My Space, Your Space, Our Space -

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH ON
SPACE OWNERSHIP, WORKPLACE
PERSONALIZATION, EMPOWERMENT
& PRODUCTIVITY
Technological innovations combined with outside and inside pressure for change have created a wave of physical office space transformations. There are several layers when it comes to understanding how organizations work and how commonly used spaces affect users. Workplace changes and their effects have been researched extensively in the past decades and many interesting findings have shed new light into the ways in which offices should be designed.

Another trend that has altered the workplaces of many is an ever-growing interest to have better collaboration within the workplace. Organizations are looking for ways to make the best use of their spaces to cut back on fixed costs while also trying to balance providing for human needs and requirements. However, many companies have fallen short with the difficult task of finding the optimal balance.

Introduction

The changing nature of work and the ways of working have shaken the foundations of what has traditionally been considered as good office design. New paradigms have entered the picture as we are just beginning to understand the effects of the advancements in different technologies as well as new needs for effectiveness and flexibility in the working life. Organizations are looking for ways to make the best use of their spaces to cut back on fixed costs while also trying to balance providing for human needs and requirements. However, many companies have fallen short with the difficult task of finding the optimal balance.
office walls. The unofficial conversations that used to be considered as needless chitchat have been proven to promote cooperation and innovation, and this evidence has not gone unnoticed by many managers\(^1\). The shift to open plan offices and, in recent years, to hot-desking has slowly knocked down many walls that have seemed to be making knowledge-sharing more difficult. These non-territorial workspaces remove most status markers and group boundaries and this has been argued to have several benefits. In addition to enhancing cross-functional collaboration and interaction\(^2\) these types of offices have also been praised for aiding an organization to achieve a level of organizational agility and a refocus on the core competencies\(^3\).

Consequently, some fundamental changes have also happened in the actual planning process when re-designing office spaces. Understanding the possible benefits of a well-executed office design process has reached bigger audiences and the growing trend nowadays is to aim at satisfying employees through new office designs. The ultimate goal of such an endeavor is often to maximize satisfaction and thus productivity at work\(^5\). However, some researchers have claimed that achieving this can be interpreted as a paradox since, at the same time, companies are moving towards space sharing and clear desk principles\(^6\). The controversy lays in the lack of possibilities for personalization\(^6\) and of personal control as people change desks on a daily basis and thus cannot create a space of their own anymore\(^6\).

Expressing one’s identity through modification of one’s workspace has been considered as an important part of organizational behavior with many implications related to performance at work. The complexity of shifting towards openness and sharing within the physical space is evident and quite topical. There seems to be a tension between the concept of non-territorality and the concept of personalization\(^6\) as research has shown, the need to personalize is not a minor phenomenon: different surveys mostly done in North-America have shown that approximately 70 to 90 percent of the workforce personalizes their immediate surroundings in an office environment\(^7\). This behavior can include having pictures of family at sight or hanging posters or artwork on the walls, for example. Understanding the motivations behind this behavior provides one route toward understanding the larger context of workplace change processes going on today.

**Why is personalization important to employees?**

A wide range of research has aimed at finding out the reasons why personalization occurs and the possible implications of loose or strict personalization policies in companies. Findings have indicated that there are several positive outcomes when a company enables and even promotes the possibilities for personalization. Being able to personalize one’s space can lead to feelings of personal control which has been found to have several benefits such as reducing stress and enhancing mental health\(^8\). One clear topic of academic discussion has been the notion that personalization might enhance a person’s attachment to their environments\(^9\) and, in the end, to the actual organization itself. Several studies have also hinted that personalization is simply related to satisfaction with the physical work environment and job satisfaction\(^10\) which is one of the important indicators of life expectancy\(^11\).

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**Personalization**

The term comes from environmental psychology; it refers to the display of personal and work-related items or the arrangement of the workspace to distinguish the occupant from others. Personalization can also occur to make oneself familiar with a place, both at home and in the organization. Personalization can be done by individuals to their own spaces or by groups to their collective spaces and it can be done to places or to objects that belong to the user/s either permanently or temporarily.

