

Master Thesis

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AmbientTeams

Staying socially connected in remote knowledge
working teams

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Abstract

With the shift towards remote work, casual, informal conversations are no longer guaranteed to happen because of the lacking serendipity. Such informal discussions are further challenged because of missing cues from co-workers about their availability or social states. In addition, despite increased challenges with mental health, tools focusing on the social challenges of remote work are still lacking. For this reason, we developed AmbientTeams, a casual and informal tool that attempts to reduce the perceived distance in remote work by creating opportunities for more informal interactions. AmbientTeams attempts to achieve this by sharing moods and status messages with the team, or more generally, fostering informal communication among team members. We evaluated our research prototype on a group of 6 knowledge workers who agreed on using AmbientTeams for one workweek.

Zusammenfassung

Mit der Verschiebung in Richtung Fernarbeit sind zwanglose, informelle Gespräche aufgrund der fehlenden zufälligen Zusammentreffen nicht mehr garantiert. Solche informellen Gespräche werden außerdem durch fehlende Hinweise von Kollegen über ihre Verfügbarkeit oder ihren sozialen Status erschwert. Darüber hinaus gibt es trotz der zunehmenden Herausforderungen im Bereich der psychischen Gesundheit immer noch keine Tools, die sich auf die sozialen Herausforderungen der Fernarbeit konzentrieren. Aus diesem Grund haben wir AmbientTeams entwickelt, ein zwangloses und informelles Tool, das versucht, die wahrgenommene Distanz bei der Fernarbeit zu verringern, indem es Möglichkeiten für informellere Interaktionen schafft. AmbientTeams versuchte dies zu erreichen, indem es die Möglichkeit schafft, Stimmungen und Statusmeldungen mit dem Team zu teilen, oder allgemeiner gesagt, die informelle Kommunikation zwischen den Teammitgliedern fördert. Wir evaluierten unseren Forschungsprototyp an einer Gruppe von 6 Wissensarbeitern, die sich bereit erklärten, AmbientTeams eine Arbeitswoche lang zu nutzen.

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Introduction

TODO: Implement Feedback André, check their publications

In Software Development, remote working has become increasingly popular over the past years. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this trend has grown even stronger, forcing many companies and their employees to work from home (TODO: CITE). Further, the majority of managers expect to have more flexible work from home policies post-pandemic, and employees would like to continue working from home at least partially [Spa20b], making the topic very much relevant also after the pandemic.

While working from home has numerous benefits, it also comes with a range of challenges. On the benefits side, employers can realize savings in real estate costs, and the employee can benefit from more flexible work hours and spending less time and money commuting [Mul+09]. However, shared challenges from working from home are that communication is reduced [KEG88] and suffers in quality [Mul+09]. More specifically, informal communication drastically reduces when working from home [HM05]. This reduction of informal communication can lead to difficulties building trust, maintaining work relationships, or not feeling attached to the team [Com+20; OO06]. Another consequence of remote work is the feeling of workplace isolation [Mul+09; MMM07]. The feeling of isolation leads to not knowing whom to turn to in case of a problem or not feeling part of the company and is said to be caused by missing support from co-workers and opportunities for social and emotional interactions in a team [MMM07]. The pandemic further reinforces this influence leading to almost 60% feeling less connected to their co-workers compared to before the pandemic [Spa20b]. Since strong team cohesion has been shown to have a positive impact on the team's effectiveness and productivity [Car+17], and the feeling of being disconnected from colleagues have been shown to impede engaging in productive tasks [Eco20], the connectedness with the team is of particular interest to us.

A lack of awareness causes the challenges of working remotely: less information about co-workers is exchanged, e.g., no or fewer cues are available to identify team members' interruptibility or emotional states. This missing information makes it a lot harder to find opportune moments to initiate a conversation because it is often unknown whether a person might be in a deep focus state or whether a person might be more than happy to chat. Informal communication is further challenged because serendipity is missing when working remotely because people no longer randomly bump into each other at the water cooler or the coffee machine. Therefore, improving awareness in the workplace is the foundation of our approach.

While there are several prior approaches to improve awareness within teams by showing the current coding tasks and work items that others are working on [Bie+07; Jak+09], they do not focus on the person behind that work item. They thus do not put teams into the center of attention. To make this point stronger, recent research shows concerning numbers in regards to workers' well-being and mental health, stating that the pandemic has led to an increase in stress for 65.9%

of people and 44.4% reported a decrease in mental health [Qua20]. Therefore, our concept, AmbientTeams, follows a different approach by “putting people first”. It includes an ambient always-on-top overview of the core team members and their moods, status messages, and other states. In addition to such a microblogging approach, where team members can share information about their moods (and potential context), we aim to study further possibilities to foster and motivate serendipitous, informal exchanges with the team.

In the next chapter, existing approaches and their underlying concepts are discussed before introducing our approach and its differences. The resulting prototype is then introduced in chapter 4 and analyzed in the scope of a preliminary evaluation in chapter 5.

1.1 Research Questions

Three main areas of interest and the research questions we would like to answer in the scope of this master thesis are as follows.

Information Sharing

RQ1: Is there a need for sharing moods/states with team members, and what are the reasons? (e.g., share your status with them to indicate states or know more about your team)

RQ2: What are knowledge workers willing to share with their team? (is that impacted by what others on the team are sharing?)

Impacts

RQ3: What are the effects of Ambient Teams?

RQ3.1: Do mood and state sharing increase the awareness between team members, and how? What do they learn from each other?

RQ3.2: Does it make users feel better to share information with their team?

RQ3.3: Does it stress/relax users to see more about their team?

RQ3.4: Does AmbientTeams reduce the feeling of isolation in remote knowledge work teams?

Tool usage and workflows

RQ4: How do knowledge workers use and interact with AmbientTeams? How do they integrate it into existing workflows?

1.2 Main Contributions

The main contributions of this work include

1. Development of a mood-sharing approach that allows moods to be shared with the team with minimal effort
2. Conduct of a preliminary study of an approach that will lead to insights into the mood and status sharing behaviors within knowledge work teams and the impact such sharing can have on personal relationships, workplace isolation, or collaboration
3. Provision and initial testing of a study design that can be used for a more comprehensive study, along with suggestions for future features that resulted

Related Work

Remote work offers numerous benefits for both the employee and employer compared to traditional co-located work. Benefits on the employee side include a more flexible schedule, higher job productivity, and less time and money spent commuting [Flo19; Mul+09]. The increased flexibility and autonomy allows employees to more easily deal with their family responsibility and leads to higher levels of job satisfaction and higher employee retention [Mul+09; GH07; Mad11], both highly beneficial for the employer. The employer can further profit from savings in real estate costs and increased productivity [Mul+09]. In addition to those general benefits, there is another popular reason for building distributed teams: the possibility to build teams with talents from all over the world [Car99].

However, remote work creates new challenges for the company and its employees. Therefore, it is not surprising that much research has been done in this area, most of which coming from Computer-Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW). The general goal of existing solutions is to support distributed teams in accomplishing work as effectively and efficiently as possible. While a lot of research goes into collaboration and coordination challenges in remote work, the goal of AmbientTeams is fostering social, informal interactions. As a result, we identified four main social challenges that are the result of working, namely the feeling of workplace isolation, reduced informal communication, missing awareness, and reduced well-being. Together with existing solutions aiming at solving those problems, those four challenges are discussed in the subsequent sections.

2.1 Workplace Isolation

Marshall, Michaels, and Mulki define workplace isolation as the "psychological construct that describes employees' perceptions of isolation from the organization and from co-workers. Isolation perceptions are formed by the absence of support from co-workers and supervisors and the lack of opportunities for social and emotional interactions with the team" [MMM07, p. 198]. They further suggest a categorization into social isolation and organizational isolation. Organizational isolation stems from the perception that remote workers might feel "out of sight, out of mind" [BK99], which is related to a lack of awareness, which is discussed in section 2.3. Social isolation relates to the fact that remote workers miss informal chats, spontaneous discussions, and meetings around the water cooler [CK02]. For those reasons, a closer look at communication and, more specifically, informal communication will be given in the following section.

2.2 Communication

Research in the field of software development states that co-workers are the most used source of information used by developers [KDV07], emphasizing the importance of team communication inside software development teams. When shifting from traditional, co-located work to remote work, studies find different results regarding the communication frequency. While Kraut, Egido, and Galegher [KEG88] and Allen et al. [All+84] find a decrease in communication, Mulki et al. [Mul+09] find increased communication in a remote setting. A possible reason for more communication includes the need for remote workers to over-communicate their availability status to their co-workers [KSO12]. Reasons for communication reduction could be the active effort required to bring back ad-hoc meetings [Mil+21], or the lack of the required awareness to initiate a conversation. Regardless of communication frequency, working remotely and thus using software to communicate leads to having more misunderstandings due to missing cues, leading to more misunderstanding and thus reducing communication effectiveness [Mul+09]. This is because text-based communication (which is often used in software development) has very limited capacity, and thus a lot of socio-emotional information is lost [Has+17]. This likely is a reason why face-to-face communication is still very important for many developers [Sto+16] and a lack thereof, which is caused by working remotely, can lead to workplace isolation, making it harder to develop personal relationships and build trust [Mul+09]. Gajendran and Harrison [GH07] state that working from home with high-intensity (more than 2.5 days a week) harmed relationships between co-workers, something that is enforced because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since informal communication helps developing work relationships [Com+20; OO06], it is of special importance in distributed teams.

2.2.1 Informal Communication

Kraut et al. define informal communication as "communication that is spontaneous, interactive and rich" [Kra+, p. 5]. Differences to formal communication include lack of planning and the fact that the content of the communication is unknown in advance. Kraut et al. [Kra+] further state that over 85% of all conversations are informal, and that informal communication happens more often if there is a short physical distance between parties. Similarly, Hinds and Mortensen [HM05] find that members of distributed teams engage less in informal conversations. This reduction of informal communication is unfortunate since informal communication is crucial for achieving high productivity and social goals [Kra+] such as developing work relationships [Com+20; OO06]. More concretely, in the field of software development, informal communication plays a critical role due to the fast speed at which informal communication distributes knowledge across a team or company [FL98; MH01]. Also, informal communication can increase awareness, enabling developers to work efficiently [HM01]. In the ever-changing field of agile software development, this is particularly useful because requirements can change, and formal communication channels cannot spread the news as fast. Besides, informal communication is essential for conflict identification and handling [HM05]. The fact that teams with a high degree of social interactions often have better team cohesion [SCS14], and informal communication is normally much more frequent than formal forms of communication [Kra+], further pronounces the importance of informal communication.

