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THEME: At the Interface

Interface: A common boundary or interconnection between systems, concepts or human beings (Random House Dictionary, 2016)

That definition highlights the dual nature of interfaces. Interfaces establish boundaries that differentiate and separate; they mark a space where insiders can jointly define an organization's mission, develop an organizational identity, and participate in organizational activities. But interfaces also develop connections that facilitate communication, negotiation, and exchange across organizational boundaries.

Interfaces are increasingly relevant to today's organizations, as information, people, and other resources cross organizational boundaries at unprecedented rates. An employee conversation held around the company water cooler today is likely to appear on social media tomorrow. In the "gig economy," people may work as employees for only a few short weeks or a handful of quick shifts, moving from one organization to another without fully integrating into any of them. And even when people are in traditional employment relationships with a single organization, mobile phones and Internet capabilities let them psychologically cross the organizational boundary dozens of times a day. As traffic at the interface intensifies, how do we distinguish between insiders and outsiders, and identify who has a legitimate stake in influencing organizational missions, decisions, and activities?

Interfaces create "interstitial spaces" in which information, people and resources are situated neither inside nor outside, but somewhere in between. Organizations leverage these interstitial spaces as they develop alumni networks for former employees, encourage family and friend referrals to job openings, ask customers to bag their own groceries, and crowdsource ideas for new products and markets. These activities are designed to benefit the organization, but society might benefit as well. Today's Grand Challenges (e.g., aging populations, climate change) increasingly demand large-scale multi-perspective strategies. When the interstitial space is large, organizations may feel greater responsibility to tackle societal issues that are not part of their formal mandate and are unlikely to deliver any immediate benefit to their traditional stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers and investors). But how far can organizations expand their missions before they are rudderless and off course?

Organizations continually redesign their interfaces as they decide which activities they will undertake and which activities will be purchased or contracted out. Organizations form and disband partnerships and alliances, changing the shape of organizational networks. These interface changes affect outcomes ranging from the employment opportunities of individuals to the wealth of nations. And when the interfaces connecting organizations and networks span national boundaries, new opportunities for organizations to shape (and be shaped by) political and social systems also emerge. The sheer scale of organizations and interorganizational networks permits organizations to unintentionally and/or deliberately influence governments and societies in ways that are controversial. How accountable should organizations be for the economic and social consequences of their actions at the interface?

THEME: At the Interface

At the Interface is an invitation to reflect on the many ways that interfaces separate and connect people and organizations – and to consider the consequences of those separations and interconnections. Some questions to explore:

- What kinds of dynamics (linear, fluctuating, punctuated equilibrium) characterize the development of new interfaces and the transformation of existing ones? What institutions affect the emergence, location, and maintenance of interfaces within and across organizational systems?

- How do organizations attempt to manage and control their interfaces within interorganizational networks, and what are the consequences of these attempts? What are the relationships between organizational boundaries and national boundaries, and how do these relationships affect both organizations and nations?

- How do interface changes generate opportunities for the creation of new firms and the dissolution of other types of firms? How do changes in the interfaces between firms affect the economic and psychological definitions of industries and professions?

- How do the characteristics of organizational boundaries (e.g., their permeability or fluidity) change the activities that are initiated at interfaces and the resources that move through them? What new roles are created for "interface experts" in the form of consultants, brokers, or interpreters?

- What roles do different types of boundaries – physical, social and symbolic – play in shaping activity at the interface? For example, how does an organization's physical location (e.g., in the central business district or within an indigenous community) influence the quality and character of organization-community negotiations relative to less tangible boundaries?

- What kind of "boundary work" do organizational insiders and outsiders initiate at the interface to create, maintain, cross, or dissolve boundaries that interfere with their individual and shared goals? When every employee is a prospective boundary spanner, how do organizations decide – and then monitor and control – what is allowed in and what is screened out?

- Exchanges across the interface can stimulate innovation by integrating new resources and fresh perspectives; they can also generate process losses and brain drain. How do changes in organizational interfaces affect the processes of innovation and the development of new technologies? How do organizations manage their interfaces to balance creativity against protecting their intellectual property?

- The frequency of organizational change (e.g., restructurings and mergers) and diversity of organizational forms (e.g., virtual and alliances) exponentially multiplies the number and importance of interstitial spaces. What knowledge, processes, and strategies are necessary to successfully plan and implement organizational change efforts in this context?

- What can leaders do to influence information exchange/flow in interstitial spaces? How do organizational leaders help employees to manage and prioritize information and interactions? What role do social networks play in structuring interactions at the interface?

It is fitting that Atlanta is the site of our 2017 meeting, because Atlanta's history displays some of the most dramatic separations and connections that interfaces generate. The city rose from the ashes of the American Civil War in the 1860s, was a primary organizing center of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and today is a major transportation hub and home to one of the world's busiest airports. Let's draw inspiration from the Atlanta context as we explore interfaces in all their complexity.

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