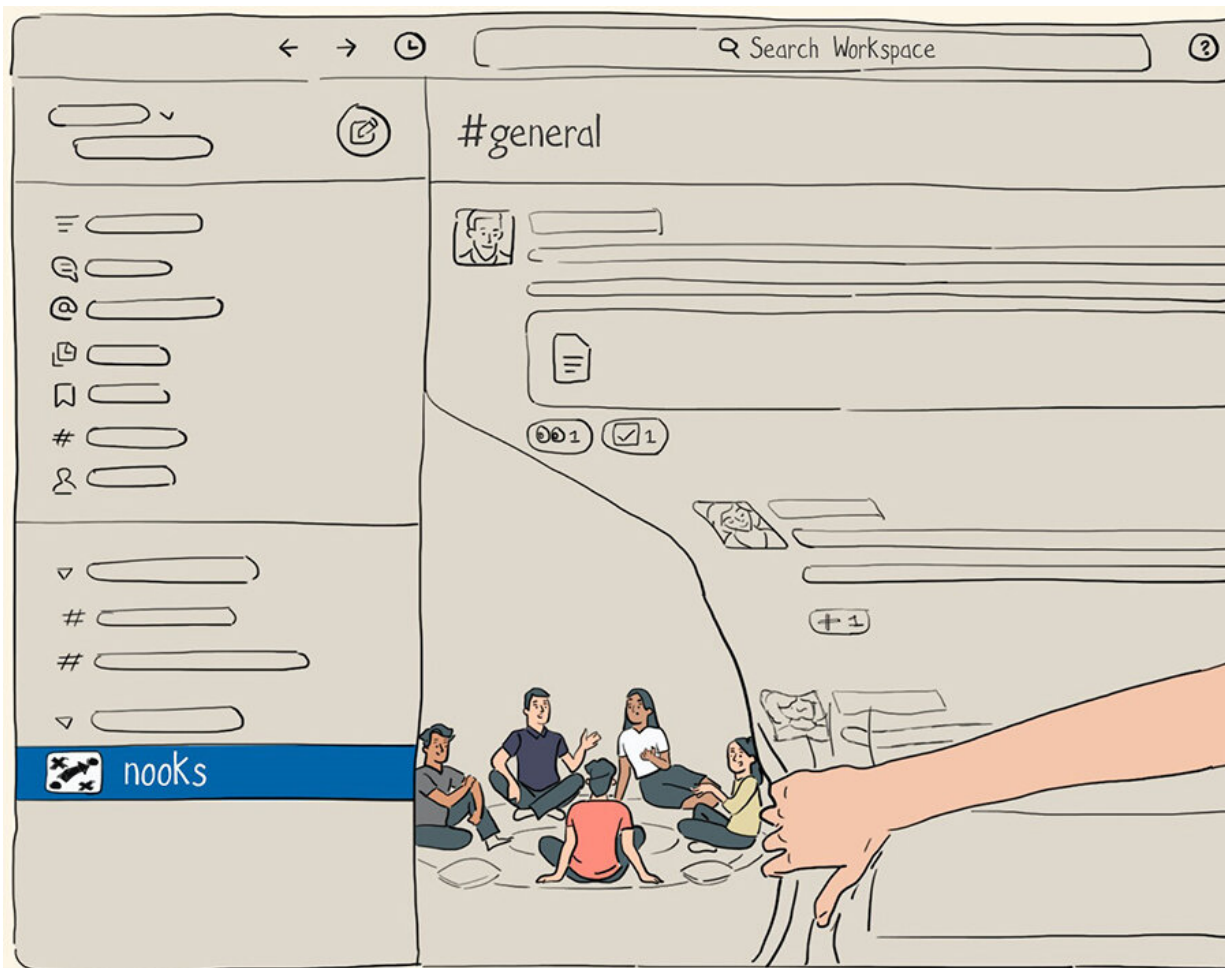


Researchers design tool to enhance workplace socialization in remote, hybrid arrangements

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To ease the friction caused by reduced in-person interaction, a team of HCII researchers created a Slack application called Nooks that helps initiate casual conversations and create affinity groups in an online workspace. Credit: Carnegie Mellon University

About one-third of our lives are spent at work, and the relationships we build there can have personal and professional benefits. But a majority of workers indicate difficulty connecting with co-workers socially, especially in the new landscape of remote and hybrid work arrangements.