Because of those benefits, it is no surprise that numerous approaches are fostering informal communication inside distributed teams. One of the earliest proposed solutions for promoting informal communication in distributed teams was VideoWindow [FKC90]. Despite being an early solution, the authors already identified two essential requirements such a system must offer: low personal cost and the need for a visual channel. If the cost for initiating conversations are too high, the system will not be helpful because the tool will not be used. The visual channel also

plays a vital role by recognizing the presence of other people, indicating whether a conversation can be initiated. Sasaki [Sas99] developed a hallway system that was able to raise awareness and helped to indicate that one might have a question but failed to promote casual interactions. In comparison, Lou et al. [Lou+12] manages to provide awareness information that is relevant to engage in everyday conversations and a low-effort mechanism to initiate such informal discussions. It does so by providing social cues which help understand the availability of others and thus creating a context for subsequent communication.

As a consequence of the global pandemic, many commercial tools have been published recently. Branch¹, Reslash², Wonder³, or Gather⁴ also follow the goal of increasing spontaneous, informal communication by creating virtual offices where users can move around with avatars and interact with others. Tandem⁵ is another tool with a focus on collaboration and takes a less playful approach by being more similar to traditional communication apps user interfaces.

Another form of communication that has been studied extensively is the concept of microblogging. Studies have shown that microblogging is a form of informal communication [ES10] that is "like a virtual coffee machine as a meeting place" [ES08, p. 158]. Further, many existing microblogging approaches have found that microblogging results in people feeling more connected [ES10; Zha+10]. Likewise, their study participants found microblogging very helpful because it allowed them to stay aware of what their team members are doing [Zha+10]. In addition to purely sharing text-based contents, which is the standard in microblogging, Dullemond et al. [Dul+13] developed a microblogging system that allows the users to attach a mood to each message which helped the teams feel more connected. What they did not measure, however, is the isolated effect of mood sharing.

Due to the value of providing additional awareness and sharing moods in the workplace, the following two sections focus on those two concepts.

2.3 Awareness

A reason for coordination and communication challenges in a remote work environment is the lack of awareness, so it is of great interest to increase awareness in distributed teams. Literature provides various definitions of awareness [CE07; Gro13; GST05]. Due to the popularity and granularity of the model proposed by Gutwin, Greenberg, and Roseman [GGR96], we decided to use their definition of awareness for this work. Gutwin, Greenberg, and Roseman [GGR96] define group awareness as a combination of:

- **Informal Awareness**

The general sense of the presence, availability, and activities of others. It is the "glue that facilitates casual interactions" [GGR96, p. 6].

- **Group-Structural Awareness**

"Group-structural awareness involves the knowledge about people's roles and responsibilities, their positions on an issue, their status, and group processes" [GGR96, p. 6].

- **Social Awareness**

"Social awareness is the information that a person maintains about others in a social or conversational context" [GGR96]. It includes, for example, the attention state of the other person, their emotions, or the level of interest [GGR96, p. 6], or whether a person can be disturbed [GG95].

¹<https://branch.gg>

²<https://reslash.co>

³<https://wonder.me>

⁴<https://gather.town>

⁵<https://tandem.chat/>

- **Workplace Awareness**

Workplace Awareness defines the awareness that results from the ‘real-time’ combination of elements workers keep track of when working together. Such elements could be people, actions, objects, and many more [GG95].

It is important to note that those four awareness types are not excluding but rather overlapping with each other. Put differently, informal, social, and group-structural awareness are all part of workplace awareness. In the case of software developers, for instance, a study shows that developers checked the availability status of their co-workers almost as many times as their compiler output [KDV07]. This indicates the importance of informal awareness. Providing group-structural awareness is essential because of difficulties when trying to find experts in a distributed team [HM03]. Social awareness is a necessity to initiate and carry on a conversation, and thus very relevant due to the high communication needs of software developers [PSV94]. Additionally, with less face-to-face communication and more computer-mediated communication, it is consequently more difficult to transfer emotional information [RCB96].

To address the problem of missing awareness when working remotely, a wealth of research developed approaches to increase awareness in distributed teams. Popular tools made explicitly for software development teams focus on providing awareness by on work items, developers’ activities (e.g., which files they have opened or recently changed) and thus put the code base and tasks in the foreground of coordination [Bie+07; Jak+09; ESS+92; DCR05]. Cheng et al. [Che+03] introduces JazzBand, an IDE plugin visualizing the team members to increase peripheral awareness enhanced with status messages and chat functionality facilitating coordination.

While the majority of the above-mentioned awareness tools require user interactions to be helpful, there have also been attempts for creating ambient approaches to raise awareness in the work environment [MCR20; OMF06; DPH12; AD12; R6c+04]. Downs, Plimmer, and Hosking define ambient devices as devices that “present dynamic information in an at-a-glance manner and have low attentional requirements” [DPH12, p. 508].

2.4 Well-being: Emotions, Moods, and Sentiments

A common finding in research regarding remote work is that employees work longer hours, experience more stress, and have difficulties with mental health [Spa20a; Mul+09; Qua20]. A recent study in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic lists the negative impacts from working from home, such as increased burnout, lack of separation between work and life, and feeling disconnected from co-workers [Spa20a]. A Psychological study highlights that the mental health of remote workers should be considered and is very important to be communicated and talked about [GWS13]. Yet, emotions can get lost or misunderstood inside text messages due to the lack of cues in text-based communication [H66+08]. For this reason, Kuwabara et al. [Kuw+02] highlights the need for connectedness-oriented communication, because it is critical for developing social relationships, and harder to do over distance. McDuff et al. [McD+12] further state the usefulness of being able to assess one’s emotional state (e.g., when considering mental health issues). Their approach, AffectAura, is developed using different kinds of sensors to predict emotions and provide an overview of them in a diary-like fashion with the purpose of self-reflection [Dul+13]. Guzman and Bruegge [GB13] emphasize the importance of emotion in software development, however focusing on the emotional state towards a project, not of individuals. MobiMood is a mobile application focusing on individuals by letting them share their moods, but not targeting a work environment [CHO10]. Saari et al. [Saa+08] developed another mobile application with mood sharing features aimed at knowledge workers. However, while the researchers developed the prototype, their approach’s usability and use cases were not studied.

To communicate one's well-being, different types of affective responses exist that can be useful for sharing with the team, namely emotions, moods, and sentiments. Emotions are typical reactions to events and therefore have a definite cause and are typically short-lived. Emotions differ from moods in that moods are longer in duration, have no clear target, and are less intense [Fri+94; BN07]. Sentiments can be described as states associated with objects rather than individuals and therefore are relatively permanent [BN07].

When it comes to measuring emotional experiences, the literature does not reach a consensus on the best measurement method. However, the valence-arousal dimensional model is most commonly referred to as the better model [Rus80; MR09]. It is a two-dimensional model where the valence dimension contrasts states of pleasure with states of displeasure (positive vs negative), and the arousal dimension contrasts states of low arousal with states of high arousal (high vs low) [MR09]. More concretely, the arousal dimension "describes the degree to which an emotion is associated with high or low energy" [Tse+14, p. 1334]. High arousal thus represents emotions such as surprise or excitement, while low arousal represents states of low activation such as sleepiness. Results of this model can then be used to map onto a discrete set of basic emotions such as surprise, fear, disgust, anger, happiness, or sadness [BN07].

Approach

While the team awareness gained by existing tools allows knowledge workers to understand who they are working with and what they are working on, and what the impact of a change can have on others, which is essential for successful collaboration [DB92], they only cover a very limited view of awareness by providing very limited social or emotional information. Because of that, we put more emphasis on social, casual information exchanges to help remote teams facing challenges with workplace isolation, team awareness, informal communication within their team, and well-being. We aim to tackle these issues by allowing knowledge workers to quickly learn about the availability, moods, and other states of their core team members in a lightweight, informal manner. The critical underlying concepts of our approach are elaborated in the following.

3.1 Minimal Design

By mimicking real offices, virtual office approaches, which have been coming out a lot due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all have a significant downside: requiring a fair bit of user interaction due to the visually complex interface. We argue that this adds a lot of unnecessary overhead and reduces long-term usability. In contrast, there are exceptions, such as Tandem¹, which takes a slightly different approach in that it is less playful and visually demanding than the other commercial tools. However, our approach goes a step further by introducing a glanceable, ambient view, which does not require significant, additional effort to be helpful. Having a limited amount of information on an ambient display is critical for both not being interruptive and costly to use [DK04]. Thus, we want to keep interactions lightweight and casual, so the functionality is kept simple, maybe even limited, by design. The information shared and displayed will be transient, meaning that there will be no chat history available, making the tool essentially unuseful for formal communication and keeping the user interface as clean and straightforward as possible. In addition, our approach visually emphasizes the topicality of information displayed to avoid outdated data that clutters the user interface. Further, to minimize interruptions and distractions, targeted use of notifications and the ability not to be contacted and to hide potential distractions is required. What's more, many existing ambient solutions include physical devices (e.g., [DPH12; AD12; R c+04]), which might not be suitable for a remote team setting due to the size of the device or the device with the awareness information not being visible to off-site team members.

¹<https://tandem.chat/>

3.2 Focus on People

Remote workers fear being "out of sight and out of mind" [BK99] and potentially suffer from the perception of workplace isolation [Mul+09; MMM07]. Additionally, virtual workers might fear that their efforts are not recognized or valued as much as their co-located colleagues [CK02]. Despite those facts, existing ambient approaches developed for use at the workplace don't seem to focus on social awareness, an essential type of awareness at the workplace [GGC96]. Some, such as JazzBand and ContactMap [Che+03; Whi+04] follow similar principles by visualizing individual team members. However, by being an Integrated Development Environment (IDE) plugin, we argue that JazzBand's resulting communication likely is work-related and only used when coding and limited to software developers. Similarly, ContactMap facilitates email communication, a formal type of communication and thus being unlikely to include any form of social awareness. For those reasons, our approach does not focus on task-related awareness and its implications for more effective and efficient collaboration, but rather the people behind those tasks by representing different team members' social states to raise social awareness.

One essential part of our people-centered approach is purely visual; avatars of the team members are prominently placed in an ambient manner, as explained above.

