Mini-track: Distributed Group Support Systems (DGSS)

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Since its inception six years ago, one hallmark of this mini-track has been its diversity—ranging from the diversity of topics covered, the diversity of research methodologies employed and the diversity of schools of thought. Implicit in such diversity is the variety of institutions represented in the mini-track. In previous years the authors have represented institutions from four continents; this year we are happy to report the inclusion of a fifth continent—Africa—in the authors’ list of affiliations.

The papers in this year’s mini-track highlight the diversity of technologies that characterize distributed group support systems: desktop video conferencing, groupware, workflow applications and distributed decision support systems. Some of these papers also provide tantalizing glimpses of the new developments—from Web-based intranets to new engineering design tools—that have radically changed the way in which groups communicate, collaborate and coordinate their activities.

One area that distributed technologies offer great promise is education. In essence, distributed systems offer two alternatives: they can be used to either augment the existing classroom experience or replace the conventional classroom concept. The former suggests incremental changes to pedagogy and curriculum while the latter suggests a more radical approach. Variations of these approaches are explored in two separate papers by Haythornthwaite and Hill. Both papers highlight various issues of using technology to deliver content to a distributed student body. Thus, while the idea of a virtual classroom—without the boundaries of space and time—is intuitively appealing, it may be practically challenging.

A second set of papers examines the use of distributed systems from a practical standpoint. Johnson explores an oft-used, yet under-studied, “real world” scenario—the partially distributed group while Johnson and Greenberg evaluate people’s availability for interaction from video snapshots.

The next area of inquiry deals with the development of theoretical frameworks to study distributed teamwork. In separate, but similar, efforts Engelbrecht and Franz explore the conceptual and critical variables in enabling distributed team interaction. Their explorations cast new light on what issues to study and how to study them in this rapidly changing field.

Finally, new and innovative applications of distributed group support are presented by researchers down under. Gammack and Poon discuss communication media for supporting distributed engineering design while Cao and Burstein discuss the use of asynchronous GSS for intelligent multi-criteria decision making (something we academicians do everyday!).

In conclusion, the papers in this mini-track highlight the new realities of studying a rapidly changing field. In some ways this phenomenon is similar to a marksman aiming to shoot a rapidly moving target. Traditional weapons, just as traditional research methods, may not be sufficient for the task at hand. New research strategies along with new research frameworks, and ultimately a new research paradigm may be required to better understand the growth and impact of distributed group support systems.