

“Along with the winds of life” with Ella Hafermalz on Working and Existing with Technology

Gislene Feiten Haubrich⁶

In this edition of JOCO, we have another fantastic scholar contributing to our interview section. We have the opportunity to talk with Ella Hafermalz, an authority when it comes to discussions on new ways of working. From remote work to generative AI, Ella's contribution to the community studying technology and work is widely recognized. I had the pleasure of working with Ella for two years in my academic journey, and beyond being an inspiring academic, she is a kind and supportive human being. I'm grateful we could find some time in her busy schedule to talk about her work, the methodological challenges of studying technology use, and more.

Dr. [Ella Hafermalz](#) is an Associate Professor in the [KIN Center for Digital Innovation](#) within the [School of Business and Economics](#) at [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#) (VU Amsterdam). Dr. Hafermalz completed her PhD in *Information Systems and Work and Organisational Studies* at the *University of Sydney Business School* in Australia. Additionally, she holds degrees in *Teaching, Media and Communications*, and *Cultural Studies* from the *University of Melbourne*. She also serves as an Associate Editor for the [European Journal of Information Systems](#), and a member of the editorial review board for [Organization Studies](#) and [Journal of Information Technology](#). As a researcher, Dr. Hafermalz aims to bridge the gap between academic theory and practical organizational applications. To deeply understand what it truly feels like to exist and work through modern technology, she frequently frames her qualitative insights through the lenses of philosophy, social theory, and the arts.

Enjoy the reading.

Gislene Haubrich: Hello, Ella. Thank you so much for your time and for joining us for this interview for JOCO.

Ella Hafermalz: Good to be talking with you!

Gislene Haubrich: I know you're very busy and full of activities, so we're really grateful that you are taking the time to share all your knowledge and your perspectives, which are always so insightful and inspiring. I'm sure this will be a great conversation. We usually start these interviews for JOCO aiming to learn a bit more about the person behind the scholar, if we can make such a separation. Can you tell a little bit about what brought you to this journey you are today? Currently, I guess, Generative AI (GenAI) is on the top of your mind and research agenda, but also, you've been studying New Ways

of Working, and are an authority on the topic. So, how did your journey progress?

Ella Hafermalz: Yes, so good to be talking with you. To answer this means going back a while. So, to go back to my youth in Australia, I studied media Communications and Cultural Studies. I really loved it. Cultural Studies, in particular, is such a rich field, thinking about new media coming in and how the world changes all the time. Lots of philosophy, a lot of art and cultural content. I've always been inspired by popular culture as well. I loved all of that. And then I became a high school teacher and then worked in recruitment for a teaching program. And I sort of was searching, basically. I knew that I liked teaching. I knew that I liked research, but I wasn't exactly sure what to do with all of that. And, for some reason, an academic career hadn't really occurred to me. I didn't really know what that was. I didn't know what it meant to be an academic. It's funny how when you're at uni, you don't necessarily look at your teachers as professionals who you might be able to be like. It just didn't occur to me.

I was then based in the East Coast of Australia and then I moved to Perth on the West Coast - and was working remotely for a company in Melbourne (about 4 hours flight and a time zone change away – it is a big country!). During that time, I felt quite isolated from my organization, from my team. I felt far away. And then I got a new job, which was based in Sydney, but I was still in Perth. And that gave me a bit of a comparison point. This other company had a lot of remote workers, and when I was working for that company, I felt quite included and like I was part of a team. I was not physically closer to my teammates, but I felt existentially closer to them. And I realized: 'okay, well, the difference is how we use technology, how we communicate, the way that we have group calls, the way people are messaging each other throughout the day.' And because I guess that was a natural experiment of a kind, I noticed: 'okay, remote working *can* work. It actually fills a lot of needs. But the practices matter.'

Already, around 2014 in Australia, it was something we were talking about – telework, they called it back then. We need to have this arrangement as a possibility because it makes us resilient to shocks, transport problems, natural disasters. It wasn't discussions of a pandemic then, but that turned out to be what we needed resilience for. So, during that time, I realized, okay: 'there's something interesting here.' *How does remote working work* is a topic I'm interested in. *The use of technology* is something I

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would like to know more about. I missed studying. I missed that inquiry, and I thought: 'okay, I want to go and do that. Maybe I'll apply for a PhD.'