Mood and context sharing

To leverage the positive impact of microblogging on the feeling of connectedness among colleagues [Dul+13], the users can share their feelings with their colleagues through microblogging with optional mood sharing. Because of the fact that topics that are blogged about are usually informal [ES10], and mood sharing seems to act as a springboard for conversations according to Church, Hoggan, and Oliver [CHO10], microblogging is one way to foster informal and spontaneous chats in our approach. Existing microblogging tools designed specifically for use at work lay the foundation of our approach and the information we want to visualize in our glanceable, always-on-top view. However, microblogging is a purely text-based form of communication. As García, Favela, and Machorro [GFM99] already mentioned in 1999, there is a need for emotional awareness inside groupware. Therefore, and similar to [MRM11], we argue the awareness of moods in a work environment is underrepresented in research, especially in a society where many are facing mental challenges caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Extending the purely text-based microblogging systems, Dullemond et al. [Dul+13] developed a microblogging system that shares selected moods in addition. We use their idea as a foundation for our work, to study the behavior of mood sharing when making it optional, something not done by Dullemond et al. [Dul+13]. Last but not least, combining an ambient approach introduced above with such micro-blogging functionality is a combination that has not yet, to our knowledge, been proposed in existing research. In contrast to Saari et al. [Saa+08], who developed another mobile application with mood sharing features aimed at knowledge workers, we will study both of our approach's usability and use cases in a preliminary evaluation.

3.3 Spontaneous Interactions

Remote workers miss the social interaction of informal chats and spontaneous discussions [CK02], which makes the fostering of those types of communication a goal of our approach. While the microblogging concept employed by our approach has to potential to increase spontaneous interactions, our approach also offers additional functionality, namely an ever-running break room and quick one-on-one interactions, to further foster and allow such conversations to occur.

Ever-running break room

Allowing to see the team, and not just relying on text-based information, is possible by joining

an ever-running break room. The goal is to mimic the water-cooler in the office. Thus, visiting a breakroom as simple as possible, similar to just walking to the coffee machine in an office and signaling to the other team members that you are now on a break, is required. This effortless joining of a breakroom is motivated by Chang and Ehrlich [CE07], who emphasize that initiating a conversation must be as simple as possible. This approach also applies to the next concept on the list, interactions that target individual team members.

1:1 interactions

For scenarios where the content you want to share is intended for a single person, or you want to get another team member's attention, there's an easy way to start a private conversation. This can be done through a direct message or by nudging a team member. This concept aims to help in cases of help-seeking, a known problem when working remotely [HM03]. Recalling the transient nature of our approach, this communication mechanism is best suited for making a non-interruptive request that is not urgent. Should a user feel the need to talk to another team member, they can indicate that now would be an appropriate time for a short informal conversation. If other team members feel the same, two team members can randomly be paired up for a virtual video call.

Research Prototype

The above outlined key concepts were then developed into the key features of our research prototype, *AmbientTeams*. Before stepping into the core features employed in *AmbientTeams* and aligning them to the above-mentioned key concepts (see chapter 3), a brief introduction into the more technical aspects and a general overview of the application are given.

4.1 Technology Stack

AmbientTeams is a cross-platform desktop application based on Electron¹. To facilitate the implementation of the interactive user interface in *AmbientTeams*, VueJS² is used as the JavaScript framework for the front-end. To maintain JavaScript as a common language for the front-end and back-end, NodeJS³ is used on the server-side. The server provides both a REST API for basic CRUD functionality for users and teams and a WebSocket endpoint since much of the data required for *AmbientTeams* comes from the server in real-time.

4.2 Windows

On the front-end, *AmbientTeams* comes with two main windows; the team overview and the ambient window.

4.2.1 Team Overview Window

The team overview window is responsible for maintaining a connection to the server, authenticating, login functionality, settings. Additionally, once users have authenticated inside the team overview window, they are redirected to the team overview view where all teams and team members are visible (see Figure 4.1). There are two types of teams in *AmbientTeams*; regular teams are stored on the server and require a unique identifier to join, similar to a straightforward invite-based approach often seen in practice. For scenarios where a user is part of multiple such teams, team members from different teams can be linked to a "favorites" team. These favorite teams only exist on the local machines of the users. By clicking on the edit icon next to the team name, the user can select team members from each team that will then be displayed on the other main

¹<https://www.electronjs.org/>

²<https://vuejs.org/>

³<https://nodejs.org/>

window, the ambient window. This is demonstrated in Figure 4.1, where the user is selecting the team members to be displayed on the ambient window.

At the core of the approach sit the avatars of the users. While we could have opted for traditional profile pictures that allow users to upload an actual photograph, we decided to use the abstract form due to privacy reasons, allowing relatively simple mood manipulation on such avatars. Also, using an avatar library gives the user interface a more clean, uniform look, which is why we make use of <https://getavataaars.com> to create and manipulate avatars.

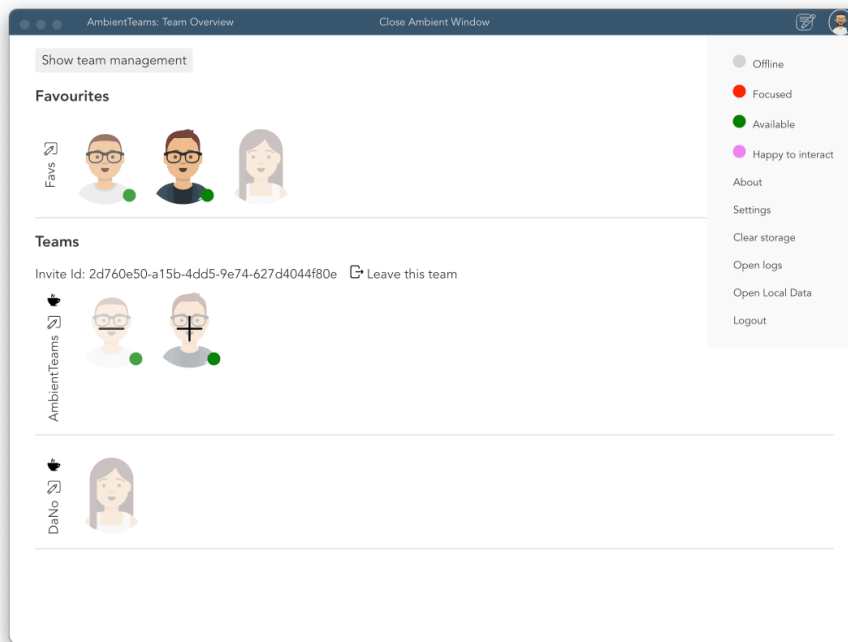


Figure 4.1: Team overview window

4.2.2 Ambient, glanceable Window

The ambient window always sits on top of other windows, making it prone to interruptions and distractions. To keep the ambient overlay as ambient and minimal as possible, we employed a transparent window. Further, certain functionality is only visible when the user is hovering over this window. When hovering over the ambient window, the user can select the team they want to show and sees the names of the individual team members, as shown in Figure 4.2b.

4.3 Availability Status

AmbientTeams does not want to be a source of interruptions which is why there is "Focused" availability state (see Figure 4.8c) that exists in addition to the three others ("Available", "Offline", and "Happy to Interact"). Users in this focused state cannot be called. Further, they don't see any direct messages or incoming nudges until they leave the focused state. In addition, focused users cannot directly interact with other team members, avoiding potential self-distraction.

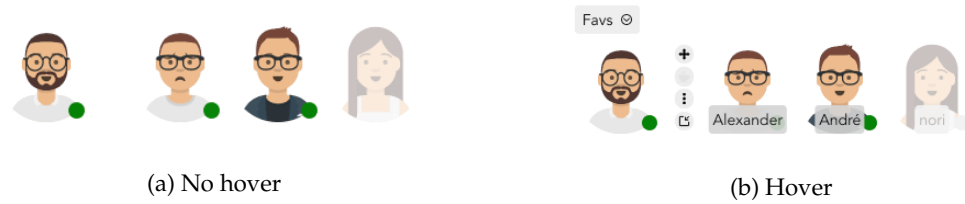


Figure 4.2: Ambient window

4.4 Sharing

The user can open the sharing window from both the team overview and the ambient window, as well as the system tray menu. All of those actions will open the sharing window as shown in Figure 4.3a, where on the left, a preview of the current avatar and the selection of predefined moods are listed. There are nine available moods, visualized using popular emoticons. The first four emoticons are more optimistic, the fifth is a neutral face, and the last four are emoticons representing rather negative emotional states. The selection of the emoticons started with the basic emotions surprise, fear, disgust, anger, happiness, or sadness. This list was expanded over time to, in our opinion, suit the work environment better by adding a neutral and tired emoticon, as well as two more positive emotions (loving hearts and grinning) to make the selection more balanced. Due to limitations with the avatar API, we were not able to render the emotion fear well enough, which led us to remove it. On the right, a textbox for providing additional context is shown. The contents of this textbox are, if available, pre-populated with the current status message for the currently selected team. Additionally, the text is highlighted when the window is created, facilitating overwriting the current status without using the mouse to select the text manually. Status messages' length is limited to 140 characters, motivated by the initial limit of Twitter (TODO: cite). Below the textbox, the user can find a button to share the status message with either all teams or a single team.

As a reminder for the user to share his moods and/or additional context with the team members, the sharing window is also automatically scheduled to appear on the lower right corner of the user's primary monitor to minimize the distraction potential. All in all, the window has the same functionality but includes two additional buttons to postpone the prompt for either 5 minutes or 1 hour (see Figure 4.3b). The scheduled sharing window is shown at three predefined times throughout the day, namely at 9:00, 13:00, and 16:00 local time.

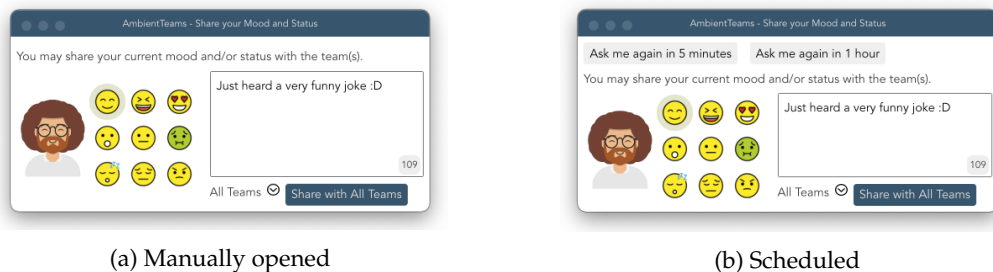


Figure 4.3: Sharing window

To ensure that information shared within AmbientTeams is up-to-date, a couple of measures

have been taken. The first is a purely visual effect which leads to the avatars fading out when no recent activities took place Figure 4.2a. Such activities include status and mood sharing, direct messages, and nudging. In addition to potentially motivating users to interact with such faded-out team members, this automatic fading out facilitates spotting colleagues' updates quickly. Another measurement we took to avoid outdated content to be shown to the users, status messages and moods are hidden at midnight.

