

A Practice-theoretical Account of Organizational Attention

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Organizational attention, the capacity of organizations to combine effective oversight and foresight, is increasingly becoming a critical core competence and a source of competitive advantage. Failure to put in place appropriate mechanisms to orient, sustain and re-orient attention can, in fact, lead to loss of opportunities, wrong strategic decisions, and adverse events. These, in turn, can have seriously negative effects on the performance and reputation of private, public, and non-profit organizations alike. Ask Nokia, who failed to pay attention to the emergence of smartphones, or the Volkswagen Group CEO, who first heard about the emission scandal from the press

Despite the increasing centrality of attention in what has been described as the click economy, we still know very little about how organizations pay attention. This is partly because the limited past research understood attention narrowly as a mental process and focussed exclusively on the attention processes of top managers.

This project aims to shed light on the mundane, concrete practices that make up organizational attention. Rather than conceiving attention as the sum of top managers' cognitive efforts and interpretation schemas, we address attention as emerging from multiple, locally situated, and materially mediated practices on the ground. We ask, for example:

- Why do we find ourselves paying attention to certain things and not others in our work? How do specific social situations and local conditions prefigure and shape the things we pay attention to in our doings and sayings? Where do these conditions come from? How can we explain these “prefiguration” effects?
- How is attention socially and materially distributed in organizations? What is the attentional role of the artifacts and tools we use in our daily work, including the informational infrastructure that increasingly supports all our activities? In which ways do material spaces and emotional environments make us turn and sustain our attention in one direction rather than another?
- How does “organizational attention” emerge as a result of the connection between multiple, localized, and situated practices of attention? How do multiple sites of attentional practice become interconnected, and how do these connections come to matter?

To deepen our understanding of how people do attention and how attentional effects emerge from the connections and conflicts between mundane practices, we will study three rather diverse empirical contexts: border control, air traffic control, and venture capital investments. We chose these organizations as paying attention is at the core of what they do, although each of them presents a unique set of challenges that will help us to shed light on the different facets of the phenomenon. Our multi-site research design will use ethnographic observation combined with photo- and video-based approaches. We will also use qualitative interviews and other methods from the qualitative interpretive tradition.

We expect the study to advance our theoretical understanding of organizational attention and to provide insights on how to manage organizational attention in business practice for the purpose of managing risks and seizing opportunities.

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