced me to his team member – my first accompanying partner.

I realised quickly that I could not rely on any internal communication about me or my project to pour through the organisation, and that there was no time to explain my role in detail. I had an attention window of only a few sentences to give the colleagues I accompanied an impression of why I would be sitting next to him or her for the rest of the day, before they would turn back to their work. So, I memorised a few key words for the introduction to position myself as a PhD student, with no ties to management interests and corporate strategy targets. Although my introductions via the respective team managers initially suggested a contrary intention, the fact that the project was financially independent from the company proved a major trust-building argument, and I was very often asked about this. At the same time, I tried to overcome the issue that a Western-looking person in that environment is usually an expatriate or a visiting manager from another global office, by carrying a bag, a note pad and pens with the university logo as visible signs of my student status.

Through this pre-study I not only got a first opportunity to refine my research methods before returning for the main fieldwork, but I also gained confidence that I would receive full support from the gatekeepers (the HR department) and would be able to leverage my role as a student researcher. I was even able to establish a few less formal contacts with some of the younger female colleagues in the office, and this proved invaluable in many aspects upon my return.

Although I always introduced myself as a student, I had to make a constant effort during all of the fieldwork phases to scale my role down to one of a junior researcher and to manage expectations from my direct interlocutors and their managers. Some of my interlocutors, for example, would ask me at the end of a day: "How was I? What is your feedback?" I initially felt slightly uncomfortable in these moments and would start to explain my role again; but I quickly learned to view such questions as an opportunity. By responding: "I don't know, I can't judge this – you tell me!" the conversations would veer towards perceived deviations from the average workday or how that day had been different from the way in which the employee would have liked to work. I had other instances of being perceived by middle management as a consultant expected to provide "deliverables" with solutions in respect to their team and work issues.

I also had to clarify at several points that I would under no circumstances convey any information about an individual to any other person – not only for obvious ethical reasons but also in order to not be considered a management spy (Bernard 2006: 357). Interestingly, the HR director, himself, raised the potential issue of me being associated with upper management (Reeves 2010: 319f.). He told me at a later phase of the research that he had intentionally not let me be seen too much with him and the managers: "We wanted to make sure you can move as freely and independently as possible." Yet I observed with interest the developing stories and rumours about my access to the organisation. Agents from different parts of Advice Company referred to communication exchanges between the CEO and my academic supervisor, which had never actually occurred.

My role in the field was thus clearly marked as external to the organisational boundaries, with no formal membership to or financial dependence on Advice Company. This position was nevertheless only partially independent, since I had to align myself with the managers of each team that I accompanied in the assigned timeframe. My interlocutors were certainly aware of this fact and most likely shaped their own behaviour in the beginning with care, infused with a degree of uncertainty over how much of management was sitting next to them in those moments. Consequently, when I analysed the data, I had to consider the point of time in the research process in order to incorporate who my interlocutors felt they were speaking to, and the effect this might have had on their comments.

3.2. The fieldwork setting: In and around Advice Company

Advice Company is an MNC of Western origin in the professional service sector, with about 30,000 employees worldwide. Professional service firms, also referred to as knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson 1995) or knowledge-based organisations, rely on a professionalised workforce with specialised expertise and skills in order to produce their products. The products offered by professional service firms are characterised by low-capital intensity; that is, their production processes operate without significant non-human assets, such as factories or equipment (von Nordenflycht 2010: 162) – a fact that makes communication-centred analysis on the basis of Luhmann's theory even more pertinent. Advice Company offers consultancy, analysis and advice to clients on relevant business decisions. Within India, Advice Company employs almost 3,000 people and has offices in major cities across the country. As I will show in Chapter 5, there are three office locations in the city I was located at, each with a different role within the organisation. I was allowed to conduct fieldwork in all three locations, and this determined, to a large extent, my research year and the study design as a multi-sited ethnography in the sense of Marcus (1995). In this section (3.2), I will explore how the field was initially classically defined as a spatial setting in a geographically distant location to my area of origin. Through the inclusion of digital and virtual modes of communication, however, it had to be considered much more widely. The different modes of communication were not only relevant for the field set-up, but were also factored into the selection of research methods (see Section 3.3). Furthermore, I argue that "the field", in the corporate setting, is a temporal phenomenon with consequences for knowledge management during fieldwork, and discuss the relevance of seasonality in this environment.