Since the goal of AmbientTeams is to foster informal communication, it has no chat history or any other history built into the application. With this transience, we aim to promote less formal communication and hope to avoid the AmbientTeams becomes just another tool to keep track of for work.

4.5 Breakroom

As stated before, our goal was to make the creation of ever-running break rooms as effortless as possible. Figure 4.4a shows the state of the ambient windows when the user clicked on the coffee icon. Having clicked on this coffee icon, the other members of the team see an indication that there is an ongoing break room (see Figure 4.4b). However, to not unnecessarily set up a break room and potentially interrupt the initiating user, the break room is only created once another user clicks on the coffee icon.

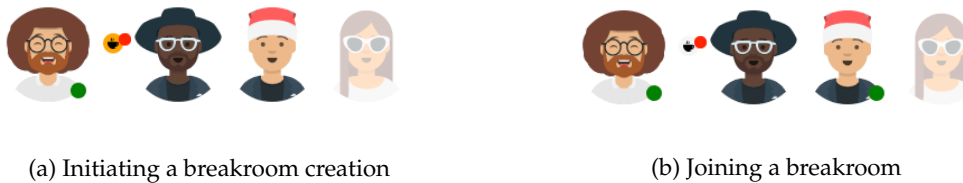


Figure 4.4: Breakroom creation

Once at least two team members are interested in a break room, a break room is actually created, and the two are redirected to the break room view (see Figure 4.5). At any point, other team members can join and leave the breakroom, and it stays active as long as at least one team member is part of it. We want to avoid users forgetting the time and staying too long in the break room. For this purpose, whenever a user enters a break room, a 15-minute timer is started. When this timer reaches its end, the user automatically leaves the break room.

4.6 1:1 Interactions

In addition to the broadcasting functionality of moods and status messages, there also exists the possibility to interact with a single team member directly. An overlay appears when hovering over individual team members, offering three different interaction possibilities, namely 1) direct messaging, 2) nudging, and 3) direct calling (see Figure 4.6).

Direct messaging is very similar to sharing status messages but without mood sharing and team selection options. Upon a click on the messaging icon, the messaging window (Figure 4.7) is shown at the user's current mouse position to minimize the distance required to interact with the window's contents. As in the status sharing window, there is a character limit of 140 characters.

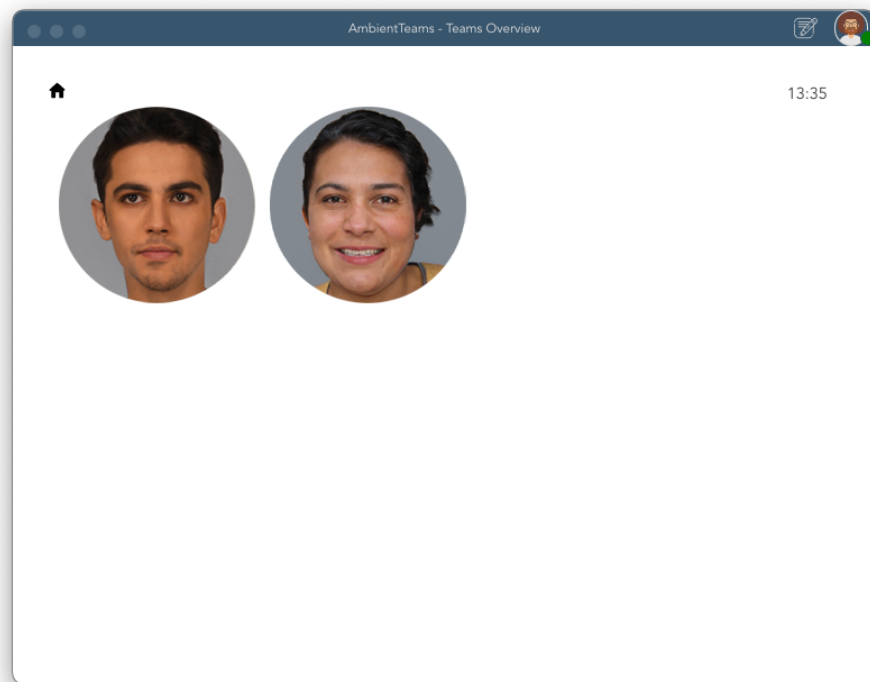


Figure 4.5: Breakroom, pictures are artificially created with <https://generated.photos/>

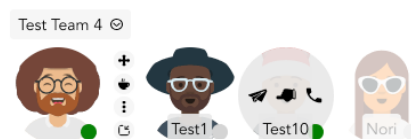


Figure 4.6: 1:1 interaction overlay

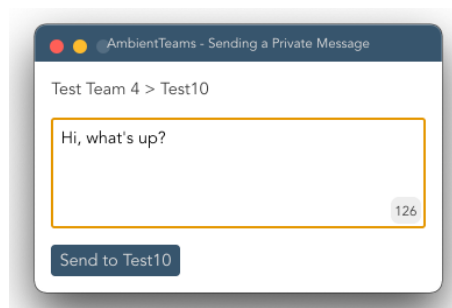


Figure 4.7: Messaging window

In Figure 4.8, the result of a successful interaction for each of the three possibilities is visualized. Direct messages differ from status messages in the messaging icon located left to the

message itself. Nudging makes use of a hand icon pointing towards the team member in question. In a video call, the video stream overlays the team member's avatar, and the availability status of both participants is automatically set to "Focused". The users can hover over their avatar should they wish to mute themselves or stop their video stream. To end an ongoing call, one has to hover over the relevant team member and click on the hanging up icon.

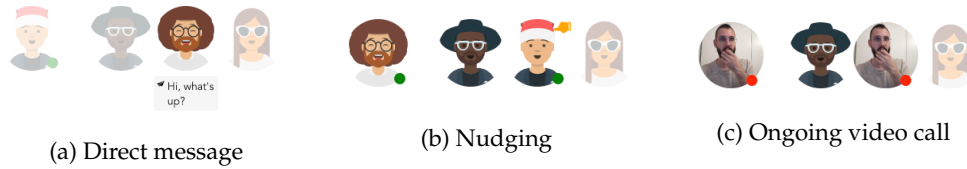


Figure 4.8: 1:1 interactions

The "Happy to Interact" availability status was included to bring back the lack of serendipity in remote work. When selected by at least two members of a team, an automatic match-maker runs every minute and randomly pairs two people, which are then forwarded into a video call.

Preliminary Evaluation

To evaluate the above-mentioned research questions, a preliminary evaluation was conducted. Optimizing and improving our approach with the help of feedback from the participants is the primary goal of this master thesis. Further, we want to learn which status and moods knowledge workers share with their closest team members, what they learn from their team-mates' sharing, and the overall impact on their perception of workplace isolation, which can help us develop both the study and the tool further.

The timeline of the preliminary evaluation is shown in Figure 5.1. Before the study was officially started with the kick-off meeting with the whole team, each participant was asked to sign and return the consent form (see Appendix A). Additionally, each participant was kindly asked to fill out a questionnaire containing some demographic questions, as well as a 10-item questionnaire about their perception of workplace isolation. During the kick-off meeting, the possibility to ask any questions the participants may have regarding the consent form will be given. The goal of the kick-off meeting was to install AmbientTeams and to show the individual features to the team. Following the kick-off meeting, AmbientTeams is used during at least three workdays. After that, but before the final interview, another questionnaire is sent to the participants.

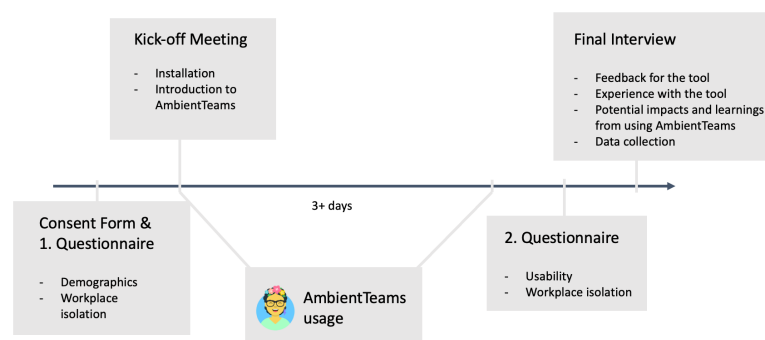


Figure 5.1: Study timeline

In the following sections, we present more details about the study procedure.

5.1 Participants Recruitment

As a first step, an interested team had to be recruited. To that end, the researchers' personal network was used. To that purpose, the study description is forwarded to the contacts, and once an interested team has been identified, it is checked whether it fulfills the participation criteria and if the prospective participants are (technically) allowed to install AmbientTeams on their computer. If this is not the case, the company's consent and approval to install AmbientTeams is first obtained. To provide the company with as much information as possible about the study and the confidentiality of the data collected, the consent form and a study description will be given to the company for review. After gaining the company's approval, the individual interested team members are approached by presenting the study, discussing the steps and goals of the study, and emphasizing that participation is entirely voluntary. For the participants to stay anonymous, each participant is assigned a random pseudonym, e.g., P392, which they were asked to provide as answers to the first question in both questionnaires. The requirements for teams participating were:

1. At least three team members
2. Three or more common working days a week
3. Spending the majority of their workday on the computer
4. Working remotely as much as possible (ideally completely remote)
5. Having all the required rights to install AmbientTeams on their work computer
6. Willingness to use AmbientTeams during at least three full days of work
7. Using macOS or Microsoft Windows
8. An active internet connection

5.2 Prestudy Questionnaire

The prestudy questionnaire contains some basic demographic questions, as well as an established workplace isolation questionnaire developed by Marshall, Michaels, and Mulki [MMM07]. The demographic questions ask about age, gender, work industry, work experience, and job title. Further, a sense of the team's current communication culture is obtained, whether they are aware of their co-workers' feelings and progress, and the preferred working style (remote vs. onsite) is gathered for each participant. The workplace isolation questionnaire is used as a baseline measurement, and the same questionnaire is also asked at the end of the study, before the final interview, to gain potential first insights into whether our approach can decrease the perception of workplace isolation amongst knowledge workers. The workplace isolation questionnaire contains ten questions and employs a 7-point Likert-Scale, where 1 stands for "strongly disagree," and 7 stands for "strongly agree". Finally, the participants could optionally write down their expectations for the study. The complete prestudy questionnaire can be found in Appendix C.