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The debate regarding whether a company should allow its employees to personalize has been going on for decades. An organization might perceive personalization as office clutter, while an individual can see personalization as a way of establishing his or her identity at the office. It has been proven again and again that even though a company would restrict the possibilities to personalize, the employees will do it anyway. These findings throughout the years have suggested that we might have a strong psychological need to personalize our environments. Looking at the topic from the perspective of organizational wellbeing, it has also been proposed that allowing employees to personalize can better the whole organizational climate. Research has indicated that companies that have allowed personalization have had less absenteeism, company costs and also the employees have tended to stay longer in the company. Past experiences have also shed light on the possible negative implications regarding restricting personalization. A study of three large British organizations showed the flip side of the coin: “the organizations’ strong stance against office personalization led to conflict, subversive personalization of workspace, and apathy among employees – all leading to decreased productivity”.

Personalization can take many forms and it can also happen within groups of people. The act of personalization can be motivated by the need to associate oneself with a certain group. Some researchers have suggested that teams should be free to express their own identity within their work environment thus differentiating themselves from other teams. For example, this might mean that a peer group would attach stickers to their phones in order to create a common identity. This kind of behavior can create a feeling of belonging. Group personalization can be one option to increase motivation of the employees but it should be done in a way that does not compromise the identification with the organization as a whole. The possible strategy of encouraging group personalization is backed by a social identity approach to organizational life. This approach proposes that employees recognition and involvement can increase motivation and engagement by increasing organizational identification.

Researchers Sandra Brunia and Anca Hartjes-Gosselink recently summarized the existing research regarding personalization and its implications. They concluded that personalization helps individuals to place themselves in an organization, and that personalization can be linked to identity, emotion, job satisfaction, work productivity, control, territoriality, status, and organizational factors like company policy, having assigned workplaces and functional group identity at the office.

In the identification with the organization as a whole, groups can see themselves from other teams. Personalization can be one option to increase motivation of the employees but it should be done in a way that does not compromise the identification with the organization as a whole. The possible strategy of encouraging group personalization is backed by a social identity approach to organizational life. This approach proposes that employee recognition and involvement can increase motivation and engagement by increasing organizational identification.

An architect’s perspective: Change through design

A pioneer in the field of workplace design, Francis Duffy, addressed the importance of workplace transformation processes in regards to employee satisfaction and the possible changes for improving overall wellbeing of employees. An organization that wishes to change its culture – to abandon hierarchy, to encourage interaction, to stimulate creativity, to accelerate innovation, to break across previously impenetrable organizational silos – would be foolish to attempt such changes while persisting with an office environment that expresses – exactly contrary values”. He argues that far too many offices have been crafted by factory-type of thinking and they reflect values from over a century ago.

The vast possibilities of physical transformation processes are relevant today and more people acknowledge this. The concreteness of a physical design solution has the potential to transform values such as egalitarianism, transparency and creativity into forms and layouts. Duffy continues: “physical design, with its ubiquity, its longevity and its sustainability, is arguably far the most powerful medium available to businesses to proclaim their values”.

Duffy’s widely read and cited article “Design and facilities management in a time of change” was written almost 15 years ago and although changes have taken place since then, there is still a great amount of knowledge-work that happens in rather stiff spatial structures. Duffy criticizes the architects, designers and facility managers because of the slow pace of change in office environments. These professions would have had the opportunity to anticipate emerging user demands and thus create more user-friendly office environments but, according to Duffy, this unfortunately did not happen – at least not fast enough.

Francis Duffy highlighted the need for the whole design profession to reinvent itself and prove its importance to a higher degree. He argues that a more systemic understanding and a better integration of design, construction and space management are needed. There is also a clear need for research that would use comparative data from cumulative case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of using workplace design to achieve strategic purposes. Through re-design of these fields and proof of success from research we can “unleash the full potential of design to business”.

