

# Final Paper

**Ethnography at FedEx Kinko's**

**HCDE 519/TC 598 – Qualitative Research Methods**

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## **Abstract**

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This paper explores how interactions between customers and employees takes places at FedEx Kinko's using the qualitative research method called Ethnography. Data was collected using various ethnographic research methodologies. The research revolved around how communications and collaborations at FedEx Kinko's take place between employees and between customers and employees. Another area of focus was how customers interact with the employees to facilitate their work at FedEx Kinko's. Results are described in the light of themes that emerged from the data collected. The sections in the paper include site description, methods, results and discussion. Since there is room for future research area in this field, future research options are also discussed.

## **Introduction**

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I have learned various techniques and research methodologies in this course, HCDE 519. Essentially, Ethnography means the study and description of human groups (ethnic groups, cultures, societies, etc.) which involves data collection in the form of documentation of observations, people, events, artifacts, interviews etc. Researchers apply these data collection methods to facilitate the further analysis of data collected. When I started this course, I did not have the skill and experience of pursuing this type of qualitative research method called Ethnography which not only entails observations but a number of other research methodologies like interviews, entrée negotiation, documentation etc. I can clearly see how these techniques can help me in my professional career.

The first task of the project was to choose an environment where I could conduct my research. There were many sites out in the world but I chose FedEx Kinko's. It was because I was able to get an easy entrée in the beginning which later turned out to be very problematic. I chose Kinko's also because I had prior work experience at FedEx Kinko's and the workplace environment involves continuous customer-employee interactions which I thought would provide me with extensive data.

The environment of FedEx Kinko's mainly consists of customers, employees and technology. Customers approach Kinko's with a range of varying needs. Employees have to be prepared to assist all types of customers with any type of order or service that the customer seeks. This produces very interesting and noteworthy interactions that helped me get insight on the culture of FedEx Kinko's.

Since I had the baseline information of how the company operated, I knew my scope was very broad, especially for a quarter-long research course. Therefore, I narrowed down my scope by focusing on the communication, collaboration and interactions among the employees and customers. I then formulated my research question around which I focused my research.

**Research Question:** *The research question was "How does collaboration and communication (between employees and between employees and customers) takes place at FedEx Kinko's? How do employees interact with the customers to provide assistance and facilitate their work at FedEx Kinko's?"*

## Site Description

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This section will describe the site and different areas which I particularly examined during my research at FedEx Kinko's. The diagram below further describes the design of the site and different areas which are most frequently used by customers and employees and where the communication and collaboration takes place.



This location of FedEx Kinko's where I conducted my research has two doors through which customers can enter the store. There is one main entrance, one side entrance and the third entrance is the Starbucks. Starbucks and FedEx Kinko's do not have a solid wall between them. There is a sliding, see through door which is locked when Starbucks closes at 8:00PM. The other parts of the site consisted of two main areas and other smaller areas which are listed below:

- 1) SS Area (Self – Service area) – also known as Express Area
- 2) BC Area (Behind the counter area)
- 3) Computer Rentals Area
- 4) FedEx Shipping Station

**1) Self Service Area:** Self Service area, also called Express area, is on the very left side of the front main entrance. This area has several machines like black and white copiers, color copiers, Sony picture station, oversize black and white printer, long edge paper cutter, and a fax machine. All of these machines are card-activated which means that customers can just insert their payment cards in the card slots and their cards automatically get charged for the service they use. Customers use the machines in this area through their debit card, credit card or Kinko's card.

This area also has many counters and counter tops have acrylics full of stationery. Primary responsibility of employees in this area is to assist customers with using the machines. The level of assistance varies with each customer and can range from showing the customer how to open the lid of the machine, placing the paper on the glass, explain the step by step procedure of which buttons to press when making a double sided copy with two single sided sheets. Customers always require assistance in using all these machines in this area and because of this need, certain employees are assigned to work in this area which is called Retail Consultants.