5.3 Initial Meeting

Due to the relatively small number of team members and their flexibility, it was possible to have one kick-off meeting with the entire team. During this meeting, the consent form (see Appendix A) and study instructions (see Appendix B) were discussed briefly, and opportunities for asking questions were given. Then, we guided the participants through the installation process and explained and demonstrated the functionality of AmbientTeams. Finally, each participant joined the team that we had created before the meeting. Following the kick-off meeting, the study period officially began.

5.4 Evaluation Phase

The team voluntarily offered to use AmbientTeams for one workweek as opposed to the three days that were planned initially. During this period, the participants were instructed to continue working as usual. The participants were instructed to contact us should there be an issue or have any other feedback. For very short feedback, AmbientTeams also has a simple feedback-sending feature. During this evaluation phase, application usage data is collected. To that end, Table 5.1 shows an overview of all data collected and what research question they are relevant for, together with the location of storage (local vs. server). Local refers to the participants' computers, whereas server refers to the server hosted at the Department of Informatics at the University of Zurich. In other words, the data stored on the server is automatically shared with the researchers. At the same time, only the participants can access the locally stored data unless explicitly shared at the end of the study.

5.5 Poststudy Questionnaire

After the evaluation phase, the participants were asked to fill out another questionnaire, which, similarly to the prestudy questionnaire, takes about 5 minutes to complete. In addition to some control questions about the extent to which the participants worked remotely during the study and how long AmbientTeams was approximately running in the foreground, a usability questionnaire is presented. Usability is measured using the System Usability Score (SUS) introduced by Brooke et al. [Bro+96]. As mentioned before, the last block of the poststudy questionnaire is the same workplace isolation questionnaire that was answered in the prestudy questionnaire. The complete poststudy questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

Together with the prestudy questionnaire, the goal of the poststudy questionnaire is to find insights into a potential impact of AmbientTeams on the perceived workplace isolation, and thus. Also, the SUS will help us better understand and quantify the usability of our approach.

5.6 Semi-Structured Final Interview

Complementing the quantitative data collected during the study, semi-structured final interviews are conducted with each participant individually. The goal of those interviews is to find valuable insights into the usage of AmbientTeams, its strengths, weaknesses and impacts, their sharing behavior. All the interview questions and their relevance for the research questions can be found in Appendix E. The interviews are designed to take approximately 45 minutes per participant, including the time required to export the local data at the start of the final interview. Because of the potentially confidential information contained in the collected data, participants are free to

Data collected	Storage	Relevance
User: email, display name, hashed password, the teams the user belongs to, avatar created on signup	Server	-
Teams: name of the team and belonging team members	Server	-
Status/direct messages: timestamp, content, team, and user(s) the message belongs to	Server	RQ2, RQ4
Availability status: timestamp, selected availability status, user	Server	RQ4
1:1 calls: start/end timestamp, call participants	Server	RQ4
Breakroom	Server	RQ4
Nudging	Server	RQ4
Random calls	Server	RQ4
Moods: timestamp, selected mood, user	Server	RQ4
Feedback: content, user	Server	-
Window actions: timestamps of opening, minimizing, closing, or restoring windows that belong to AmbientTeams	Local	RQ4
App running time: timestamps of manually starting or quitting AmbientTeams	Local	RQ4
Team changes: timestamps and destination team when switching teams inside AmbientTeams (ambient window)	Local	-
Active windows: information about the active windows while ambient teams is running (see https://github.com/sindresorhus/active-win for more information)	Local	-

Table 5.1: Data collected during the preliminary evaluation and its relevance for the RQs

obfuscate the contents of the active windows file before uploading it to UZH dropfiles¹. The interviews are recorded, if the participant allows, and then transcribed. Two researchers (one being the author of this thesis) independently open-coded the transcripts to analyze the interviews.

5.7 Participants

Using our private network of contacts, we were able to find an interested team for the preliminary evaluation. The group initially consisted of six knowledge workers working at a Swiss company operating in the FinTech sector. Unfortunately, one person was eliminated from the study because this person was inactive when using AmbientTeams and could not be reached even after several attempts. The remaining five people consisted of three employees who had been part of the company for about two years, and two had joined their team about three months ago when the study started. While all participants were between 25 and 34 years old, their work experience ranged from 3 (working student) to 13 years (senior accountant). Out of the five participants, three were female, and two male.

¹<https://dropfiles.uzh.ch/>

Results and Discussion

6.1 Usability

The post-study usability questionnaire resulted in an average SUS score of 81.1 across all five participants (see Table 6.1). According to Sauro [Sau11], one would need to score above 80.3 to be in the top 10% of the 500 studies using the SUS. 80.3 is also the point where users are more likely to be recommending the product to a friend [Sau11], making us believe that AmbientTeams was easy and intuitive to use.

TODO: Likert-Scale chart and remove Q1-Q10 from SUS score table

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	SUS score
P038	3	1	4	1	3	1	5	1	5	3	82.5
P163	4	1	4	4	5	1	5	1	5	4	80.0
P586	2	2	5	1	2	3	5	3	4	1	70.0
P751	5	2	4	1	4	2	5	2	4	2	82.5
P904	4	1	4	1	4	1	5	1	4	1	90.5
Average											81.1

Table 6.1: Usability questionnaire results and resulting SUS score

6.2 Tool Usage and Workflows (RQ4)

A detailed timeline view of the participants and their selected availability state ("Available", "Focused", or "Happy to interact") are visualized in Figure 6.1. Those three states combined are looked at as the time when the application was adequately running (potentially in the background). This is because the user is automatically set to an offline state if the connection to the server is lost. Upon successful connection to the server, the users' availability state is also automatically set to "Available". It is worth mentioning that this metric could be slightly erroneous if participants manually set their availability status to "Offline". This would, however, only underestimate the time spent online in Figure 6.1, making our results as conservative as possible. All in all, the average time spent in a non-offline state, and thus AmbientTeams was running (potentially only in the background), was 7.13 hours per day (std. 3.57), with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 12.7 hours. Except for the inactivity on the weekend, only some participants did

not use AmbientTeams some days. To be precise, only 5 out of a total of 30 workdays showed no or very little running time. The fact that P038 could not participate in the initial meeting with the rest of the group explains the lack of usage on the first day of the study. In general, because the kick-off meeting took place in the early afternoon, the relatively short running time on the first day was to be expected. The remaining days with very little only time most likely indicate non-working days for those participants because had they worked on those days, AmbientTeams would have automatically started as soon as they had started up their computer.

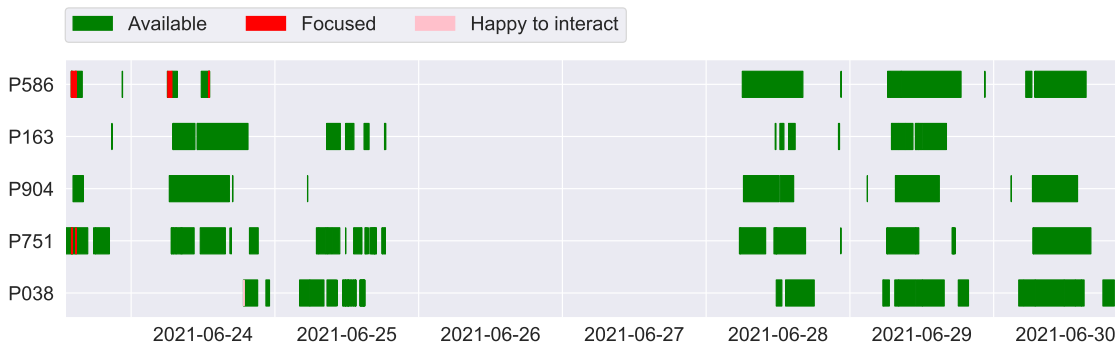


Figure 6.1: Time spent in the different availability states

The results show that the participants did not often change their availability states and thus mainly relied on the automatic availability status setting of AmbientTeams. The "Focused" state was selected a couple of times in the first two days of the study, yet this behavior did not continue throughout the study.

6.2.1 Little Active Use

As with the changes in availability status, many interactions recorded with AmbientTeams were rather unspectacular. Figure 6.2 illustrates that both the ambient window and the team overview window were almost exclusively opened when those windows were in focus. In other words, both of those windows were opened, interaction took place, and then they were closed or minimized again, making them disappear from the user's monitor. This is the result we expected to happen in the case of the team overview. In contrast to our beliefs, however, the ambient window was used very similarly. As a result, the ambient window only very rarely was kept open as a glanceable, always-on-top team view when working on other tasks.

The interviews gave us some more insights into possible answers for why the ambient window was not kept open while working on other tasks:

I tried it in the corner of the monitor, then it did not work, but in the corner of the window did not really work because there you have to click to close other windows. Then I put it somewhere in the middle, but then I needed to put some buttons there, so sometimes I got annoyed and then closed it. -P038

We hypothesize that this particular user most likely was using a single monitor setup and had a hard time finding a suitable position for the ambient window. The participant further presented a potential solution to the problem:

P586 mentioned that the ambient window was too small and thus too difficult to properly move around, indicating that this participant might have missed this part of the demonstration

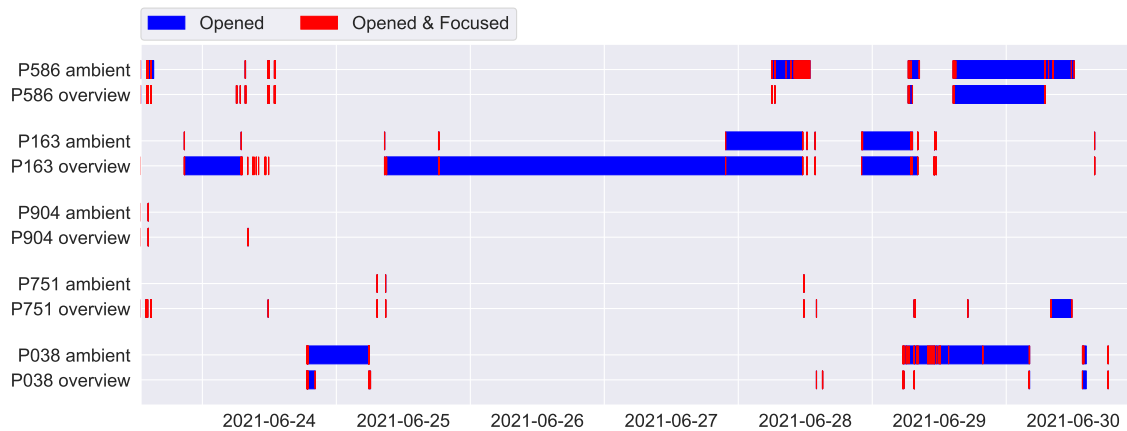


Figure 6.2: Time AmbientTeams was opened vs. opened and focused

during the kick-off meeting. In addition to the annoyance of the ambient window experienced by P038 and P586, P163 mentioned that manually closing an application that automatically starts up is something that happens almost automatically to them. The hassle and difficulties of positioning the ambient window are a rather crucial issue that potentially requires further development; the case described by P163 could be solved by not allowing to close the ambient window during a future study.