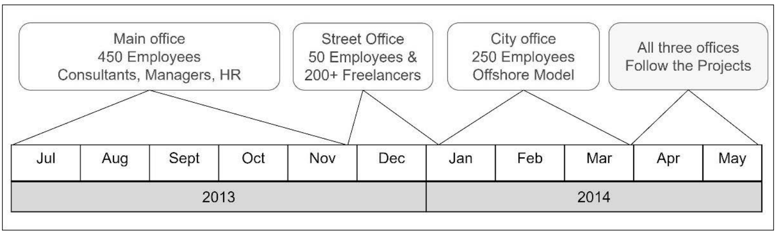
3.2.1. Constituting the multi-sited field

The first office I went to was Advice Company's Indian headquarters, where most of the top management, consultants and service departments (such as HR and finance) are located. With 450 employees covering a diversity of departments and roles, the main office was, for me, the most important research site. Consequently, I allocated most of my research time there and also aimed at setting up my accommodation nearby. Thanks to the contacts I had established during the pre-study, I had the opportunity to move into a shared flat with two young Indian ladies who were friends with some of the Advice Company employees. I lived in this flat, which was located in one of the 10 towers of a large housing compound (called "society") within walking distance to the main office, throughout the entire period of fieldwork. Due to the convenient location to the office, several colleagues from Advice Company also lived in the compound. This circumstance allowed for many opportunities for us to walk to or from the office together, and turned my accommodation – as well as the adjacent shopping mall, with its multiple restaurants and coffee shops – into another research site.

The second largest office is located in a central area of the city in direct proximity to the city's primary shopping and leisure areas. Approximately 250 employees work in this office, supporting international colleagues located all across the world through an offshore work model. While the city office location is clearly intended for commercial use, the third office, which I call the street office, is of a remarkably different profile. A windowless, two-storey brick house, it caters for 50 employees, each with an allocated desk, and provides a unique temporary interaction space for 150–200 freelancers. Although the offices are vastly different in their set-ups and are perceived as distinct by the employees (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4), all employees contribute to the organisation's project development process, and this defines the formal relationship between them. A key assumption of multi-sited ethnographic research is that translocal relationships are as relevant as those within each office; such studies depend on the discovery and analysis of the "ties, linkages and relationships different to a mere comparison of localities" (Hannerz 2003a: 206).

Figure 1 provides an overview of the fieldwork locations and the research phases during which I predominantly worked in each office. The research design incorporated all three offices and examined the entire sequence of Advice Company's project development process. I used a multi-sited approach on the micro-level by accompanying members of different departments and teams within each office.

Figure 1: Fieldwork phases and locations



In response to the complex research setting, I employed two of the six strategies of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995: 106): For the majority of my fieldwork, I used the strategy of "following the people", which involved tracing the daily work patterns of employees across the office floor, meeting rooms and cafeteria. Accompanying my interlocutors to meetings at other offices or to after-hours activities with their work colleagues (such as wedding receptions, team dinners and weekend coffees), however, added a number of locations across the city to the multi-sited field. During the last phase of my fieldwork, by which point I was familiar with a large number of the employees and business processes, I employed a different strategy in order to change my perspective on the field: I attached myself to three client projects and followed these projects to different agents in various departments and office locations. I accompanied whoever was working on the projects at any given point in order to observe the work steps involved. Although not material objects as such, the projects were the central commodities around which the departments geared up their processes. This second strategy of "following the thing" (Marcus 1995: 107) provided insight into everyday working practices, and this insight was surprisingly different from the insight gained previously. This method can be compared to Bruno Latour's shadowing of a soil sample from its initial capture to its reflection in published findings in a scientific journal (2000). While client projects did not change in status while they circulated through different contexts and departments – as in Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1988) – the strategy of "following the thing" revealed the previously hidden collaboration strategies involved in their execution (see Chapter 8).

Though I conducted research in each of Advice Company's three offices, which would seem to comprise a clearly circumscribed field, I cannot claim to have gained an ethnographic grasp of the entire field, as multi-sited approaches always require a selection process – in my case, a selection of the departments I would work in and the individuals I would accompany. I was not trying to study the entire culture and social life of these offices, nor of all the employees. Rather, I was trying to get insight into the direct working environment of a number of employees, their daily experiences and their opinions of those experiences (Hannerz 2003a: 208).

3.2.2. Enhancing the field: Shopping malls, Facebook and other sites

With the above meta-structure of fieldwork phases in hand and my four key fieldwork sites determined (the three offices and my home), I had to quickly add a number of physical sites to the field as my immersion level rose, such as shopping malls, coffee shops, wedding venues and interlocutors' homes in other "societies", while I accompanied them to out-of-office activities with other colleagues. My field mirrored the "enclaved gaze" (Brosius 2010: 66-67) on the city from the perspective of my interlocutors, who would fall within descriptions of "India's middle class" (Lobo and Shah 2015, Baviskar and Ray 2011). My field sites were almost exclusively "new urban spaces", which served as "quasi-colonies, islands or planets of a different kind, only partially connected with their physical environment that lies between them" (Brosius 2010: 69). The descriptions of my travel between these places, such as the trajectory from my accommodation in "society" to the main office, as well as my interlocutors' statements relating to their commuting experiences, illustrate this notion (see Chapter 4, Section 4.1). My field was clearly shaped by my interlocutors and, hence, comprised a restricted selection of places in the city.

Along with my immersion and participation in after-office activities, my involvement in virtual modes of communication also widened my field to include social media platforms such as Facebook, email, WhatsApp and interactive games such as QuizUp. Through this broadening of the research field, I was able to trace relationships and gain visibility into the various channels of virtual communication and bonding used by the employees.

