Distributed Prospective Memory:
An approach to understanding how nurses remember tasks

Tobias Grundgeiger
Penelope M. Sanderson
Hamish G. MacDougall
Bala Venkatesh

School of Psychology, The University of Queensland
School of Psychology, The University of Sydney
Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane, QLD

People’s ability to execute future intentions, or their prospective memory, is a critical aspect of cognitive work as failures can have adverse outcomes. Most research to date deals with unaided prospective memory performance outside a healthcare context. We report results from a field study investigating prospective memory performance of intensive care nurses. Concepts from distributed cognition help to identify how nurses use physical properties of their working environment to manage prospective memory demands. Results show that (1) PM demands can be classified using a taxonomy from aviation and (2) nurses use properties of the working environment to manage PM demands. Focusing on distributed support for prospective memory makes it easier to study prospective memory in rich work contexts. The results inform health information system and device design and professional education.