To make the ambient window fit better into their workflow, P038 suggested that it should ideally not stay on top of other windows and instead just come to the foreground again once a team member has shared something new.

Despite the criticism around the ambient window, it was still used by all the participants except for P904 and seen as one of the best aspects of AmbientTeams by P751:

I liked that the ambient window feels very dynamic and refreshing compared to other tools.
-P751

Despite this positive statement, this participant used the team overview window more, which is surprising because all the participants were only part of one team during the study, eliminating the potential advantage of the team overview window, in our opinion.

Considering the relatively short time AmbientTeams was actively used, it is not surprising that many of its features were not used. More concretely, the features aimed at spontaneous interactions such as the breakroom and the random pairing for a video call were not used at all. While there have been two attempts of creating a breakroom, one on the second day of the study and one on the second to last day, none of them were successfully created because no other team member joined. P586 gave a possible explanation for why the spontaneous video chat features were not used during the interview.

But also maybe I have to mention that two or three weeks ago we started with virtual break rooms on Friday afternoons to try to keep up with people from work, especially for new people, because we don't really get the chance to get to know each other in home office. -P586

Consequently, it is possible that it is sufficient for the participating teams to meet once a week in their own virtual break room. Regardless of the use of the break room integrated into AmbientTeams, this indicates that the concept of such a break room is generally perceived as important. Similar to the breakroom, the directed video calls and the nudging functionality were only used

during the initial kick-off meeting for testing purposes. While this shows that it was clear to the team how to use those features, they don't seem to have felt the need for those.

Things look a bit different when analyzing the direct messages that were sent through AmbientTeams. In total, there were six direct messages sent through AmbientTeams, coming from three different participants. One of those direct messages was a response to a missed call, and the other five were of either of type greeting or along the lines of "what are you doing?". P032 gives an indication to why the team did not use the above-described functionalities:

Because now it's a bit, you know I can write to somebody in Microsoft Teams or AmbientTeams, and I would normally pick MS Teams because we use it, and you also have a message history which you don't have in AmbientTeams. -P032

Essentially, P032 explains that AmbientTeams has to differentiate itself from MS Teams, and it is doing so with the *Twitter approach* of broadcasting moods and messages, but not so much with other communication functionalities.

When it comes to sharing moods and status messages, eight status messages were shared, three of which were in reaction to Switzerland's soccer game during that time. Generally speaking, none of the status messages contained any work-related information.

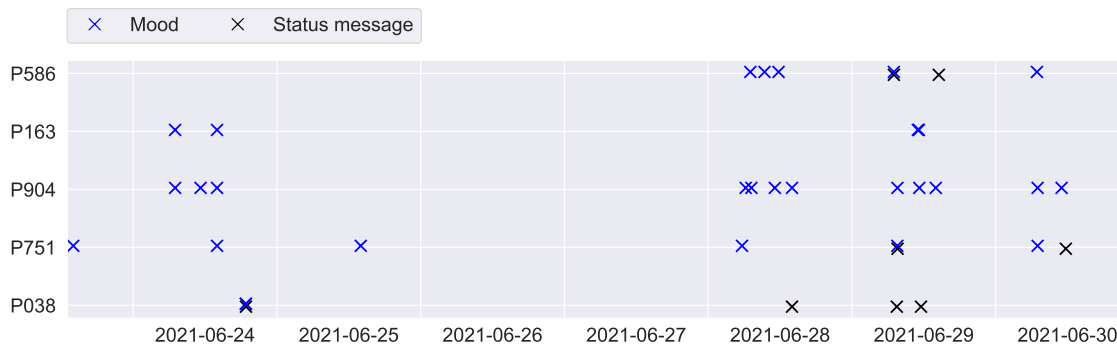


Figure 6.3: Moods and status messages shared

To conclude, despite the high SUS score, the data shows that AmbientTeams was used in the sense that it ran in the background, but various functionalities were only used to a limited extent, or not at all. The more commonly used micro-blogging functionality, on which also the study put more emphasis, is discussed in the following section.

6.3 Micro-Blogging: Sharing Moods and Status Messages

6.3.1 A Need for Status and Mood Sharing (RQ1)

Lack of Awareness

We asked the participants why and how they used AmbientTeams during the study. Two reasons for checking AmbientTeams could have been identified, highlighting the interests in states of other team members, namely moods, status messages, and availability.

Also, sometimes for just checking who is online and who is grayed out.
-P586

I think it was very interesting to see moods and states of team members with whom I might not be currently working together too closely.
-P751

I think it's a good idea, especially now if you work either hybrid or completely remote, I think then it is quite difficult to see the mood of your team colleagues, because now in most video conferences you make a happy face into the camera, so it is also difficult to see your mood how your mood really is right now.
-P163

Sometimes I then [at a previous company] got the feedback that they already finished with work or that that they have no more tasks left. With something like AmbientTeams they could set like a bored state and I would have been able to give them a new task.
-P163

I very much like the idea of sharing moods with the team. As we are becoming more aware on such a sensitive topic as mental health, this feature allows to discover more about your colleagues, and it sheds light to a part that we tend to keep only for ourselves.
-P751

This finding confirms a lack of awareness when working remotely and shows a general interest in the moods and feelings of co-workers. It seems to be a known fact amongst the participants that talking about feelings is important. However, P586 also expressed some concerns about a mood sharing approach:

I mean of course it is very important that you talk about these kinds of things [feelings], but you don't want to share it with the whole team.
-P586

TODO: Pre-study questionnaire results regarding lack of awareness
Lack of social contact / task-focus

I think during corona, you don't really have that breakroom time, so if you call somebody, it's mostly about business and not about private stuff. So, I think it's very difficult to get into a deeper connection with people you don't see that often.
-P586

Motivation for Sharing

Maybe don't put in separate subsubsection, have to see

6.3.2 What Is Shared and Why? (RQ2)

6.4 Effects (RQ3)

6.5 Workplace Isolation

6.6 Broader Tool Feedback and Future Directions

6.6.1 Better Integration with Established Tools

To increase the use and usage of AmbientTeams, participants Pxxx, Pxxx, and Pxxx all mentioned that a single tool would increase the likelihood and time they would use our mood-based micro-blogging approach.

I think it would be good if AT could be integrated into Teams because if you have one tool, then you would use it more often. -P163

6.6.2 Improved Tool Feedback

6.6.3 Self-Reflection

6.6.4 Task-Sharing

Generally, x/y said that they would continue using it. X would continue using it if xyz was changed.

Future Directions

Conclusion

Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Form

The consent form was handed to the participants before the kick-off meeting. During the kick-off meeting, they had the chance to ask any questions regarding the consent form.



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Consent Form "Emotion and Status Sharing in Remote Knowledge Work Teams"

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Purpose

Working remotely has become very popular over the past years. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic this trend has grown even stronger, forcing many companies and their employees to work from home. Further, the majority of managers expect to have more flexible work from home policies post-pandemic, and employees would like to continue working from home (at least part-time), making the topic relevant also after the pandemic. However, working remotely also comes with various challenges for knowledge workers, such as feeling lonely and not belonging to a team, not knowing who to turn to in case of a problem, or not knowing what others are working on. While the latter has received a lot of attention in previous research, the existence of tools focusing on the social challenges of remote work is still lacking. By sharing moods and status messages, or more generally, fostering informal communication, team members can develop more personal relationships and teams feel more connected despite the distance. For this reason, we developed AmbientTeams, a casual and informal tool that attempts to reduce the perceived distance in remote work by creating opportunities for more informal interactions.

In this study we want to explore the usability and usefulness AmbientTeams. Further, our goal is to learn which statuses and moods knowledge workers are sharing with their closest team members, what they learn from their team-mates' sharing, and what the overall impact is on their perception of workplace isolation.

Study Procedure

Overall, the study spans across three or more workdays and consists of the following three steps:

1. A kick-off meeting where the study is explained and the opportunity for questions is given. Before attending the kick-off meeting you are kindly asked to fill out a short questionnaire on demographics and your work (taking about 5 minutes to complete). To submit this questionnaire, you will be given a pseudonym with which you will be identified with during the study. After the study is explained and there are no more questions regarding the consent form or other topics, you will be asked to install the application on your work computer. Upon successful installation, you will join the team and the main functionality of the application is explained by one of the researchers running the study.
2. During at least three workdays, we will ask you to continue to work as usual with AmbientTeams running on your computer. While running AmbientTeams, you are completely free in how and how often you use of the application.
3. At the end of the study we will ask you for feedback about how using AT impacted your work and productivity. Similar to the kick-off, we will kindly ask you to fill out another questionnaire prior to



that meeting. In the interview, you will be asked to export the locally stored data and explanations will be given on how the data can be obfuscated before uploading it to a secure drop-folder. All in all, the final interview will not take longer than 30-45 minutes.

Benefits and Risks

By participating in this study, you will have the chance to learn about your own and your co-workers' moods at work. You will use a casual and informal tool that attempts to reduce the perceived distance in remote work by creating opportunities for more informal interactions.

The main known risk of participating in the study is the loss of time required to participate in the study. We estimate the total amount of time required to participate in the study to be approximately 60 - 90 minutes during three workdays. You may use AmbientTeams for more than three days if you want to. We are aiming to make the most efficient use of your time by streamlining the setup and onboarding of the study and providing constant and timely support in case of difficulty with application usage, as well as allowing you to determine a suitable time for the study and interviews. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from participation at any point during the study, without the need to provide a reason.