For example, one evening after office hours, I accompanied Sakshi and Raveena to a cake shop with an impressive collection of high-calorie temptations. As soon as we ordered our cake and sat down, the two women took out their smartphones and "checked-in" to the location via Facebook. Then Raveena tagged all three of us to indicate we were at the cake shop together, and posted this with a funny comment that would appear on each of our Facebook pages for everyone in our friends list to see. Reactions such as "likes" or comments were instantly posted by other teammates, and during the next morning's coffee break, our cake session was a topic of further conversation. Similarly, team members would challenge each other to play the mobile phone game QuizUp (a trivia game that requires an opponent) during the day or in the evening, and the result of this game would be subject to cheerful gossip the next day. This field extension was not only useful for tracing informal social relationships (see Chapter 6, Section 6.2), but it also proved a powerful research method for connecting actual events with their representations in the virtual world. The extended multi-sited field hence encompassed a number of physical locations and virtual spaces. My connection to several members of the organisation through social networking platforms and other virtual modes of communication was certainly a great source of insight, as it allowed me to gain a different perspective on interactions between colleagues in the online community. However, this connection not only gave me insight into the actors' virtual networks, but it also provided direct access to my own appearance in virtual space, forcing me to engage in "reciprocal transactions of granting each other access to one's virtual social worlds" (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013: 2).

I would be asked questions about my brother, who had posted a comment on my "pin wall", or where exactly the picture in Singapore that I was tagged in had been taken, and whether it was close to the hotel a person had been to earlier in the year on their vacation; thus, marking also the fact that I was am not the only one transient (Hannerz 2003a: 209). Despite having travelled over 6,000 kilometres, suddenly my "home"[1] – even if it was virtual and carefully managed – was part of the field, and my friends and family the subject of casual conversation at the office. A separation of home and work, or my professional and personal self, was not possible – I watched these two domains melt together in front of my eyes on my Facebook page when my "home" friends and my Indian colleagues began to answer each other's comments on a group photo of a wedding reception I had attended with the office crew.

This illustrates the fact that "space", as a primary organising principle of fieldwork, is increasingly challenged and physical distances are more easily overcome through digital modes of communication (Petermann 2010: 120). After my return from India, I remained updated on my interlocutors' after-work dinners, holidays, weddings and job changes via Facebook and remained in contact with some individuals through occasional chats. I shared online documents containing short sections of the manuscript (generally sections with case studies) with interlocutors who had agreed to look at it and collected their feedback via virtual comments. A year after completing the physical part of the fieldwork, as I like to call this phase, I met one of my interlocutors from the city office for a coffee and interview at Oxford University, where he was about to complete his MBA. One of my flatmates visited Heidelberg during her project assignment in Munich and half a dozen other (ex-)employees of Advice Company moved temporarily or permanently to cities across Europe. Marcus and Fischer refer to this fusion as a "messy, qualitative experience" (1986: 22), yet it constitutes the fieldwork reality (Amit 2000: 8) and represents a classic experience of "study sideways", in the sense of Hannerz (2006: 30).

1 "Home" is an unspecific term with an assumed yet subjective quality. In my case, "home" comprised virtual contact with my friends and family via Facebook. For a discussion of the different aspects of "home", see Madden (2010: 45–48).

3.2.3. Knowing who doesn't know: Company tenure and knowledge

I explored above how "the field" – as a spatially demarcated entity – had to be enhanced by virtual components, or, much more, how the agents widened it by giving me access and including me in their various modes of communication. However, especially in organisational contexts, the aspect of temporality should be discussed, as the field must be seen as a temporal phenomenon (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013: :2). The structure of the organisation is subject to constant change, with employees joining, leaving and changing departments for personal or career opportunities or due to management-induced major or minor re-organisation.

Within my first weeks of fieldwork, I attended a farewell lunch for a colleague and got an impressive demonstration of the temporal structure of her team when she conversed with a colleague about the different managers they had had. This resulted in a count and the realisation that they had had 10 and 12 managers, respectively, in their two years at the company. The wider discussion at the table then led to a count of the team members who had joined and left the 13-person team in that timeframe and concluded with the stunning number of 27 individuals. When I completed my fieldwork 11 months later, 9 people had changed their seats again. This situation wildly ruptures the "classic image and assumption about the durability of fields and the involvement of 'natives' in them" (Hannerz 2003a: 209), as the length of my tenure in the company equalled and sometimes even exceeded that of the colleagues I accompanied.