I'd read a book by [Melissa Gregg](#), who's from Cultural Studies, about remote working called [Work's Intimacy](#), and I was very inspired by that. So, I reached out to her. And she said, oh, yeah, it would be good to do a thesis on remote work, but I'm actually leaving to go to the US. Why don't you contact my friend, my colleague, [Kristine Dery](#) in the business school at Sydney? And I thought: 'okay, give that a go.' And then I started chatting with Kristine. I had never envisaged myself in a business school; I thought that I was a humanities person. It's funny how life kind of leads you along. And because the topic was relevant to the Australian government agenda, I was able to get a scholarship to do my PhD. And then I moved over to Sydney to pursue that. That's how I ended up with this topic and in a business school; all of this was just going along with the winds of life, really.

Gislene Haubrich: Well, that's so fascinating. And it's interesting that you're mentioning these differences between the companies and your own experience. How did them shape how you moved forward with your research?

Ella Hafermalz: I respect authors that advocate for using your experiences in your research. [Jorgen Sandberg](#) and [Mats Alvesson](#), they talk about this as well, [your pre-understanding](#). I think a lot of my research in general is inspired by a particular feeling that I've had, which I find hard to articulate or explain or put theory to, and then I like to really interrogate that and sort of chase it. So, that feeling of deep loneliness that I experienced as a remote worker is something I wanted to understand better and know more about. And for me, the best way to do that was to read, but then also to talk to people who are in this position.

When I started studying remote work, I was both very interested in and inspired by conceptual work that examines this very existential feeling of feeling left out, of feeling lonely, you know, fear of missing out, all of these things. It has been a topic discussed in philosophical literature for hundreds of years. So, there's already a lot that we can learn from the human experience. And then there are the specificities of geography, technology, infrastructures, organizational setup, and that I was able to explore by talking to people.

Whenever I had an interview with someone who worked remote, I felt already like there was a level of empathy there, of some awareness of what it might be like for them. Most of my interviews were over the phone. This

was before COVID, so the video conference was not such an established genre. I mainly talked to people over the phone. And I know that back then, remote workers mainly did their work via phone. So, I could also understand that this was a very authentic way of them communicating about how they felt, and what they thought and about their experiences. So, I could also relate to that, that mode of communication. My own experiences were there methodologically, in terms of sampling, the questions that I asked, the philosophy that I found inspiring, very informative.

Gislene Haubrich: We will talk a bit more about these inspiration sources. If I understand you correctly, because I've read your research and now I'm listening to you, I see that the connection between workplace in isolation or socialization of work, depending on how we look at it, in technology-intensive environments, that is, I feel, that the red thread for your research. That is also present in your work with Jana Retkowsky and Marleen Huysman, particularly in the paper [Managing a ChatGPT-empowered workforce: Understanding its affordances and side effects](#). In that sense, did it feel natural to move, to progress this way in your research? From hybrid work and remote work towards GenAI.

Ella Hafermalz: Yeah, that's a good question. And this was a journey for me. So, after studying remote work, I moved to the Netherlands and to the KIN group, and that's when I started to investigate hybrid work, which seemed like an extension from remote work. At the same time with Marleen and the [AI@Work Research Group](#), there was a lot of research about AI, which I was also interested in, and you know, so much great research happening around me. I was also looking for 'how do I connect to that'. At that time, it felt like two separate topics. My new ways of working research and then some interest in AI. When generative AI came along, that's when things started to connect. And that is because the conditions of post-COVID hybrid working turned out to be a catalyst for some of what was going on in the way that people use ChatGPT.

To be specific, people were already quite fragmented in the workplace because of hybrid working. Some people working from home, some people in the office, and very idiosyncratic schedules. Whereas we previously might have all just been in the routine of coming in most days, sitting next to each other, and so you have this familiarity with one another; the routines that we all see now are quite fragmented. You might not know where your colleagues are or when you're going to see them, which means that it's harder to reach out and ask a question very simply, because there's not a colleague sitting next to you.

And then you have this large language model coming in, and it is always there. It is always ready; you can ask it any question and it's going to answer you at any moment of the day. That becomes very appealing because the cost of reaching out to a colleague has gone up. So, this technology was entering a workspace that was already configured in a way that made it attractive to go to ChatGPT before you go to a colleague. And that's also what we found in our research. So, *there* is a bridge between the new ways of working context, and the research I've done there, and generative AI! The older modes of AI, more predictive, prescriptive, discriminative AI, that felt like a different topic. LLMs though, because they're so conversational, that starts to really come into the same sphere as new ways of working for me.

