The Voice of Mobile Workers

Translating Practices, Relationships and Components into Effective Workplaces

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Purpose

Supporting work-life balance, attracting and retaining talent, improving job satisfaction and managing global deployment are challenges that organizations face today. To meet these challenges effectively, companies are increasingly embracing mobile work strategies.

As a result, Knoll, Inc. has been engaged in a long term study to explore, from the employee perspective, how organizations can successfully provide for their mobile workforces.

Background

Over the course of the last decade, the number of workers who spend a significant portion of their time away from allocated office space has substantially increased (Beatty et al., 2005; Becker, 2004; Nemertes, 2007). Today, technology allows employees to work flexibly and improve their work-life choices by working whenever and wherever they need. However, little research has been conducted that investigates how the shift to greater mobility and the associated changes in workspace and technology usage are affecting work roles, activities, interpersonal cooperation and worker satisfaction.

A recent benchmark study from Nemertes Research (2007) revealed that a staggering 83% of organizations now consider themselves "virtual," with workgroups spread across multiple locations and geographies. In addition, 91% of company employees reportedly do some of their work outside of traditional headquarter locations, and 96% use some form of real-time collaboration tools (e.g., instant messaging, web or audio/video conferencing).

Indicative of widespread worker mobility, Nemertes found that 43% of global organizations had a mobility strategy, with another 26% currently developing one. Among US-based companies, 35% had a mobility strategy, with another 16% having one in development.

While Nemertes observed a large number of companies engaged in mobile work strategies, it also revealed that more than half of the interviewed US enterprises have no organization-wide strategy for supporting the needs of the mobile workforce. Even more noteworthy, only 15% of all organizations interviewed had a specific mobility budget.

Mobile Worker Research at Knoll

In 2005, Knoll published its findings on the corporate benefits of flexible and mobile work strategies. The study, entitled *Time as a New Currency: Flexible and Mobile Work Strategies to Manage People and Profits*, found that flexible and mobile work strategies help companies attract and retain employees, increase corporate agility and reduce occupancy costs.

As outlined in the report, one of the most common mobile work strategies conducted by respondent institutions involved the creation of unassigned workspace within a company's workplace or real estate portfolio. This was typically enacted following a thorough workspace usage analysis, which commonly found a large percentage of workstations vacant. Real metrics were produced and real dollars saved.

However, workforce restructuring for mobile workers that involved a move to unassigned workspace—and away from traditional work groups—generated resistance because it marginalized the mobile worker. It became clear that in addition to implementing mobile work strategies to address organizational concerns, further study should seek to grasp the employee perspective on mobile work.

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The Voice of Mobile Workers

In 2006, Knoll partnered with Verna Allee Associates to understand mobile work and the lives of mobile workers from the employee perspective. The resulting Study, presented here, surveys mobile employees working for diverse organizations. The goal is to identify aspects of mobile workforce deployment that are successful and those that need improvement.

The Study leverages value network analysis to understand the relationship mobile workers have with their professional peers (see Appendix).

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Research Methodology

To better understand the employee perspective on mobile work strategies, Knoll conducted a comprehensive quantitative study with a survey population of 557 respondents representing 84 participating organizations. Respondent recruiting involved both corporations and selective marketing to professional organizations that have large populations of mobile workers. In order to attain a representative sampling of mobile workers, participating organizations were not limited by the presence or absence of a corporate mobile worker program (however, 67% of respondents were enrolled in a formal mobile work program).

Survey data collection was handled using the GenIsis™ Suite for Value Networks, which is a research tool co-developed by Verna Allee and Oliver Schwabe. The Web-based survey tool for data collection was Survey Monkey®. All the findings were summarized in spreadsheets, documents and graphs.

When asked to define their function within an organization, the Study found that mobile workers occupy a plethora of roles. Over 40% of mobile workers perceive themselves as occupying leadership positions.