When I began my fieldwork I took part in a two-day "new employees welcome" workshop. At this workshop, I was able to meet the 35 people who joined about the same time as I did and who were, much as I, more like "strangers" to the organisation than "natives". However, over the course of my fieldwork – including my stint in the organisation during the pilot study four months prior to the main fieldwork – colleagues began to perceive me as having a certain level of "seniority" in the organisation, or at least a certain "expertise" about it: When I sat with a colleague I was accompanying, Asif from the project coordination team (who I had previously accompanied) passed by, saying: "Hey Nimesh, you don't need to fake a good impression anymore – she's here for too long now and has seen everything!" This certainly was not the case, but it significantly eased my trust-building process and helped me to build rapport, and it might have also lowered the all-present observer effect (McDonald 2005: 259). Due to the commonly known fact that I moved throughout several teams and offices, I quickly became a source of information for colleagues. I was asked, for example, if I could point out somebody in the database team, whether I knew if it was okay to go ahead with a project despite a final finance signature pending, if I could explain what kind of work the project coordination team did or how "corporate" the main office was. Through these questions, I learned about my interlocutors' different and quite restricted views of and within the organisation, and realised that grasping the emic perspective meant "switching off" parts of my knowledge. Being part of one team meant ignoring certain aspects of the work process that were central to and assumed by another team, and vice versa (see Part II).

Especially when it came to studying the non-intentional and intentional working misunderstandings driven by knowledge concealment between individuals and departments, I found myself in a dilemma. Making use of my full knowledge about certain projects or circumstances and sharing this with the different individuals would have altered the situation significantly, as this information imparity constituted the very structures I was analysing. Hannerz (2003: 210) asserts that with this problematisation of the "local's" and the ethnographer's knowledge, "we have moved away from the classic field work model". Now, the model is not primarily about gaining maximum knowledge, but is much more about knowing what certain individuals do not know relative to others in the organisation.

3.2.4. Aspects of seasonality and the duration of fieldwork

There is a lively debate in the discipline on the duration of fieldwork. Previously, exposure to long-term fieldwork of a year or more was taken to indicate research quality and depth of understanding. A number of scholars have challenged this "tacit standard" in our discipline, arguing that fieldwork should instead target the nature of the field and the relevant research questions (Dalsgaard and Nielsen 2013: 4, Hannerz 2003a: 209). Although my total duration of on-site fieldwork added up to one year (including the pre-study), the amount of time spent in the respective offices was aligned with the number of employees, the type of departments and the complexity of the business processes they served, rather than assumed standards of long-term immersion.

The "classic" threshold of about one year for ethnographic fieldwork to generate valid insights was originally motivated by the fact that this duration enables an anthropologist to observe different seasons and to follow the agricultural food-producing process that (stereo)typically determines the lives of the ethnic groups under analysis. The offices of Advice Company are located in a major city in India; the offices are reasonably equipped and the services offered by the organisation are not dependent on agricultural products. However, seasonality was of relevance to the employees' working life, on various levels.

The weather played a much bigger role than one would expect in a fully air conditioned office environment. Most employees were dependent on public transport and had to commute 60 to 120 minutes from their homes each day. During monsoon season, this meant facing train cancellations and delays, long queues for taxis or rickshaws and endless traffic jams when travelling by bus, private car or motor bike. Constant heavy rains affected even those living in close vicinity to the office, as most were likely to arrive drenched and covered with muddy water from the street. On these days of intense rainfall, people would be challenged to get to the office at all, let alone back home again. Having finally reached the office in the morning, female employees would meet in the ladies' washroom to change their wet dresses and shoes, restore their hairstyles and make-up and exchange stories of who had encountered the longest commute to the office and which parts of the city were completely flooded. Also during the hot and dusty summer months, commuting ladies would meet each morning in the washroom to wash their faces of street dust and city pollution, change their sweaty *kurta* and style up again.

Religious festivals would bring work-free days and motivated holidays and trips home to the family, as well as after-hours gatherings (and also office gatherings, at desks). Neha, for example, got up from her desk in the late morning and indicated that I should follow her, with the words: "It's Eid, we have to go to Tanika, I'm sure she has brought awesome *sevaiyyan*[2]!" Advice Company distributed greeting cards to the employees according to religious group on Diwali, Eid Mubarak and Christmas. These cards were signed by the CEO and collected and displayed at desks. During the wedding season, many evenings would be spent at teammates' wedding receptions and the next day's coffee talk would be dominated by discussions about the food that had been served. Also from a business perspective, the year was structured by internal and external events. Externally, clients would divide the year into quarterly deliverables and file a larger number of project requests towards the end of

2 A sweet delicacy made of vermicelli and pistacchios.

the calendar year in order to use up their budgets. This would result in higher anticipated and perceived workloads around this time.

As Advice Company's financial year was at the end of March, members of the finance team would push their colleagues in the consulting departments heavily during that month to file invoices and follow up on payments. Advice Company would furthermore structure the year according to a performance review process, wherein the first review would be conducted after six months and a final grade would be given in January/February. The annual performance review, against which bonus payments and promotions would be fixed, would be followed by a wave of people leaving the organisation due to unmet expectations. In contrast, employees showing extraordinary dedication would be recognised through quarterly performance awards, which would be bestowed in a public office ceremony.