**2) Behind the counter area:** The 'Behind the counter area' is on the very right of the front main entrance. This area is where heavy duty printing of orders takes place and that is the reason why it is also called Production. Primary responsibility of employees in this area is to run production i.e., print orders. Different employment positions also classify the responsibility of employees in this area. For example certain employees are required to take orders at the front counter, which are called Senior Project Operators (SPO), certain employees are required to print the orders from the orders taken by other employees, which are called Senior Project Coordinators (SPC) and certain employees are required to maintain these orders in the company software (Order Taking Process, OTP) and these employees are called Lead Project Coordinators (LPC). There are a number of machines in this area which range from copiers, sign and banner printer, electronic cutters, drilling machine, binding machines, scanners, computers, electronic folder, and paper shelves. Customers are not allowed to come in this section unless employees ask them to when customer-agreement is needed in the designing of their document.

**3) Computer Rental Area:** The computer rental area is located at the far end corner on the right side of the store and is right next to 'Behind the counter area.' This area is massively used by customers with different needs. There are a number of services like using computers with internet, using computers with internet and designing software, using scanners attached to design computers, using laptop stations, printing documents, and using desks for general work like doing homework, making phone calls etc.

Mostly customers rent computers to browse the internet or design documents. There are two types of computers, design computers and basic computers. Design computers have designing software whereas the basic computers are provided with internet and no design software. Scanners are also

attached with the design computers. Customers usually always need assistance in scanning documents even though there is an instruction manual on how to design documents. Employees avoid scanning documents for the customers because there is a charge on scanning documents if they place the order. If the customers are in that area using the computers, they are required to read the instruction manual or the employees just show the customers how to scan their document by asking them to follow step by step instructions.

The passport picture center in this area consists of a white screen with a chair in the front. Employees use a digital camera to take passport pictures. The computer rental area is also used by customers who need to work on their documents but do not require any renting of computers. There are separate desks for that. There are laptop stations as well which customers can attach their laptops to and print documents from the laptop.

**5) FedEx Shipping Area:** The fourth main area is the FedEx shipping station is located on the very right side of the front main entrance. This is where the FedEx shipping and FedEx pick-ups take place. It has two computers with FedEx shipping software, a desk with shipping forms, also called air bills, envelopes and boxes for packaging packages, weight machines, tapes and tape measures. Almost all the employees seem to know how to process a FedEx package but there are FedEx specialist as well who provide details on holding shipments, Opening or closing CONS, giving end-of-day receipts of all the packages to the FedEx drivers. All the boxes left by customers for shipping are stored in a big basket in this area.

## Methods

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There were a number of methods and techniques used in the process of data collection and data analysis. These methods are listed next:

- 1) Grand Entrée – (Mgr, Asst. Mgr, PR officer in TX ... )
- 2) Observations – (Jottings)
- 3) Field Notes – (13 field notes, 2 hours each)
- 4) Interviews – (2 interviews, 30 mins each, transcription of each)
- 5) Manual Coding – (Emergent Themes)
- 6) Memos – (2 Memos)
- 7) Pictures – (Online)
- 8) Readings – (Weiss, Emerson, other articles)
- 9) Index – (top 5 codes)
- 10) Codebook – (various themes in the field notes)
- 11) Poster – (HCDE open house)
- 12) Presentation – (10 minute long final project presentation with Q&A)

**1) Grand Entrée:** Gaining entrée was the first practical step of the project. Entrée was gained by calling the manager of the store who gave immediate permission. When interviews were to be conducted, permission was sought from assistance manager who denied complete pursuance of the project because the manager had not communicated with the assistant manager about a student conducting a research project at FedEx Kinko's. I was then advised to contact the Public Relations Officer at the FedEx Kinko's headquarters in Texas. After extensive back and forth calling and emailing, permission was granted to conduct two interviews, each 15 minutes long. I was able to stretch the duration of the interviews to 30 minutes.

**2) Observations:** Observations were documented in a field notebook in the form of jottings. These jottings were then converted to detailed field notes in the field note journal. The two areas where I sat to take my notes were computer rentals area and self service area. I would observe the customers using machines in these areas after entering the store and what would lead them to ask employees for assistance. The recurring incidents which were relevant to my research question from these observations leading to field notes were noted down as emergent themes which were discussed in detail in the memos written and were also coded as well to form a codebook.

**3) Field Notes:** The jottings were converted to detailed field notes in the field not journal. Since the quarter was of 10 weeks, the first two weeks were used to formulate research question, gaining entrée to the site and spending some initial time in the field. The last week was used to compile all data collected in the form of a binder and derive final themes, codes and index terms. There are 13 field notes and each field note records the incidents and tasks which were performed in 2 hours. Therefore, the total time spent in the field to document observations is 26 hours.