Most of the 70 survey questions focused on the physical aspects of the work being performed and the equipment and task needs of the mobile worker. One set of questions involved the work activities of mobile workers, including how they interact, communicate and collaborate with fellow workers and how they use space, technology and collaboration tools. A second series of questions involved the level of support they are receiving at primary work locations. Responses to these questions were compared and contrasted in an attempt to understand what are the employees' requirements for mobile work, and whether or not these are being addressed on the institutional level.

Observations and Findings: Defining the Mobile Worker

1. Who is the Mobile Worker?

Myth Buster 1

The data collected in this Study serves to dispel the common assumption that mobile workers are young females (Coplan, 2000; Naylor, 2006). In fact, the Study found that **most mobile workers are more than 40 years old and revealed a 65/35 male-to-female ratio.**

Myth Buster 2

The data also serves to dispel the common assumption that mobile workers are technology workers performing individual, lower-skilled tasks (Coplan, 2000; Naylor, 2006). In fact, the Study found that **most mobile workers occupy professional, managerial and executive positions.**

When asked to define their function within an organization, the Study found that mobile workers occupy a plethora of roles. Over 40% of mobile workers perceive themselves as occupying leadership positions, as outlined in *Figure 1.* Most frequently, respondents define themselves as:

‣ **Leaders** (13.3%)

‣ **Consultants** (13.1%)

‣ **Problem Solvers** (8.2%)

‣ **Coordinators** (7.5%)

‣ **Subject-Matter Experts** (6.5%)

Myth Buster 3

While it has traditionally been assumed that only specialist workers (e.g., salespeople, auditors, consultants) spend significant periods away from the office (Andriessen and Vartiainen, 2005), the Study found that **all levels of staff in an organization are working outside the office, and they are doing so with customers and business partners.**

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Data also revealed a high level of consistency among the mobile worker population. The majority of mobile workers characterize themselves as:

▸ **Mature:** 65% were more than 40 years old

▸ **Family-oriented:** 82% were married or living with a partner

▸ **Hardworking:** 75% were working more than 40 hours per week

▸ **Professionals:** More than 80% held professional, managerial or executive positions

Mobile workers are serious, career-oriented employees. 67% of respondents were employed in an organization with a formal mobile work program and had long-term employment at their company. 30% had been employed for 6 to 10 years, while more than 20% had spent 16 to 20 or more years at their organization.

Figure 1: Identified Roles of Mobile Workers
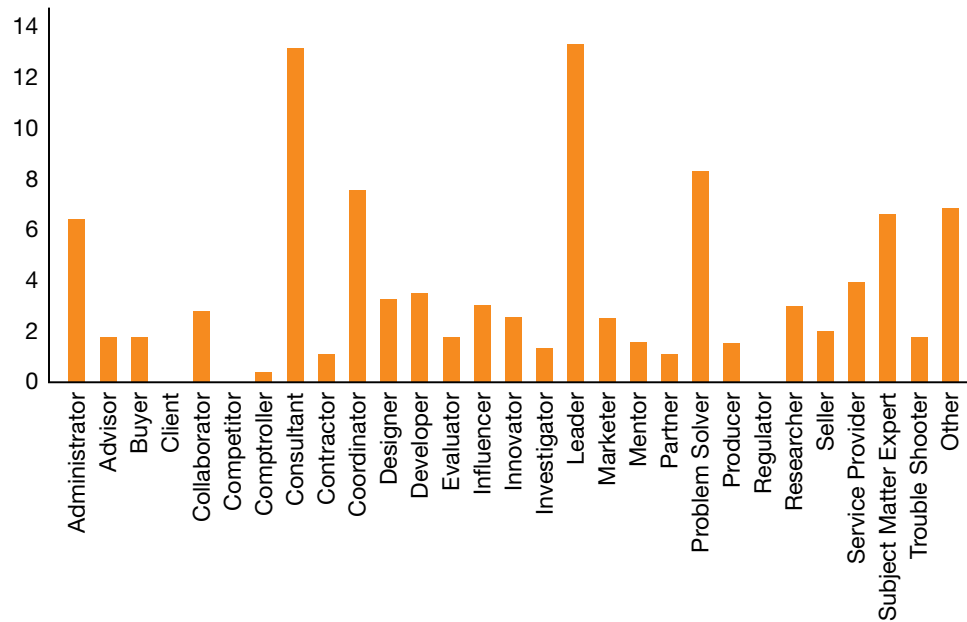
2. Tasks of Mobile Work