These layers of seasonality, which structured the employees' work life, would have been impossible to experience in a shorter period of fieldwork. Conducting the pre-study several months prior to the main fieldwork also proved very important, as it led me to be perceived as having been with the company longer than I actually had been, and ensured a very smooth research start. The fact that I was able to recall situations and events that had happened during the pre-study phase supported my immersion process insofar as I was able to join conversations and stories right at the beginning of the fieldwork. For example, during my pre-study phase, Advice Company organised a party on the roof terrace of the office building. At this party, a magician called three female employees on stage – including me – to assist him with some tricks. Revisiting this experience with laughter with the two other women during morning coffee on the second day of my main fieldwork phase was an invaluable start to the first phase of research.

3.3. Methods: Classics with a twist

3.3.1. Shadowing in the office: Participant/observation?

Participant observation has been the most well known and widely used fieldwork method in our discipline since Malinowski described it in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (2005 [1921]). The method has the strong potential to capture detailed firsthand knowledge of agents' daily practices and their opinions on these practices, and to provide insight into the often unarticulated networks of relationships. In the direct sense of the term, the researcher observes agents' practices while also participating in them. When researching daily practices within complex organisations, the aspect of "participation" is limited insofar as the skills required to take part in the work processes require specialised expertise – commonly referred to as "knowledge work" (Alvesson 1995). As such expertise is not achievable without extensive training, organisational anthropology has adopted the method of shadowing.

Akin to participant observation, shadowing refers to the practice of accompanying a member of the organisation throughout his or her workday. This includes not only sitting next to the person at his or her desk, but also following him or her to spontaneous catch-ups with colleagues and joining meetings, coffee breaks and – in my case – even after-hours outings with team members. Throughout the day, the researcher may ask the occasional question to understand the context of the activity or conversation and to get a direct reaction from the agent on the situation (McDonald 2005: 456). By doing so, the researcher can connect the behaviour or the situation to a comment or opinion on it, and in this way gain deeper insight into the context of the event. Through this method, the organisation can be seen through the viewpoint of the accompanied individual and his or her paths, connections and strategies of working in the organisation (ibid.: 457).

As the general rule of this method is to incur the least possible disturbance of the employee's workday, the researcher must always balance a fine line between asking enough to understand what is going on and to build rapport, and being too "chatty". In Barbara Czarniawska's words, the "point is never to behave like a fly on the wall [...], but to behave like a responsible adult, showing respect and sympathy to others" (Czarniawska 2007: 56). Throughout the day, I would take notes on the agents' activities and conversations, including the small, informal questions I would ask and the employees' emotional states in certain situations throughout the workday.

I shadowed the employees of Advice Company between one and three days per person and changed departments every four to six weeks. But my companionship with each actor was not inactive. Hannerz (2003: 212) discusses this passivity of observation in "settings of modernity", which are difficult to access, and asks what the researcher should "do when 'your people' spend hours alone at a desk, perhaps concentrating on a computer screen". I certainly agree that the corporate context is a setting of modernity. However, it was hardly ever the case that my interlocutors sat isolated at their desks in front of a document and only worked on that task. It was much more common to observe a constant flow of conversations on different topics with a broad number of people, both virtually and across the office floor (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1).

Even when my interlocutors sat silently in front of a screen and were not involved in conversation (which rarely occurred for periods of more than 20 minutes), they would be exposed to constant input. This input would enter, for example, in the form of emails – announced by a short message popping up in a corner of the computer screen – even though about one-third of the emails would not be directly addressed to the colleague but would only copy him or her in. Furthermore, the organisation's chat programme would constantly inform colleagues of who in their contact list had logged in to the software, with similar pop-up notifications that would disappear after a few seconds. Finally, the general talk of team members in the vicinity of the interlocutor's desk would create a steady flow of information that had to be screened for relevance.

Along with shadowing, I employed several other data collection methods, such as formal interviews. These interviews complemented the seemingly casual conversations that were held during lunch breaks and the feedback collected in observation forms (see Section 3.3.2). Despite the abovementioned limits of participation in this research setting, I was able to switch into a more "participating" format at several points during the day, for example by sharing my *dabbah* (lunch box) contents with colleagues or by joining after-hours activities such as a coffee with female interlocutors in the evening, a team function at a colleague's home in a suburban setting or a trip with a female colleague to her hometown over the weekend.

During the heavy monsoon phase, I would sometimes physically participate by arriving drenched, swearing to myself under my breath and meeting female colleagues in the ladies' washroom who, like me, had to change their entire outfit. Furthermore, active participation meant the experience of frustration while hunting for feedback and approval from an HR manager on my next department assignment. Participation also involved meeting my neighbour, who was one of the Advice Company managers, for a walk downstairs in our housing compound and accepting the request to play a few rounds of QuizUp from a team member at 11.00pm, just when I wanted to go to sleep.