To ease the friction caused by reduced in-person interaction, a team of researchers from Carnegie Mellon University's Human-Computer Interaction Institute created a Slack application that helps to initiate casual conversations and create affinity groups in an online workspace.

"We were freshly out of the pandemic, and we realized that everyone around us was complaining about how it's hard to build genuine connections," said Shreya Bali, the project's principal investigator who earned her master's degree from CMU's School of Computer Science in 2022. "Online modes of communication do provide us with the technical tools to make connections, but there is still a lot of hesitation to actually initiate such conversations when you are not in the same room as someone."

The team's new application, called Nooks, offers users a low-risk way to start new conversations in three phases: creation, incubation and activation. It starts with someone anonymously submitting a topic of interest. Then, the topic is incubated while the system presents it to other Slack users, allowing them to indicate if they are interested in the same topic. Once the [incubation period](#) is over, a private channel—or "[nook](#)"—is activated for this newly identified affinity group.

"Typically, when everyone's in the office at the same time, you can usually tell that if someone is near the water cooler it's OK to go and disturb them. Or if someone is walking in the corridor, you can start a conversation as you walk past," said Pranav Khadpe, an HCII Ph.D. student and one of the paper's co-authors. "But online, we don't have

those lightweight signals. Nooks can help to replace these [social cues](#)."

Some of the app's features include batched notifications to avoid frequent disruption and anonymity not only in proposing a new topic, but also once the nook is created. No one can see the list of who is already a member of a certain nook—a feature that could be especially helpful to newcomers.

"Anyone interested can hop into a nook and break the ice without any preconceived notion of who is in the group," Bali said. "This helps to avoid [social anxiety](#) of, say, not knowing anyone in the Nook or feeling intimidated if you see it includes colleagues of a different team or higher level."

In addition to Bali and Khadpe, the research team includes Chinmay Kulkarni, of the HCII, and Geoff Kaufman, the Robert E. Kraut Associate Professor of Human-Computer Interaction and the institute's Ph.D. program director.

The team tested the app for nine weeks with 25 student workers in a CMU summer research program. Eighty percent of these students were new to the university, and most were unacquainted, working across four different locations on campus. Of these participants, 22 participated in at least one Nook, with most participating in six.

Topics ranged from discussing books and television shows to arranging meetups and sharing LinkedIn profiles. The researchers found that usage was higher in the beginning of the nine weeks and decreased toward the end. Participants indicated that by that point in their program, they had identified co-workers with whom they connected and took their conversations offline or in-person.

"In their interviews, most of the participants indicated that they felt

Nooks did help to decrease the friction and perceived social risk of initiating new conversations and making new connections," Bali said.

The system could improve collaboration and productivity by fostering positive social interactions at work, while simultaneously helping employers understand the needs and interests of their employees.

"Through Nooks, employers could find that a lot of people in their organization are interested in certain topics," Khadpe said. "So in a way, it gives them a discovery mechanism they could use to organize more formal events or more formal interest groups in the workplace."

The team will presented their paper "Nooks: Social Spaces To Lower Hesitations in Interacting With New People at Work" on Wednesday, April 26, at the Association for Computing Machinery's Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems ([CHI 2023](#)) in Hamburg, Germany. The paper is also published as part of the conference proceedings.

The team says that in the future their framework can extend beyond Slack and integrate with other online messaging platforms, and they are looking for participants who would like to integrate the app into their workplace to continue deploying the application and seeing its use potential.

"Beyond supporting personal well-being, positive social interactions at work diffuse ideas, accelerate decision-making, promote better collaboration and enhance productivity," Khadpe said. "It's a neat win-win situation that Nooks can help facilitate."

More information: Shreya Bali et al, Nooks: Social Spaces to Lower Hesitations in Interacting with New People at Work, *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2023).

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