Mobile workers reported that they network and collaborate inside the office, while other types of work tasks were generally performed at home. When working from their home base, mobile workers responded that their primary work tasks were:

▸ **Computer-based teamwork and correspondence**

▸ **Creative thinking**

▸ **Writing**

▸ **Creating presentations**

▸ **Reading**

When working at their primary location, mobile workers responded that their work tasks were the same as performed at home, with the addition of face-to-face meetings.

In fact, 75% of mobile workers use their primary work location for face-to-face meetings with co-workers and clients, and to socialize.

When working from other locations, mobile workers responded that their work tasks were mainly face-to-face meetings and e-mail processing.
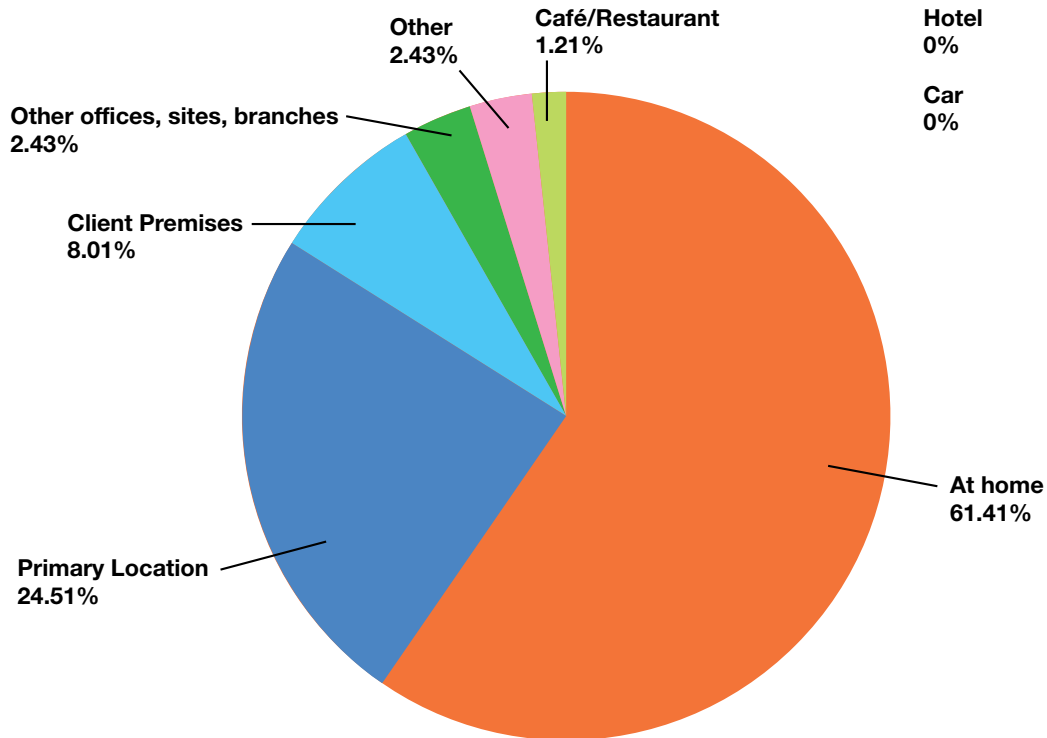
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3. Productivity for a Mobile Worker

Mobile workers do their best independent work at home. As outlined in *Figure 2*, more than 60% of respondents said they are most productive at home, with as much as two-thirds of their time spent on individual or independent work.

Mobile workers find collaboration to be positive. When asked about working collaboratively with others in their organization, a small percentage of respondents had a negative (2%) or neutral (10%) experience. Indeed, working collaboratively was a positive experience for 88% of those surveyed.

