

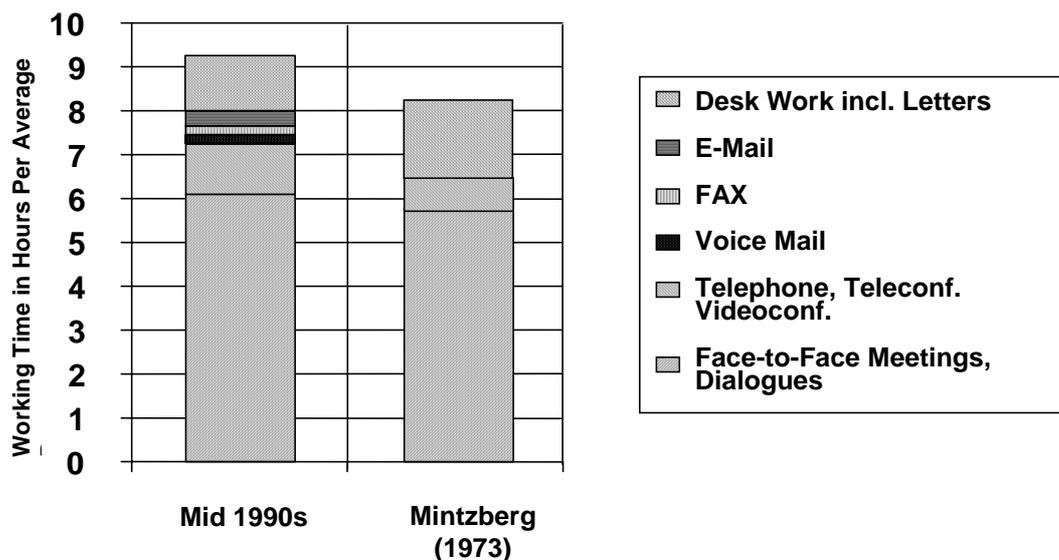
The Media Paradox

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More than 25 years ago, Henry Mintzberg received much attention with his book “The Nature of Managerial Work” based on findings of empirical case study research of communication structures at upper-level management in large US corporations. Expanding the work of Mintzberg, the Chair for General and Industrial Management studied the communication processes at the top management level of three globally operating companies from the field of computers or telecommunications. The result of the empirical examinations of communication activities in this field and the comparison with Mintzberg’s result can be summarized as a “surprise”: *“face-to-face” is a constant!*

Figure 1 shows the comparison of the time profiles of the results we found and those found by Mintzberg. The study results can then be easily compared after a simple recoding according to Mintzberg’s definition of activities. This comparison can be attempted by cause the methodology we employed in our study agrees in many areas with the methodology employed by Mintzberg, and, in some points actually goes to a much greater depth.

Figure 1:
Work Time Structure of Top Managers Mid 1990s and early 1970s



Results of 28 days of observation in the mid 1990s and 25 days of observation in the 1970s by Mintzberg coded after Mintzberg, H.: The Nature of Managerial Work, 1973

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The differences in the proportion of average use of the telecommunication media e-mail, fax, and voice mail, are self-explanatory, as these did not yet exist at the time of Mintzberg's study. What is surprising is the increase in the proportion of telephone communication compared with Mintzberg's results, and this despite the asynchronous communication media available today. However, the greatest surprise provided by this time comparison is the almost unaltered proportion of time spent for face-to-face communication. Just as it was the case 25 years ago, managers today spend an average of more than 6 hours per day either in personal conversations or in meetings. Despite all forecasts about substitute options to face-to-face communication – particularly when connected to the bridging of spatial distances – this comparison impressively illustrates that, at upper management levels, face-to-face communication has only been displaced by the available telemedia to a limited extent, if at all.

While media usage and the spatial distribution of work locations increase, so does the importance of face-to-face communication at co-located geographical spaces. This particular preference for face-to-face communication among top managers of globally operating corporations has also proven to be one of the primary reasons for their intense travel activities as well as for the increasing demand for mobility. This observation fits into the so-called "*Media Paradox*": Generally, management exhibits an increasing need for face-to-face communication as a result of globalization and media usage. More face-to-face communication with remote partners acts to increase stress within the manager's work situation through physical stress, absence, poor accessibility, and time pressure.

Tele-presence via new media in social spaces that emerge apart from geographical locations could represent a way out of this situation, but all previous predictions that telemedia would replace face-to-face communication have shown themselves to be erroneous. In fact, it is the heavy user of telemedia who travels the most. Practitioners of the autocratic media usage model exhibit a particularly high level of mobility. They are apparently in a position to best deal with the new situation. Mastery of media applications inwards through telemanagement, and mastery of media applications outwards through telecooperation gives them the space they need to realize the increasing demand for face-to-face communication with remote partners.

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