Personal Information

For this study, we will collect personal information about you such as your name, email, gender, age, and job role. Your name as well as other identifying information will strictly be kept separate at all times and will be stored in a subjects table at a different location from any other information you give. For AmbientTeams to function properly, it needs to upload to the server and persist some personal data, including status messages' and direct messages' content, shared moods, and active window titles.

To answer our research questions, we will only use your anonymized data (i.e. with the pseudonyms as explained in study procedure) and no identifying information will ever be shared outside of the research group and the confines of this study without your explicit permission. All data collected will be saved in password-protected storages. Your anonymized data will be stored no longer than 5 years. Any identifiable data (subject table) will be deleted after the project is published (if it is) and at the latest after 2 years.

Data, Storage & Confidentiality

AmbientTeams stores data **both locally on your computer and on a server hosted at the Department of Informatics at the University of Zurich.**

Data collected by AmbientTeams

At the end of the study, you will be asked to export your local data and share it with the researchers. Before uploading your exported data to a secure storage hosted by the University of Zurich, you have the opportunity to review and obfuscate the data. The local data contains only a pseudonym (e.g. P0123), provided to the participant at the beginning of the study, no information that would allow the data to be associated with personal data of a participant. Local data include window actions (opening, closing, minimizing, and restoring of AmbientTeams), general usage (starting and quitting of AmbientTeams), timestamps when the team was changed in the dropdown, and active windows (the active window is the window currently in focus and contains the name of the application and, in cases of web browsers, the current URL). In case you are working on something sensitive, we recommend to temporarily quit the AmbientTeams application.



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Data stored on the server

Since AmbientTeams allows to exchange your status and moods with co-workers and (optionally) allows to communicate via personal message or audio/video-chat, data has to be persisted on a central server. The server is hosted by the university of Zurich. All requests to and from the server are SSL encrypted by using the HTTPS (wss respectively) protocol. Since the data on server includes identifiable information about the participants, all the data stored on the server will be deleted after the completion of the project, at the latest 2 years after participation in the study. Further, the data that will be downloaded and stored on the password protected machines of the researchers to run the analysis will only contain random IDs and not the actual personal information of the participants. The following is stored on the server:

- User data: email, display name, hashed password, the teams the user belongs to, and the parameters of the avatar that was created by that user during signup
- Teams: name of the team and its members
- Status/direct messages: timestamp, content, team and user(s) the message belongs to
- Availability status: timestamp, selected availability status, user
- 1:1 Calls: start and end timestamps, call participants
- Moods: timestamp, selected mood, user

All audio/video calls are end-to-end encrypted using the WebRTC protocol and thus cannot be eavesdropped. In addition, the calls are also not recorded. It should be noted that messages (both status messages and private messages) are not encrypted, and **we strongly advise against sharing confidential data within AmbientTeams**. Also note that by sharing a status message with your team, all users who belong to that team will be able to see that message. That said, users not belonging to that team will never have access to your posted status messages.

Interview Data

If approved by you, the final interview will be audio recorded. The audio files will be deleted as soon as the interviews have been transcribed (automatically if interviews were taken in English and you give consent to use a transcription service below, manually otherwise).

Uses of the Study Data

The results of this study will potentially appear in both internal and external academic research presentations and publications, such as academic journals and conference proceedings. No findings gathered from the participation in this study will ever reveal the identity of the participants. Reference to specific participants will always be made under their pseudonym.

Contact for Information about the Study

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to the study, you may contact Dario Bugmann (dario.bugmann@uzh.ch) or Dr. André Meyer (ameyer@ifi.uzh.ch).



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Consent for extended Data Uses

With your explicit consent, you can allow the researchers to transcribe the audio recording of the interview using a transcription service:

☐ I allow the use of a transcription service to transcribe my interview

With your explicit consent, you can allow the researchers to share the results or ask you to participate in future studies.

☐ The researchers might contact me in the future to share the results and/or ask me to participate in future studies.

Consent for Study Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your participation at any point during the study, without needing to provide any reason. Any information you contribute up to your withdrawal will be retained and used in this study, unless you request otherwise.

With your signature on this form, you confirm the following statements:

- An investigator explained the study and the listed conditions to me. I had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand the answers and accept them.
- I am at least 18 years old.
- I had enough time to make the decision to participate and I agree to the participation.

In no way does this waive your legal rights or release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal or professional responsibilities.

Participant's name

Location, Date

Participant's signature

Study Instructions

A study to understand Emotion and Status Sharing in Remote Knowledge Work Teams

Principal Investigator

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Supervision

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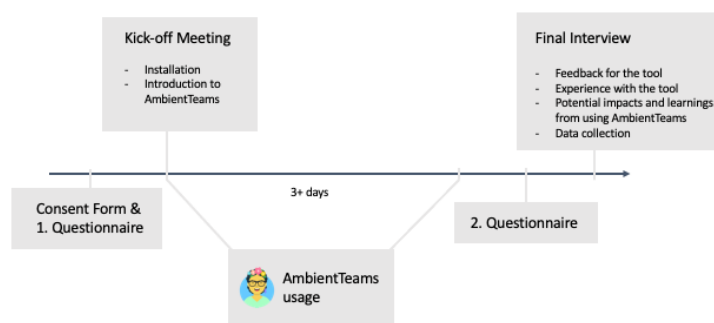
Masters Student

Dario Bugmann MS Student Department of Informatics, University of Zurich,
(dario.bugmann@uzh.ch)

Introduction

Common challenges of remote work include the feeling of not belonging to a team and feeling lonely, not knowing who to turn to in case of a problem, or not knowing what others are working on. While the latter has received a lot of attention in previous research, the existence of tools focusing on the social challenges of remote work is still lacking. By sharing moods and status messages, or more generally, fostering informal communication, team members can develop more personal relationships and teams feel more connected despite the distance. For this reason, we developed AmbientTeams, a research prototype which with we want to better understand social interactions within teams working remotely.

Study Overview



Study Procedure

Overall, the study spans across at least 3 workdays and consists of the following three steps:

1. A **kick-off meeting** where the study is explained and the opportunity for questions is given. **Before attending the kick-off meeting you are kindly asked to fill out a short questionnaire** on demographics and your work (taking about 5 minutes to complete). To submit this questionnaire, you will be given a pseudonym with which you will be identified with during the study. After the study is explained and there are no more questions regarding the consent form or other topics, you will be asked to install the application on your work computer. Upon successful installation, you will join the team and the main functionality of the application is explained by one of the researchers running the study.
2. During at least three workdays, we will ask you to **continue to work as usual with AmbientTeams running on your computer**. While running AmbientTeams, you are completely free in how and how often you use of the application.
3. At the end of the study we will ask you for feedback about how using **AT impacted your work** and productivity. Similar to the kick-off, we will kindly ask you to fill out another questionnaire prior to that meeting. In the **interview**, you will be asked to export the locally stored data and explanations will be given on how the data can be obfuscated before uploading it to a secure drop-folder. All in all, the final interview will not take longer than 30-45 minutes.

Installation (optional before the kick-off meeting)

TL;DR

Installation MacOS: <https://vimeo.com/563689368>

Installation Microsoft Windows: <https://vimeo.com/563689849>

MacOS

1. Download from <https://ambientteams.ifi.uzh.ch/releases/AmbientTeams-0.9.1.dmg>
 2. Drag icon into applications folder
 3. Open AmbientTeams
 4. You will be asked to give AmbientTeams permissions for
 - Microphone: Required for making voice calls
 - Camera: Required for making video calls
 - Accessibility: Required for retrieving information about the currently active window
 - Screen Recording: Required for retrieving information about the currently active window
 5. Grant the permissions and restart AmbientTeams
 6. Please check the following file: /Users/{your user name}/Library/Application Support/ambientteams/localDb/activeWindows
- If the file is not empty, everything worked! All the remaining steps will be done together with us in the kick-off meeting.**

Microsoft

1. Download from <https://ambientteams.ifi.uzh.ch/releases/AmbientTeams-Setup-0.9.1.exe>
2. Please select "keep" on the downloaded file

3. On the following popup, please select "show more" and "keep anyways" (this is because the application is not signed on windows due to very expensive code signing certificates)
4. Chose "more info" and then "run anyways"
5. Plase navigate to the following file:

%USERPROFILE%\AppData\Roaming\ambientteams\localDb\activeWindows

If the file is not empty, everything worked! All the remaining steps will be done together with us in the kick-off meeting.

Note: To quit AmbientTeams completely on Microsoft Windows, you have to click "exit" in the system tray

Additional Information

What if someone wants to join after the study has started?

Should anyone be interested in also participating in the study (and has not been in the kick-off) during the first day of the study, he/she is welcome to join. However, I kindly ask you to inform me beforehand.

Troubleshooting

In case you face an issue with AmbientTeams, either reach out directly to us (dario.bugmann@uzh.ch), or first try the following steps:

1. Refresh the window (either via keyboard shortcuts: macOS: cmd + R, windows: CTRL + R, or via right-click inside the team overview window)
2. Quit and restart application (macOS: cmd + Q or in the Menu Bar, windows: exit via system tray)
3. Clear local storage (team overview window → click on your avatar in the top right corner → "Clear storage")

Note however that this step will **delete** your favourite teams, color and device settings, and the team member selection displayed in the ambient window.

4. If none of the above helped, contact me via email (ideally with a screenshot and/or your exported logs (settings→ "Open logs")) at dario.bugmann@uzh.ch.

If you have a question

Don't hesitate to contact us via email (dario.bugmann@uzh.ch) or MS Teams (dario.bugmann@uzh.ch).

In case you find a bug

If you could write an email to dario.bugmann@uzh.ch, ideally with attached screenshots or even logs, that would be highly appreciated.

In case you have feedback (can be anything, really!)

Simply click the "Feedback" button in the "AmbientTeams - Teams Overview" window.

Thanks for your help making AmbientTeams better! Please note that your user ID is stored with your message, so this feedback is not anonymous. This information is needed to contact you in case there is any ambiguity.

Updates

AmbientTeams automatically checks for updates on application startup. Further, there is the option to manually check for updates in the settings.

Note: After the update has been downloaded, a restart of AmbientTeams is required (on windows the user must quit the application via the system tray) for the update to take effect.