Gislene Haubrich: Digging deeper in these phenomena you're carving out around workplace and genAI. If we take particularly your research on new ways of working and the discussion about exile, published in *Organization Studies*, *Out of the Panopticon and into Exile: Visibility and Control in Distributed New Culture Organizations*. When you look back at that paper and what is happening now, do you think that people are getting more exiled now? Or less, perhaps? How do you think the technology is now impacting that concept if you look back at it?

Ella Hafermalz: Actually, I think something very insidious is happening if I think about the world of work with LLMs now. And we started to get to this also in our recent paper in *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *Harnessing a "Spirited Technology": How Working with Generative AI Collapses the Creative Process*, but I'm still thinking it through and probably will for quite some time. What I'm talking about is, I think, people *feel* less exiled, but that may come at a cost. We have this idea of ChatGPT as our 'number one knowledge assistant'. I think a lot of people feel quite supported by this technology. It's always there, ready to help, and it does, tangibly. It helps when you're trying to do some tasks. It can help you overcome some procrastination, fear of a blank page, all of these things. Or with AI agents now, they're also doing tasks for people. So, it can make people feel less on the outer, more supported, they may feel more content. It may reduce the sense of being 'exiled'. At the same time however, ChatGPT is *not* a human. It's a false substitution, basically. So, we may *feel* like we're interacting with others: the technology is anthropomorphized, it's helpful, it's there for you, it doesn't judge.

But at the end of the day, we are *not* interacting with others. And there are resources that you build up when you interact with other people, to think about this in

quite an instrumental way. From working with humans on tasks, friendships arise. Someone can see from one day to the next if you're not doing okay; or someone might introduce you to someone else, or just widen your social world in various ways. Human interaction builds reciprocity around emotional connection and also forces us to deal with the challenge of not getting along, sometimes. Which builds resilience to discomfort and teaches us to cope in a world where we are all different. All these things that are very human. That is not happening when we work with AI, even though we have a kind of illusion of collaboration. So, I think we as a society and also in organisational contexts will start to feel the consequences of that. So short term, I think that it alleviates some of the fear of exile. But that relief probably gives you less reason to see that your connections are actually not in place the way that perhaps they could be or should be. That may lull us into a false sense of security that may actually deepen the sense of exile in the long term...but we'll see.

Gislene Haubrich: That's interesting because I would assume the opposite. If we are really relying on these tools and assume they are our best buddies, it means we acknowledged feeling left out of other conversations, so that we "chose" to connect with technology, increasing our perception of isolation. But, in a way, if we are replacing the organization with that relationship with the chatbot, so we might feel less isolated short term. That is super interesting. Let's see how it goes. Now talking particularly about your most recent paper on *Harnessing a 'Spirited Technology'*. How did the metaphor with the 'Spirited Horse' to discuss our relationship with GenAI come along?

Ella Hafermalz: What we're talking about here is a metaphor that comes from Don Ihde. I had read his book, *Technology and the Lifeworld* during my PhD, and he offers an interesting framework. So Ihde talks about different ways that people relate to technology and the world. The way that we use glasses as a technology is different from how we use heating. Glasses help us to see the world, quite literally, but we're not meant to be looking at the glasses; that's not the point. Heating is in the background. It's important as a technology, but it is again different to how we look at glasses. We also have technologies like a thermometer, where we can interpret the world *through* the technology.

Then, there's the special type of relationship, which Ihde calls *alterity relations*, which is when you encounter a technology as something to interact with. It has a degree of otherness to it. It isn't a full other in terms of being this fully agential sentient being, but there is a certain sense of it being an interactant. And chatbots are a classic example of this that have been around for decades. But it

can go further – for example, I grew up with a car, a VW camper van that had a name. We called it *Popper* because the roof popped up. It was like a member of our family. It's not unusual actually for humans to have this sense of alterity relations with technologies. You can get attached to them or maybe talk to them – a teddy bear, or even a pet rock or something! So, it's not unusual. Within this category of alterity relations, Ihde has this little section where he talks about *spirited technologies*. Already at Sydney Uni, [Mike Seymour](#) and I started thinking about [these spirited technologies](#) (Mike does very cool research on e.g. avatars, lifelike avatars).