This is in keeping with the understanding that mobile workers utilize their company-provided workspace primarily as a place to meet with clients and fellow workers within the organization.

Figure 2: Mobile Workers' Most Productive Locations

- **Other** 2.43%
- **Café/Restaurant** 1.21%
- **Hotel** 0%
- **Other offices, sites, branches** 2.43%
- **Car** 0%
- **Client Premises** 8.01%
- **At home** 61.41%
- **Primary Location** 24.51%

Mobile Worker Requirements at Company-Provided Locations

1. Meeting Space

Mobile workers express the need for team space. The Study uncovered a general misalignment of resources in this regard: there is a disparity between required work settings and the types of spaces being provided to mobile workers. Respondents' comments validated the perception that team rooms are sorely missing.

More than 50% of mobile workers stated that they really needed conference room space at their employer's office, but were having trouble getting it. Less than 5% of respondents had assigned collaborative space (see *Figure 3*).

Mobile workers do not necessarily need individual space at employer locations. The majority (more than 60%) of those surveyed said they had an assigned workstation at their employer's office (see *Figure 4*) but reported they did not need this type of space for independent work tasks, which are being completed at home.

Few mobile workers have unassigned workstations. In comparison, only 17% of respondents said they were provided with an unassigned workstation. As stated above, data points to the fact that the majority of mobile workers require collaborative space, not individual work areas.

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Mobile workers need productive space just as much, if not more than, traditional workers. While there has been a tendency to think that *mobile workers are constantly on the move, in a car or on an airplane* (Gogoi, 2005; O'Hara et al., 2001), this is not the case, according to survey respondents.

Collaborative technology is a must-have for mobile workers. In general, being mobile necessitates different technological requirements for achieving peak performance, feeling organized and meeting personal necessities.

▸ 90% of mobile workers said they needed mobile teleconferencing and collaborative technology capabilities, and that laptops are their core technology.