Export of locally collected data

At the end of the study (please don't upload before you received the email asking you to do so) you will be asked to export your locally stored data. To do so, please perform the following steps:

1. "AmbientTeams: Teams Overview" window: click on your avatar in the menu bar at the top right and select "Open Local Data"
2. Inside this folder you will find 4 files:

- 1) windowActions: all the window actions (timestamps of when you opened, closed, minimised, or restored windows of AmbientTeams)
- 2) appUsage: timestamps of when you started and quit AmbientTeams
- 3) teamChanges: timestamps when you switched teams inside the ambient window
- 4) activeWindows: information about the active windows when AmbientTeams is running (see <https://github.com/sindresorhus/active-win> for more information)

- Check to see that you don't share any window titles/URL you don't wish. You are free to delete entries from the activeWindows files to protect your privacy.

- Zip the four files and name the archive in following way: {{your pseudonym}}.zip

Example: "P1234.zip"

- Upload zipped file to: <https://dropfiles.uzh.ch/dropzone/6dc8afbf>

Data, Storage & Confidentiality

The following list only serves as a summary! You may find details in the consent form.

1. Your data is stored on a **server hosted at the University of Zurich** and will never leave the research group. This does not include the data under the section "Data collected by AmbientTeams", which is stored locally on your computer until you decide to upload the exported files.
2. Your anonymised data will be stored no longer than 5 years. Any identifiable data will be deleted after the project is published (if it is) and at the latest after 2 years.
3. Messages (both status messages and private messages) are not encrypted. We strongly advise against sharing confidential data within AmbientTeams.
4. Video and audio calls are end-to-end encrypted and are not recorded.
5. Your information will be kept confidential, but keep in mind that all of your colleagues / team members who use AmbientTeams can potentially see your status updates.

Prestudy Questionnaire



Default Question Block

A study to understand Emotion and Status Sharing in Remote Knowledge Work Teams

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study! All of your responses will be kept confidential. If you have any questions, please contact me at dario.bugmann@uzh.ch.

Please enter your pseudonym, which you received in the email

Pseudonym, e.g.
P2932

What is your job title?

How many years of work experience do you have?

Which of the following categories best describes the industry you primarily work in (regardless of your actual position)?

How is your work split between office and working from home / remotely?



What would be your ideal split of working from home / remotely?



Why would that be your ideal split?

What gender do you identify with?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How old are you?

- ☐ 18 - 24
- ☐ 25 - 34
- ☐ 35 - 44
- ☐ 45 - 54
- ☐ 55 - 64
- ☐ 65 or older

Communication

How and how often do you communicate and meet with your team and what tools do you use?

A large, empty rectangular text box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to provide details on how and how often they communicate and meet with their team, and what tools they use.

What kind of information do you exchange with each other? Do you exchange purely work-related information, or do you also exchange more personal, informal information?

A large, empty rectangular text box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to describe the kind of information they exchange with their team and whether it is purely work-related or includes more personal, informal information.

Are you aware of how your team members are feeling and the progress they are making at work?

Block 2

Please rate the following statements about your work

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
I have friends available to me at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have one or more co-workers available who I talk to about day-to-day problems at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have co-workers available whom I can depend on when I have a problem	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have enough people available at work with whom I can talk about my job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have people around me at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am well integrated with the department/company where I work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am kept in the loop regarding company social events/functions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am part of the company network	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Qualtrics Survey Software

07.07.21, 15:04

Upper management
knows about my
achievements

☐☐☐☐☐

My supervisor
communicates my
achievements to upper
management

☐☐☐☐☐

Do you want to share any additional thoughts?

Block 1

What are your expectations for the tool and study?

Powered by Qualtrics

Poststudy Questionnaire



Default Question Block

A study to understand Emotion and Status Sharing in Remote Knowledge Work Teams

Thank you for having used AmbientTeams in your team! All of your responses will be kept confidential. If you have any questions, please contact me at dario.bugmann@uzh.ch.

Please enter your pseudonym, which you received in the email

Pseudonym, e.g.
P2932

How was your work time during the study split between "at the office" and "remote-work" (e.g. from home)?

working completely remotely					working completely in the office					
0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

Percentage of
working in the office

Please clarify

How much of your work time was AmbientTeams approximately running and you had the ambient (transparent) window in foreground?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Percentage of your
work time with the
ambient window in
the foreground

Please clarify

Block 1

Please rate the following statements about your experience with AmbientTeams

		Neither agree nor disagree		
Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree		Somewhat agree	Strongly agree

Qualtrics Survey Software

07.07.21, 15:05

I think that I would like to use this application frequently.

☐☐☐☐☐

I found this application unnecessarily complex.

☐☐☐☐☐

I thought this application was easy to use.

☐☐☐☐☐

I think that I would need assistance to be able to use this application.

☐☐☐☐☐

I found the various functions in this application were well integrated.

☐☐☐☐☐

I thought there was too much inconsistency in this application.

☐☐☐☐☐

I would imagine that most people would learn to use this application very quickly.

☐☐☐☐☐

I found this application very cumbersome/awkward to use.

☐☐☐☐☐

I felt very confident using this application.

☐☐☐☐☐

I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this application.

☐☐☐☐☐

Do you have any additional comments or explanations to one of your

answers above?

Block 2

Please rate the following statements about your work

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
I have friends available to me at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
I have one or more co-workers available who I talk to about day-to-day problems at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
I have co-workers available whom I can depend on when I have a problem	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
I have enough people available at work with whom I can talk about my job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
I have people around me at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Qualtrics Survey Software

07.07.21, 15:05

I am well integrated
with the
department/company
where I work

☐☐☐☐☐

I am kept in the loop
regarding company
social
events/functions

☐☐☐☐☐

I am part of the
company network

☐☐☐☐☐

Upper management
knows about my
achievements

☐☐☐☐☐

My supervisor
communicates my
achievements to
upper management

☐☐☐☐☐

We'll address more specific questions in the interview. In case you want to provide any early in the meantime, please use this textbox:

Powered by Qualtrics

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Prior to interview: look briefly at participant usage data (moods shared / status messages posted etc.)
2. Write down the pseudonym of the participant.
3. Check if everything of this participant has reached us (the 2 questionnaires and consent form)
4. Export Local Data
5. Ask whether English is fine
6. Ask for recording permissions
7. If yes, start recording

General Ice breakers

1. How long have you been part of the team and how well do you know the other team members?
2. [RQ4] Please talk a little bit about how you used AmbientTeams during the last couple of days.
3. Do you have any concrete examples on how you used AmbientTeams yesterday (or the day before)?
4. Did your usage change over time and if so, how?

Typical Communication Behavior

5. [RQ3] Did your general way of interacting with your team members change with the usage of AmbientTeams? If so, how and why?
 - prompt for potential changes inside AmbientTeams, but also outside
 - Tools, informal communication, meeting style
 - What they share with each other / what they talk about
 - How and if they find out how others feel

Mood and Context Sharing

6. [RQ1] What do you generally think about sharing moods/status messages inside your team? Do you see a need for it? if so, why?
7. [RQ1 & RQ2] What would you say motivated you to share something yourself?
8. Did you notice that your and your team-mates' avatars were fading out? Did this somehow influence you for sharing yourself?
9. [RQ2] What did you generally share with your team? And why? (this question is slightly different for each participant, depending on the individual usage)
10. [RQ2] Did you also share negative moods/states when you didn't feel so good? If so, when and why, or why not?
11. How did you previously share moods and states (e.g. with Slack, Teams, Zoom)? If they did share moods/states: Do you prefer AmbientTeams over your old way sharing moods/states? Why/Why not?

Information Consumption / Awareness

12. [RQ3.1] Was there anything you learned from AmbientTeams about your team members? Was this something you didn't know about them before using AmbientTeams?
- Was it helpful to learn about the moods/states of your team mates? If so, why or why not? Do you have any concrete examples?
13. [RQ3] Did the awareness on your team members' moods and states affect you in any way?
- Potential questions if they don't answer:
- Did it make you feel better/worse about your work?
 - Did it alter what you shared with your team members? (e.g. did you share less/more information with them over time?)
 - Did it impact what you know about your team mates' well-being? Is it important to you?
 - Did it impact you knowing about your team mates' progress and/or tasks they're working on? Is that information important to you?
14. [RQ3] Do you know if sharing your states/moods had an impact on your team members? Did it have an impact on yourself?

Broader Impact of AmbientTeams

15. Did/does AmbientTeams have an impact on the frequency of communication and when you share information with your team? (Both inside AmbientTeams and in general, e.g. other tools)
- Examples if they don't have ideas:
- More connected to your team? Impact on the number of meetings you had? Less/more time spent in other communication tools? More informal communication? Topics you talk about? AT useful for better small talk topic selection? etc. etc.
16. [RQ3] Was there anything else that you learned or changed from sharing and seeing moods/states with AmbientTeams?
17. [RQ3] With the information that you could gather from AmbientTeams, would you say it could potentially lower the barrier (Widerstand/Hemmschwelle) to communicate?

AmbientTeams Glanceable Display and Features

18. [RQ4] Did you use the ambient window? If yes: How did you like it and why? (Can you think of scenarios where you would use it more?)

The ambient window itself was created as a glanceable display, which is always on top. How did this influence your focus at work? Did it sometimes interrupt and/or distract you? Do you think this should be improved/changed? If so, how?

19. [RQ4] Did you use the teams overview window? If yes: How did you like it and what information did it provide it to you? If no: Why not? Can you think of scenarios where you would use it more?

- Usefulness of the provided information

20. [RQ4] Does AmbientTeams integrate well into your existing work-flows, or could this be improved?

21. [RQ4] Compared to traditional communication tools (such as Slack, Teams, Zoom), is there a difference in the types of content and information that you share with your team using AmbientTeams? Why is that?

Improvements to AmbientTeams

22. Would you consider the past couple of workdays to be typical? (was there something unplanned, extraordinary, etc.?)

23. We are thinking of adding a feature that will detect your current mood and fatigue from a webcam and automatically display it to your co-workers, similarly to what you now did manually. What are your thoughts on such an automated feature?

Follow-up, either:

1. Do you think it would be important to always confirm what is being shared within your closest team?
2. How would that change if you had to confirm what is being shared before it is actually shared?

24. Could you see yourself using AmbientTeams after the study? Why/Why not? What could be improved?

25. Do you have any other feedback or questions regarding the study?

Closing remarks

Say that they are free to continue using it if they want to

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