**4) Interviews:** Three interviews were supposed to be collected but permission was denied for the third interview. Two interviews were conducted through the pod-casting equipment borrowed from the HCDE lab and were transcribed without using any tool or software. Since failed to conduct the third interview, both of the interviews were transcribed. Questions included in the interview are also included in the binder.

**5) Manual Coding:** Field notes were read and analyzed for themes which were repeating and prominent across the notes. Those themes were then noted down in the form of actions, tasks, stress etc. These codes were then used and discussed in great detail in the memos written.



**6) Memos:** Two memos were written which had several sub memos. The codes obtained from manual coding were discussed in detail explaining the reasons and the underlying concepts which for a certain incident to occur in the store.

**7) Pictures:** Pictures can also be taken to capture the workplace atmosphere and setting but when permission was sought to take pictures of the inside arrangement and artifacts used by employees, permission was denied. However, pictures were collected from various online websites which provide about 90% of the similar workplace environment overview. These pictures are included in this paper and were also included in the poster and presentation.

**Readings:** There were two required course textbooks by Weiss and the second one by Emerson. Some other articles were assigned as well which provided an in-depth understanding of how to conduct interviews, observations, when and what to observe and document in the field notes.

**8) Readings:** There were two required course textbooks by Weiss and the second one by Emerson. Some other articles were assigned as well which provided an in-depth understanding of how to conduct interviews, observations, when and what to observe and document in the field notes.

**9) Codebook:** The codebook consists of the codes and themes which were emergent from the field notes. It also contains a list of tasks, areas, acronyms used and other components which needed short description

**10) Index:** An index was created as well in which the requirement was to index top five codes, from the codebook designed. However, in this project, more than five codes were indexed.

**11) Poster:** A poster was designed for HCDE open house in the seventh week of the quarter which summarized the findings up to that week. Data from poster was used to design the final presentation and to write the final paper as well.

**12) Presentation:** Final presentation for the project was designed as a summary of all the findings and results obtained from the research. It also provided a sense of structure and layout of how the final paper should be organized and what aspects should be covered in the final paper.

## Results and Discussion

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My research was focused on answering how collaborations and communication happened between employees and, between customer and employees. Answer to this question was observed using the above mentioned techniques. I observed that FedEx Kinko's is a very busy workplace which requires the employees to digest a lot of information. The workplace atmosphere among the employees is quite friendly and they share a family-like relationship. The employees will tend to share information about how they cooked a specific food at home, how their roommates did not clean the house, how the day was spent and jokes about sexual orientation of employees and in particular, gay employees.

At times the employees do get into arguments which result from miscommunication and stress. If a junior employee fails to seek permission about finishing or taking a project, the senior employee then lectures them in a scolding tone by saying that "You are supposed to ask the employee running production." They also go above and beyond to assist the customers and meet their needs in the form of offering discounts, calling other stores to find out if other stores could print an order quick than them, giving stuff to the customer for free. Employees are constantly engaged in helping customers, especially in the self-service area. It happens less in the behind the counter area as compared to the self service area. It is because of the varying responsibility which is given to the employees through their employment positions. It was also observed that the workplace can become very disorganized and stressful due to various reasons described next.

**1) Extensive Verbal Communication:** Employees are engaged in verbal communication most of the time. If it is not related to work, it is about their family life and even sexual orientation. Communication

happens during taking orders where the customer approaches the front counter, employees then assist them in using a machine or taking an order using the Order Taking Process software system. The files are saved in the Kinko's computer from the customer's file storage media. Order taking process usually involves a series of questions which the employee asks the customer and these questions include what type of paper the customer prefers, color or black and white printing, double sided or single sided printing, size of paper, any cutting, drilling folding or binding needed, any digital document creation and at the end, if the customer wants the order to be delivered at their business. Employees also feed the customer contact information, phone number and address, in the software so that the customer can be contacted if the employees have any questions.