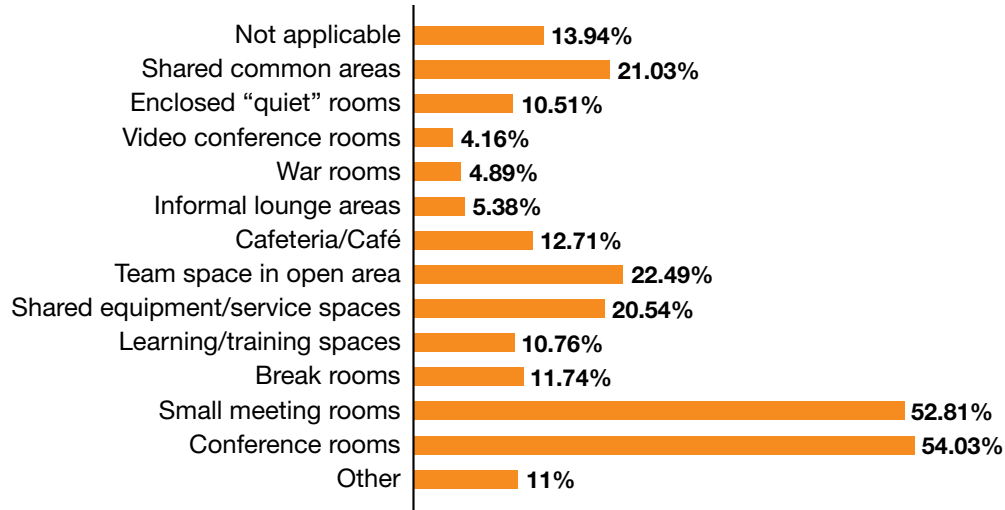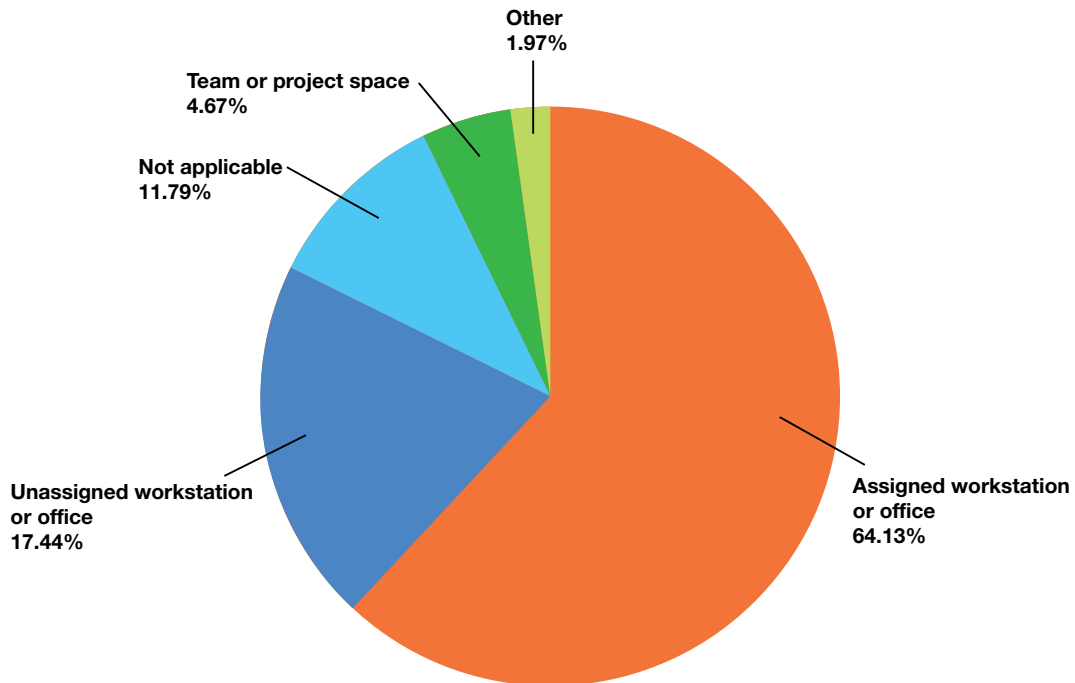### Figure 3: Types of Space Desired at Primary Location

Category	Percentage
Not applicable	13.94%
Shared common areas	21.03%
Enclosed "quiet" rooms	10.51%
Video conference rooms	4.16%
War rooms	4.89%
Informal lounge areas	5.38%
Cafeteria/Café	12.71%
Team space in open area	22.49%
Shared equipment/service spaces	20.54%
Learning/training spaces	10.76%
Break rooms	11.74%
Small meeting rooms	52.81%
Conference rooms	54.03%
Other	11%

Figure 4: Types of Space Provided at Primary Location

Other 1.97%
Team or project space 4.67%
Not applicable 11.79%
Unassigned workstation or office 17.44%
Assigned workstation or office 64.13%

Implications for the Workplace

As reported in the 2005 Knoll study Time as a New Currency, while real estate and facilities costs can be significantly reduced as a result of worker mobility, the real driver for this work style is worker productivity and effectiveness.

While the creation of unassigned workstations are successful in reducing real estate costs and are utilized by a portion of the mobile worker population, the majority of mobile workers, as outlined in this Study, require collaborative space. The type of independent work that is completed at a workstation is being fulfilled at the mobile worker's home, where he describes himself as being most productive.

Based on the results of the survey, organizations should consider undertaking a thorough review of their typical space profile and consider reassigning space in greater alignment with the needs and expectations of an increasingly mobile population. Based on respondents' answers to five fill-in questions in the Study, suggestions are outlined below for creating an accommodating and effective workplace.

Suggestions for a More Effective Workplace

1. Address requirements of older and younger mobile workers for greater effectiveness at their workplace and home:

▸ **Mobility resonates particularly with older workers.**
Most older workers who say they want to extend the number of years they remain in the workforce state that the typical, traditional workplace provisions (e.g. inflexible work hours, workspace as entitlement, commuting to one location, treating employees as costs) offered by their employers are inadequate for properly working at home.