3.3.2. Field notes: Tools and strategies

One of the most practical issues that I needed to resolve related to the necessity of taking notes on interlocutors who were often on the move (Czarniawska 2007: 57), and lacking a suitable position – let alone the time – to do so. Upon my very first day in the office, I realised that I did not have space to write notes. I sat next to an employee at the corner of their desk and did not want to "invade" their personal work zone. Consequently, the area I considered "my space" was basically the office chair I was sitting on. In this position, it was quite difficult for me to write in my paper note book. Therefore I switched to a small, 7-inch handheld device that I could hold with both hands and type notes into almost like writing a text message. This incidentally resembled the activity of colleagues working on their smartphones and therefore enabled me to blend in more easily with the surrounding behaviour. Most colleagues, in fact, assumed I was writing emails, playing one of the popular online games or browsing the Internet rather than taking notes about my observations. This probably prevented the occurrence of the "embarrassing situation" of my interlocutors "catching" me obviously writing notes about the conversations and events occurring around me (Krause-Jensen 2013: 51). The tool also proved suitable for the office area, as it enabled me to accompany my interlocutors when they spontaneously visited colleagues; I would keep my note pad with me in case these conversations extended to longer discussions. The handheld device featured a simple text application into which I could write my field notes, log and summarise the different interview situations and jot down desk layouts. Furthermore, I used its voice recording programme for formal interviews.

My daily field notes consisted of general descriptions of the setting, the style of the employee's desk, the projects and tasks performed, the outline of the day and – most importantly – the interactions with colleagues. As I accompanied my interlocutors during their average workday at the office (for about 10 hours), I sat next to them at their desk for long periods of time. This gave me an opportunity to note some of their statements – as well as their shorter conversations with colleagues – word-for-word. Over the course of the workday, it frequently occurred that one of my brief casual chats with an interlocutor would intensify into an informal interview lasting 10 to 15 minutes, before usually being interrupted by a phone call or colleague. Unless the interruption led to another potentially interesting situation, I would use the time to document a paraphrase of our interview directly after it occurred, including a few verbatim quotes; such opportunities are a rare luxury in ethnographic fieldwork. Although these relatively short informal interviews often raised further questions, I would not resume the conversation as soon as the situation allowed. As I had gained permission to conduct my fieldwork under the condition that I would not disturb the employees in their workday, I tried to avoid actively initiating longer conversations. However, at the same time, I did not cut a conversation short if my interlocutors resumed talking about the topic or initiated a new one later in the day.

I created one file of field notes for each day. I wrote predominantly in English, but switched into German for emotional remarks and personal reflections. This was for two reasons: First, I was able to express personal emotional nuances more precisely in German, as it is my native language. Second, the German language in these passages allowed me to quickly identify phases of higher emotional intensity in the data analysis process and to subsequently set the other notes taken during that period into context. For example, such notes could suggest potential biases I might have had at the time of note-taking (Bernard 2006: 392). My note-taking device was pin protected, so my notes were kept safe throughout the fieldwork during the day. Each night, at home, I downloaded the day's jottings from the handheld device to my laptop computer with an encrypted harddrive to compose my consolidated field notes for the day.

3.3.3. Snapshots and heat maps: How to capture "I'm busy"

As I touched upon in Section 3.3.1, the employees not only interacted on the basis of direct conversations in the office but also via virtual communication methods such as email or chat, and even within informal virtual channels such as social networks (Facebook) and online games. Therefore, the challenge was not only to conceptualise a multi-sited approach to studying practices within and across physical spaces, but also to manage the integration of "face-to-face *and* digital modes of connection" (Dirksen et al. 2010: 1046). Dirksen and colleagues suggest a solution of "connective ethnography", which goes a step beyond Marcus' method by including the server data of employees' activities on corporate team collaboration sites for social network analysis. Although access to such data was not feasible in my research, I was certainly able to trace and connect social events (e.g. a "cake shop visit") to their virtual representations on social media and other communication channels – or vice versa, to monitor the way in which virtual modes of connection enabled social events to be reflected upon and followed up in direct office interactions the following day (e.g. in relation to QuizUp challenges).

However, gaining insight into the connection of face-to-face and virtual communication in work-related situations remained challenging, as I was not included in all email or chat messages exchanged. My interlocutors made statements such as "[The] office is great to coordinate things, but real, concentrated work I prefer to do at home", which suggested that it might be important for me to gain an understanding of the qualities of "real work". Gaining insight into the details of daily work practices therefore meant observing what was actually happening during a "busy" work phase by tracing both physical and virtual communication channels. To achieve this, I adapted observation forms and developed a method I call "activity snapshots", inspired by Wollcott's tracking of a school dean's work day (2003 [1973]).