Employees also contact other employees at home for clarification on orders, if needed. If they can't access the employee who took the order, they at times call the customer at home. This usually happens when the employee's writing on the order form is not illegible or if the order is not completely understood by the employee who is printing it. This happens because the morning shift usually is quite busy that they spend most of their time in taking orders. The night shift then prints those orders and since different employees take the order and different employees print them, the level of understanding the order varies for the employee printing the order. Employees also communicate with other employees from different stores and different vendors as well through the phone. The phone number of these vendors and other locations is written on a laminated sheet which is pasted on counter tops next to each telephone. The employees are very familiar with the employees from other locations as well and all of them have a very friendly relationship since conversations on the phone with employees from other stores involve questions like how is the day going, what are you doing next weekend etc.

Communication also happens when cash registers, also called tills, are being closed or opened by employees. Usually phone intercom is used by the employees in the countdown office, also called back

office, to ask the employees on the main floor of the store to verify their till by checking the amount of cash written on the end-of-day receipt and cash in the till.

The communication of employees with the customers is quite friendly as well, especially with the regular customers because employees remember their names and sometimes their phone numbers as well. All of this communication is very formal and friendly. Customers also bring in goodies for the employees in the form of Pizza or donuts because either they own that business or the order has been completed earlier than the due date.

**2) *Miscommunication:*** Miscommunication also happens among the employees and, among employees and customers as well. When customers place an order with a specific turn-around time, and if the order is delayed, customers feel very irritated. Also, when the pricing of a service changes, Kinko's does not communicate that price change to the customers. It is because Kinko's lack a successful way, or any way at all, of communicating the price change with the customers. The customers when realize about the price when they come in and place a project, they get very irritated and engage in a slight argument which includes sentences like "I wasn't charged this before when I placed the order."

Usually, digital service fees are not charged by some employees but are charged by the others so this creates miscommunication for the customers; thus, customers feel irritated when they have to pay the fee. Prices for all the services are stored in the computer system and require a 4-digit-code to find the price. When employees are unable to find a code for a service in the code-sheet glued next to their cash registers, they end up charging a "made-up" price just to get the customer out of the store.

Dis-organization: The workplace of the site gets very unorganized especially during shift change, or when the store is under staffed, or when machines are not working or when there is incomplete order information on orders. During shift change, managers are leaving, morning shift employees are leaving

and FedEx air pick-up is happening which customers are rushing to catch. All of these actions are happening around 5:30PM.

The employees coming in the store to start the night first get cash registers first, some employees regardless of the customer crowd leave when their shift ends but some stay over their shift ending time to help the customers. Shift change requires the morning shift employees to pass off information about orders taken in the morning to the night shift employees because printing of orders happen during the night shift as less customer traffic comes in during the night. In this chaotic situation, morning shift employees are tired and eager to leave and fail to either pass of complete information or at times leave without passing information at all. The night shift employees then either end up calling the customers for details or calling the employees at home. Also, sometimes when machines aren't working, orders get piled up; thus, orders are delayed which irritates the customer and creates further disorganization.

**3) *Setting Customer Expectations:*** Employees go over and beyond in helping customers with their projects in many ways. At times, discounts are offered, orders given out for free, employees call other stores to ask them if the other store can quickly print an order if this location does not have time to print it. It is very rare that employees say 'no' to a customer. For example if customer originals are lost or ruined during the printing of an order because the paper got stuck in the machine or accidentally got ink, smudges or got thrown in the garbage, customers are offered discounts which the customers happily accept. And at times, if the situation is extreme, stuff is given out for free as well.

Employees are also educating and training the customers especially in the self service area. The employee in the self service area greets the entering customer and offers help. The customer is then escorted to the self service area. If for example the customer needs to make black and white copies, they are asked to insert a payment card in the card slot. If they hesitate to use a debit or credit card, they are taken to a kiosk where they can get a Kinko's card and put money on it from that Kiosk, just like

an ATM machine. They then insert that Kinko's card into the card slot to use the copy machine. The employees at times teach and show the customers how to open the lid, where to place the document on the glass or in the top feeder, which buttons to press and how to get the originals back. Essentially the goal of the employees is to teach all the customers so that they would require minimal assistance in the self service area.

**4) Future Research:** There is a lot of room for continuing research on this project. The aspect of technology can be observed that how employees and customers use technology in their projects when they are at Kinko's. Since there are various machines at Kinko's which are being used by the employees all the time, further research on how technology, especially OTP, is being used can provide insight on what other type of technological systems should be in place which can facilitate the work of employees and customers.

## References

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