▸ **Mobility is a solution to increase productivity.**
This is especially true where employees are faced with temporary health issues or health restrictions related to aging and disability (Hedge et al., 2006).

▸ **Younger mobile workers view mobile work as directly correlated with improved quality of life.**

2. Provide corporate workspaces that:

▸ **Allow for mobility of work and mobility of the workplace, not only the mobility of people.**
Workplaces must be highly portable, with necessary technology, equipment and support tools.

▸ **Allow work to be carried out collaboratively at any time and any place.**

▸ **Enable mobile workers to work where and when they like, at any hour or day of the year.**
Manage people by objectives rather than by their presence.

▸ **Are more context-aware.**
Enable workers to switch easily between collaborative work settings with others and more individual, task-focused activities.

▸ **Have plug and play capability.**
Technology and digital access is absolutely necessary at the primary workplace and the home; primary locations need high-quality workspaces for collaboration and virtual conferencing capabilities. Facilities operators should seek priority agreements with service providers for services at other locations, including residences.

3. Provide work environments and service centers in addition to workstations, including:

▸ **Spaces that are interruption-proof** (this is both a culture and design issue)

▸ **Informal areas** where people can meet and engage with each other

▸ **Back-office services,** making copy/print/mail easy

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- ‣ **Team communication centers,** both physical and virtual

- ‣ **Learning and development activities:** identify and support people playing key knowledge network nodes

- ‣ **Non-traditional areas** (e.g., booths near coffee bars for informal meetings)

- ‣ **Concierge support services,** dining areas and gaming areas

- ‣ **Teleconference capability,** utilizing new technology for video conferencing

Conclusion

Mobile worker programs must support the primary role an individual is assuming. Far from being an employee who is constantly on the move, the mobile worker, as portrayed in this Study, is an employee who is independent and exceedingly productive at his own home, who comes into the office to collaborate and to access in-house services. Mobile workers engage in a variety of different roles, yet for the most part they are leaders within their organization, problem solvers and consultants. Every effort should be made to support them effectively, as they are valuable resources within their organizations.

When mobile workers can focus on assuming their primary roles, performance is highest. The formal organization of a workplace should consider a resource model that supports key roles in identified mobile work activities. In most cases, this involves creating a suitable amount of meeting space at primary work locations. However, mobile workers operate differently according to their role or preference. Therefore, a healthy balance of unassigned workstations and collaborative space will ultimately provide the company with the most satisfied and productive mobile workforce.

Appendix

An Innovative Approach: Value Network Analysis

In addition to seeking out the different roles mobile workers occupy, this Study also sought to determine the kinds of professional interactions they conduct and the differences in their output. By employing a *value network perspective*, these levels of interaction could be easily mapped out, helping to inform the assertion that different roles can have very different needs when it comes to support for mobile work.

Increasingly, knowledge and other intangible assets (e.g., employee competence, the ability to form strong relationships and a capacity for mutually beneficial collaboration) are the foundations for an organization's success. Strong value-creating relationships support breakthrough innovation at the operational, tactical and strategic levels. Consequently, we now are seeing a world of dynamic, rapidly adapting value networks that function as loose and complex configurations of industries, businesses and business units within organizations (Allee, 2003).

A *value network* is any web of relationships that generates economic or social value through complex dynamic exchanges of both tangible and intangible benefit. Such networks operate internally across the organization and also extend externally to partners, stakeholders and the industry (Allee, 1997).

Value network analysis attempts to determine the value of interactions between people in a network. Typically, people have both contractual exchanges and non-contractual exchanges involving knowledge, information or other kinds of support and benefits (Allee, 2000).

With this perspective, it is possible to map mobile work as sets of roles and value-creating interactions. Value network analysis maps and measures the level of relationship between people and puts the emphasis on work roles and outputs, the makeup of the interaction and the benefits or deliverables. This results in a whole systems view of the situation—the natural network pattern of organization into which people move to make things work (Allee, 1997).