Throughout their workdays, the employees would interact with each other via various communication channels, often running different active communication channels in parallel and generating a communication density that was experienced as "being busy" and "not getting things done". Through "activity snapshots", this notion could be made visible and could provide a seemingly objective, non-emotional basis for discussion of the topic with my interlocutors. The activity snapshots tracked the flow of information through various channels, such as email, chat, phone (mobile or landline), face-to-face discussion and ad-hoc mini-meetings at a desk, over the duration of one hour. For this, I tried to choose an hour when interlocutors were either sitting at their desks or had planned to do so (i.e. when no formal meeting was scheduled). During this hour, I would note in an observation form the frequency with which employees connected with other colleagues and via which communication channels. I aimed at taking snapshots twice per day – once in the morning, once in the afternoon – in order to regularly remind myself of the task and to achieve a broad number of tracking moments. As the employees would sometimes come into the office later or leave early, attend meetings lasting several hours and participate in teleconferences or workshops, this was not always feasible. During tracking, I would ask interlocutors at the beginning of the hour for their perceived work intensity level on a scale from 1 to 10. Then the distinction would be made between incoming and outgoing connections (i.e. between received and sent emails, received and made calls and conversations initiated by the employee or others). As the employees I accompanied were – in most cases – interested in the results of the snapshot, they were willing to openly share their computer screen with me for that timeframe.

After the hour, I would spend a few minutes with my interlocutors briefly reviewing the data, leaning over my note pad, explaining one or the other situation and checking back with their emails to distinguish "content email" versus "system-generated" alerts, which they didn't read. They would sometimes even point out other contact that had occurred during that timeframe, such as text messages from clients and colleagues. When the situation allowed for it, the activity snapshots were complemented by a more detailed description of the communication pattern and exact timing of each communication. This description gave an impression of interwoven face-to-face and digital modes of connection and the notion of "being busy" in the context of the office atmosphere (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4.1).

3.3.4. Tracing informal connections: Webwork diagrams

While activity snapshots are helpful for collecting data about communication during work, techniques inspired by network analysis (Schnegg and Lang 2002: 7) can help deliver data on whom employees interact with in work-related and non-work-related situations. Especially in Advice Company's spatially defined office environment, it was possible to obtain information about formal and informal relationships through observation. The office comprised a relatively closed environment in which direct interactions could be easily observed and matched with interlocutors' own assessments. I systematically traced agents' activities and asked agents to draw small-scale egocentric network diagrams. Through these observations, my aim was to uncover informal relationships by analysing which agents interacted with each other in relatively "free-choice" situations such as breakfast, lunch and high tea and general questions versus non-choice situations (e.g. those relating to client projects). For this, I distinguished the contact category "Work-related non-choice" (e.g. project team meetings); "Work-related choice" (e.g. asking for advice or help); and "Non-work related" (e.g. lunch or *chai* (tea) breaks).This analysis was conducted for each of the colleagues I accompanied, for at least two days. I am aware that the data gathered through observing visible interactions in the office is more accurate than the data gathered on less openly visible contact channels, such as chat programs, except in cases when the agents chose to share their computer screen with me (for example, during collection of the activity snapshot).

The egocentric network diagrams aimed at uncovering relationships with members of the organisation (irrespective of team) in more detail, and were based on employees' own assertions. These diagrams were built beginning in the second half of the fieldwork phase, and primarily with colleagues I shared good rapport with. This is because I not only asked interlocutors about the colleagues they preferred to interact with, but also about the colleagues they tried to avoid, and why. Through applying this method, I was able to trace the informal network of lunch groups in the city office, as presented in Chapter 6, Section 6.2.

3.3.5. Interviews: Strategising the record button

Interviews were my central method of collecting information about the professional background of my interlocutors and they enabled me to understand the wider context of the situations I observed during the day. The interviews were conducted formally (i.e. in situations clearly marked as interviews that were arranged in advance). Furthermore, as described above with respect to the field notes, I employed the shadowing technique for many informal interview situations and created structured documentation of these. While the spontaneous, informal interviews throughout the day provided valuable insights and often concise statements from my interlocutors about situations or interactions, the formal interviews allowed for more concentrated and (mostly) undisturbed in-depth conversations on potentially controversial topics.

Ad-hoc, informal interviews were of tremendous importance in this office environment. My casual questions about the latest timeline discussion while accompanying an interlocutor to the coffee machine, chit-chat about an interlocutor's background situation over lunch, or an interlocutor's upset grumble to me about a heavy workload as we walked to the gate of the office compound provided deeper insight into their opinions of the events I observed as part of their work life. Some employees had three meals per day at the canteen and others took cigarette and *chai* breaks; all of these moments provided good opportunities for me to gain extra moments of their time, build rapport and ask questions. When informal interviews took place away from my interlocutors' desks, meetings or other places where I could document their comments immediately, I would write the minutes from memory as soon as I could access my handheld, following the rule: "If you don't write it down, it's gone" (Bernard 2006: 389). Yet in these settings, I had to bear in mind that the situation was never really informal and that my interlocutors were very aware of my role and my interest in “browsing for information”, as an interlocutor put it.