Jana, Marleen and I got interested in this idea of spirited technologies in the context of creative work. We really further developed this idea of a spirited technology as one that carries out instructions but is a bit unpredictable and unruly. Particularly interesting to us was that Ihde explains that when you're an experienced user, you quite like spirited technologies that push back a little. And here is where he brings in the spirited horse as an analogy: if you're a very good rider, it is more interesting, more exciting, and possibly more beneficial in terms of winning a race if your horse is a bit spirited. It has a bit, you know, this capacity to push back, to pull in different directions, and you need to be responsive and get along with that. It's actually the same if you play a musical instrument, when you start playing a musical instrument, it's good to just have an instrument that complies. But the very experienced musician enjoys an instrument with a bit of personality, with a bit of flair. It has some quirks that you have to get along with. But if you steer it well, then you get something really interesting out of it.

All this to say, when Jana and Marleen and I started to study Generative AI in the context of creative work, and specifically this was the text-to-image application Mid-journey, we saw that experienced creatives were also, in a similar manner, inspired by the little quirks that come back in the images when they prompt. It's not entirely predictable. So, it was offering a little bit more, a little bit different from what you've asked. And that gives you something to react to. For skilled creatives who know how to steer and, you know, adjust the next prompt and react to things, it has this effect of like harnessing a spirited technology. So that's how we came to that. I read it previously and when we started studying this phenomenon, it had the same quality, and we went in that direction, with many iterations in between.

Gislene Haubrich: It's such a rich perspective and it's so inspiring for us to think about this technology. Also, as a counterpoint, because usually when people are talking about ChatGPT or any of these chatbots, the complaint is that they are very compliant. So, they will 'tell' you what

you want 'to hear,' that they will not really challenge you. And in a way, if I understand what you're saying, perhaps that's not the case. The case is that we don't know yet how to challenge it enough, to iterate enough, perhaps because we are too naive to, or at least this is the general understanding, that it's kind of agreeing with you, and it feels like it is not really helping you.

Ella Hafermalz: If you have an avatar or a chatbot that you're interacting with, it's very irritating if it only complies, only agrees. It's engaging for humans to have a bit of a bit of pushback, a bit of struggle. And with ChatGPT, it's an interesting case because, we actually have a lot more control over how it interacts than we think. For example, in the recent versions, you can change the settings, and you can ask it to be less compliant. You do have some say over what mode of interaction you're going into. Temperature for instance is basically a setting that controls how much randomness or variability is incorporated into the model's responses. If you turn the temperature down, the model tends to give more predictable responses, because it is sampling more heavily from the highest-probability next tokens. So, it is experienced as being less spirited, in our definition. Whereas if you increase the temperature, the model samples from a broader range of possible next tokens, which can produce responses that feel less predictable. So, we have some control over these settings, and it is worth thinking about the role that this plays in how we want to use Generative AI.

And then, there's also the *skill* that goes into working with AI. And that's something that we've found that has not been acknowledged sufficiently. There is a lot of talk about human-AI interaction, but we don't often think about what *type* of human and particularly the fact that a novice and an expert are different in what they bring to that interaction. And this is also related to hallucinations. So, in a sense, you know, the unpredictability of generative AI often gets talked about in terms of hallucinations. "We don't know if it's going to make stuff up". And if you're only dealing with really factual contexts, of course, that's a problem to solve. Also, if you're a novice and are in contact with these technologies and something erroneous comes out, it is a real risk because you don't have the knowledge needed to identify that it's wrong!

But in creative work, facts are not the main criterion of quality. Novelty and interest are important. Quirks can be useful. We were studying creative *experts* who had built up a whole repertoire of experiences in a non-AI setting. They brought that experience and expertise to their interactions with AI. And they could use AI as a spirited technology to generate images that surprised them – it

allowed them to have ‘aesthetic experiences’ that they could reflect upon, and use to move forward. Using Generative AI was similar for them to what one would usually get with a team, where you throw out ideas, they push back, they'd sketch something and you have something to react to. In a creative process, you need something outside of yourself to react to. We found that AI as a spirited technology can offer that opportunity - to a skilled operator.

Gislene Haubrich: It's nice that you're also putting this context very clearly because when we do research with other types of workers, one of the questions that I hear most people asking is how can we have the perfect prompt? And there's like a myriad of courses now trying to teach you how to have the perfect prompt. And in a way, if we find the perfect prompt, if that is to exist, we are kind of capping all this pushback you were just mentioning that's so important for us to really get something interesting out of this relationship with the technology.