Naturally, mobile workers also depend upon a web of relationships, or network, to fulfill their tasks. Workers seek to be effective in the different purposeful, value-creating networks to which they belong (Allee, 2000).

The survey collected data that allows insight into the roles mobile workers play in their internal and external value networks. This informs the creation of workplace solutions that support the real needs people have for maintaining healthy network relationships.

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Based on the roles and interactions defined by the six value network questions, data was analyzed to identify the *type of value* being created, *the level of value* as perceived by the worker and the *type of output* generated. In other words, the study looked at what work was typically being produced, and the perceived value of that work to others.

Responses are illustrated below *(Figure 5)* as value creating network relationships using graph analysis, showing the relationships as nodes and links. Three primary mobile worker roles, as determined in the Study (leader, consultant and problem solver), are highlighted in blue; other roles, as recorded in this Study, are represented in relationship to these primary roles. A heavier line weight between nodes indicates a greater level of valuable interaction. ■

Figure 5: Visualization Map of Primary Roles and Relationships
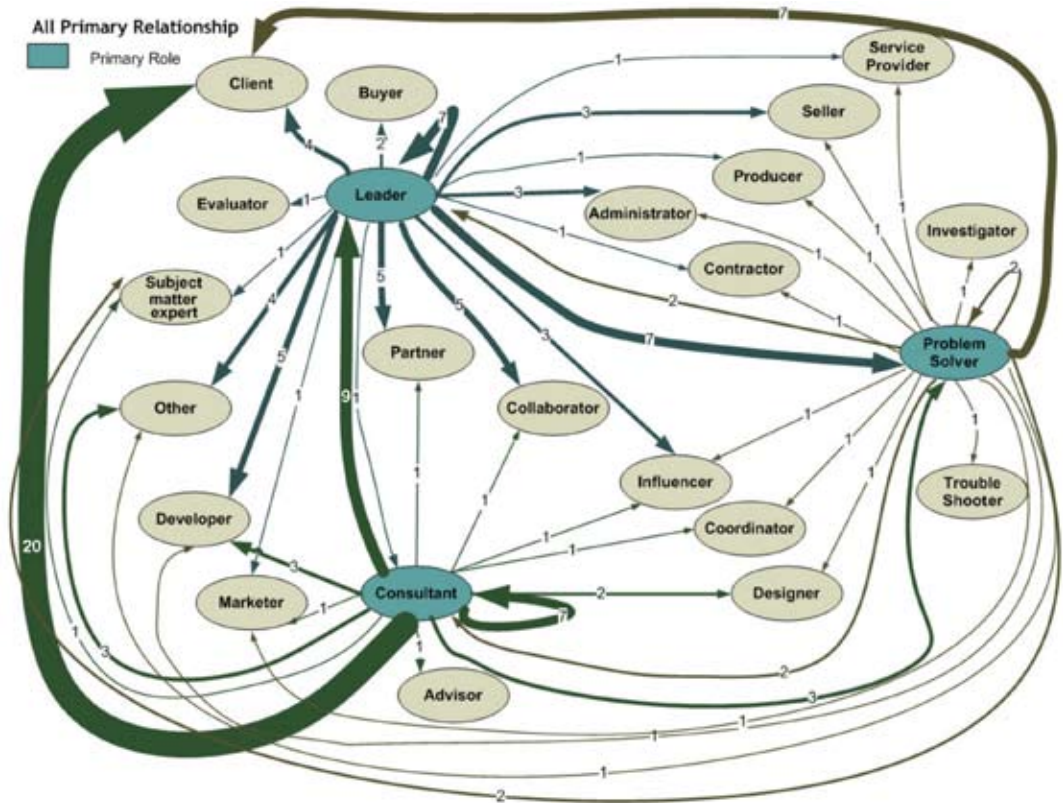
Note: The larger the number on the line, the greater amount of interaction.

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