Semi-structured formal interviews were conducted with employees from all levels of Advice Company. I adjusted the interview guide to each situation by adding questions relating to situations I had observed with the interviewee. As the majority of the interviews were held during office hours, I had to target a length of 20 to 30 minutes to ensure my interlocutors would agree to the interview. In order to fit employees’ work schedules, the interviews usually took place in the early evening, between 6.00 and 8.00pm. Whenever possible, I held these in a meeting room, which my interlocutors had to book. Once all of the logistics and schedules had been sorted out, the interlocutor and I would sit in one of these meeting rooms – windowless rooms of 5 square metres equipped with a glass sliding door into the office area, a round table and three chairs.

Doubtlessly, the formal setting and the official nature of a recorded interview situation emphasised my role as a researcher collecting data. However, through this set-up I ensured that I had the opportunity to talk to my interlocutors in a relatively secluded, peaceful and confidential environment, even if only for a very limited amount of time. As the meeting rooms were reserved by my interlocutors, they were assigned a formal hosting role and this balanced the potential hierarchical disequilibrium of my position as interviewer. Our situation also resembled the familiar event of a business meeting, in which one talks about a previously agreed topic. As Bernard points out, semi-structured interviews are useful for actors who are used to efficiently using their time (Bernard 2006: 212).

To achieve the greatest possible focus on my interlocutors in the interviews I seated myself at the small table facing the sliding door into the office, so that my interview partners would automatically sit in the opposite chair. With their back towards the office, they would avoid scanning the actions going on in the office during our interview. Placing the handheld device on the table and pushing the red button to record the interview sometimes also helped to prevent interruptions from mobile phone calls, and again stressed the formal nature of the situation. To create a less formal setting, I switched off the recording after having asked around two-thirds of the questions. I then continued to ask the remaining questions in a less formal manner and took note of the answers in bullet points in a small paper note book. This resulted in a significantly more relaxed, literally “off-the-record” atmosphere, giving me the opportunity to ask about controversial topics. Often, this technique resulted in a voluntarily prolonged interview.

In other situations, I refrained from recording a formal interview at all. These situations mostly occurred when an interview had to be conducted at a location unsuitable for recording due to loud background noise, such as the street office, the office canteen or a public coffee shop. In some cases, I judged recording as inappropriate as it would place too much emphasis on the formality of the situation; for example, when interviewing an employee about his or her decision to change departments or leave the organisation. In these situations, I took notes during the interview, and transferred these notes into a more detailed memory protocol on my laptop as soon as possible after the interview.

3.4. Concluding remarks on fieldwork in corporate offices

This chapter has shown that fieldwork in corporate offices faces similar challenges to research in other settings: gatekeeper management, role definition and an interlocking analogue and virtual world are part and parcel of ethnographic research. However, the corporate office, with its clear structures, requires a correspondingly structured fieldwork approach with a clear plan. Accordingly, the "classic" methods of ethnographic research must be adapted. In the present environment of highly specialised experts of commercial topics, I used shadowing, rather than participant observation, as the primary method of data collection. Getting a share of the actors' time – a highly precious resource at work – required constantly hunting for opportunities while not competing with colleagues. On the other hand, the office provided a very suitable setting for analysing communication channels and observing social networks.

Because I was outside the organisational system, I was able to move freely within each of the three offices and to chat with Advice Company's employees on very different teams and hierarchy levels. Although I was assigned to different teams throughout most of my fieldwork, I enjoyed an almost limitless level of mobility. This allowed me access to conversations with a wide network of people that only long-term managers at Advice Company enjoyed similar access to. At the same time, my external position enabled me to more easily build rapport with my interlocutors and lowered their reluctance to engage in informal conversations with me.

This position, however, also limited the applicability of a particular research method I had initially planned to employ: focus groups. With the aim of engendering discussion among participants, focus groups are viewed as useful tools for gaining deep understanding of potentially controversial topics. After running three focus groups and attempting another two, I decided to refrain from using the method due to my practical inability to recruit a handful of people at the same time. My attempts were fruitless: whether I planned the focus group meeting days in advance or tried to gather participants spontaneously – neither method worked. Client deliverables, urgent issues or simply rare opportunities for colleagues to knock off early led to situations in which I was sitting on my own in the meeting room. The only ways I achieved some level of presence were either employing a confederate amongst the participants to motivate his or her peers to reluctantly leave their tasks or mentioning to a manager that I wanted to hold a focus group with some of his or her reports. Either way, I had to rely on the organisation's structures to get participants into the meeting room, and this did not lead to the open and motivated discussions I had imagined. On the contrary, my dependence on the organisational hierarchy or advocates in a team endangered the rapport I had built with the interlocutors. My position outside Advice Company's structures was beneficial for the remainder of my research, but clearly not for conducting focus groups. In closer alignment to my role, I therefore used lunch tables, taxi rides and other informal, more or less incidental group moments to instigate discussions of topics I was interested in.

Of all the opportunities and challenges during fieldwork discussed above, the most remarkable was the information asymmetry I encountered between different teams and departments. Assessing and managing the different levels of information provided about a client project required careful management. However, analysis of the different selection processes at play in each of the teams proved a fruitful source of insight into the organisational functioning.