Ella Hafermalz: Absolutely, and we're in the paper even quite critical of prompt engineering as the main focus for AI skills. There's something to be learned there for sure, but what we saw is not a one-shot interaction. Building something with AI is an extremely iterative process. And we're not saying you *should* build things with AI, but if you're going to do that, then it's extremely iterative. I mean, these creators that we studied would work for hours, days, just prompting, prompting, prompting, prompting. So, one beautifully engineered prompt will only get you so far. It's all about what do you do with the output that's thrown at you in that moment. What will be your next move? And that requires skill. So, there are real concerns here, for how do we foster that skill, when the skilled workers are operating mainly with the technology rather than with teams where you can bring novices in?

So, the socialization problem. Training newcomers is going to be a big issue in the long term.

The prompt is such a small part of the story. It's also this very embodied skill that's been built up over time that's needed. That is not easily replaced or instilled in someone. And then it's also this process of being open to what you encounter and exercising this aesthetic reflexivity. Essentially, you see something, whether it's text or an image, and you allow yourself to be in some way affected by that in order to form an opinion about what should be done next. It's not just critical thinking. It's being *moved* by it, either to go, that's rubbish, and therefore I want to go here, or, oh, that's sort of interesting, this little quirk over here, there could be something there. That's why we refer to harnessing a spirited technology – it is skilled, active, work.

Gislene Haubrich: This has been such an inspiring conversation – as always, Ella – but I know you have another engagement right after we finish recording this conversation. If we think about the research on new ways of working, which is an interesting umbrella, and I guess working with AI is one of these new ways of working. How do you think the research, like to directions do you think we should pay attention or should or could go with research in this area?

Ella Hafermalz: One area where we are scratching our head, and also getting excited about possibilities, is the methodological aspect. I think probably always, but even to a greater extent now, the method seems to really shape what you see when you study AI. There is a lot of experimental research. There is much to be gained from that, and at the same time, we want to know: what does this look like at the prompt face? What's going on in organizations? And here we have such a challenge to our traditional qualitative observational methods because a lot of AI use is *shadow AI* use. It's covert, it's hidden. People don't want to show or even talk openly about what they're doing with AI. The way that they use the tools is also very intertwined with their personal lives. We can't always ask people to show us their ChatGPT logs, for example, because there's a bit of work in that chat window, but there's also health concerns and relationship queries. And this is so mixed that where work is happening is also where life is happening to an even greater extent than perhaps, we've known for some time. And methodologically, this is getting challenging. But also, some exciting opportunities there, which we're exploring!

Gislene Haubrich: Our final question: If we want to learn more, read more about the relationship between new ways of working and GenAI, where else could we look for? What is important that we read to get inspired to think further this relationship?

Ella Hafermalz: This is a very fast-moving world, so it's very fragmented how to keep up with the conversation. So, I'm reading people's posts on LinkedIn. I watch a lot of Instagram reels where they are making skits - humorous videos - about what's going on in organizations, with '[tokenmaxxing](#)' for example. And I find that level of cultural analysis sometimes a step ahead of our more institutionalized press. I do find that the Financial Times has some very thoughtful content on these topics. It brings in geopolitics and economics, it's very multidisciplinary; you're paying for good journalism there. Of course, there's great academic papers coming out on these topics too, but because it takes years to publish our work, this more kind of iterative, rough, but

still very insightful popular content, is where I get a lot of inspiration. Talking to my students and even asking them to write hand-written reflections on their AI use has been extremely eye opening. There are lots of little ways of surfacing things that are not so easy to get a hold of at the moment: *What is it really like to work, study, live in this world?* So again, popular culture, there we go, full circle. I think that comedy, parody, is where we're getting some of the most insightful takes on what work is like today. And I will continue to be inspired by that. It is an amazing skill to capture phenomena in 30 second clips that make you laugh – and think. I love it.

Gislene Haubrich: Thank you so much, Ella, for your time and generosity on sharing your inspiring ideas and knowledge. We could continue this conversation for hours, as I would love to hear more about your experience with the students – you just won a teaching award! Big congrats! – and you're just telling me about the project on AI Literacy with schoolteachers. But these are all reasons for us keep in touch and follow your work.

Ella Hafermalz: Thank you.