Workplace identity = Workplace identity refers to the distinctiveness and status self-categorizations used by an individual to signal his or her identity in a workplace. These self-categorizations include personal identity categorizations, which signify a person’s intragroup distinctions and status (“I’m an efficient worker”), and social identity categorizations, which signify a person’s distinctive and status-oriented affiliations (“I’m an engineer”). These identity categorizations do not need to be work-related but they need to be used by an individual to define him- or herself at work.

One big contradiction in research seems to be: why do we actually personalize our work environments? Are we expressing our identities or are we just marking our territories? The answers are multifaceted and research supporting both views can be found. Some results have indicated that workplace personalization helps employees to develop a workplace identity while, on the other hand, many results have emphasized the perspective that personalization is actually a form of behavior that is mostly motivated by territoriality and the actual situation at the workplace (the personalization policies, for example). For instance, researchers Meredith Wells and Luke Thelen have suggested that an individual’s personality does not predict the expression of his or her personality through personalization at the office. This would hint that personalization might be more related to the actual situation of an individual at the organization and thus personalization should be seen as a type of status marker.

In the early 2000’s, quite radical suggestions were made for office designs regarding personalization: for example, Wells and Thelen suggested that high-status employees should be provided with the private space they need to display their personal belongings and this would increase their psychological wellbeing. However, in many companies of today which see reduced hierarchical structures as an integral part of their ways of working, this strategy can hardly be seen as an appealing option.

Are hot-desking environments a threat to workplace identity?

Personalization is integral to the general discussion regarding the current larger scale shifts in office design. In the time of the “Laptop Era” research on personalization has taken new directions. Academic researchers from different fields have tackled issues regarding personalization combined with space sharing and increased mobility because these changes have clear effects on ownership of space at the office.

Kimberly D. Elsbach from University of California investigated the effects of new spatial arrangements that restrict personalization on perceived employee well-being and satisfaction. She interviewed and observed one high-tech company’s employees who had moved into a hot-desking office six months before starting the research project. Her research aimed to understand the issues relating to identity threat in new non-territorial office spaces. Elsbach’s research showed that some employees felt that their workplace identities had been threatened in the process of moving into this new office environment. The results emphasized the importance of personalization in relation to the employees’ distinctive identities because many reported feelings of losing a part of their identity with the new arrangement. In order to communicate their distinctive personality traits many workers started to carry portable artifacts with them that reflected their identities. She concluded that the loss of office personalization “appeared to leave employees with a strong need to affirm personal distinctiveness” but the environment did not provide many options to engage in this behavior.

Elsbach suggests that providing opportunities to use both portable and permanent objects to showcase different workers’ personalities might be an appeal-
7 MEANINGS OF PERSONALIZATION

Found by interviewing and observing office workers in a space sharing environment.

1. **Comfortable and familiar environment**: personalizing spaces to improve the feel of the environment. Also: seeking for familiarity by creating one’s “own” workplace with items.

2. **Status and achievements**: the need to showcase achievements of successful cases like photographs, trophies or having an assigned office space.

3. **Territoriality**: creating territories by personalizing and claiming space.

4. **Control**: having the control over the environment, not being disturbed when there is an important task to deliver for example.

5. **Recognition, clarity, certainty, and rest**: meanings given to personalization that are related to lack of personal control. People value clarity and certainty: similar routines and territories can give tranquility of the mind.

6. **Identity**: decreasing the anonymity at the office, recognition, creating a pleasant environment in your own way, memories.

7. **Dehumanization**: behavior against the policies that decrease the ‘human feeling’ by personalizing the space (even though it would be against the rules).

company had been featured in the “Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to work for” (UK) listing for four years in a row when the case study was written in 2008. The company’s spaces had been designed as a multifunctional hot-desking environment and it seemed that they had worked their way out from the problem of whether the worker’s needs for privacy, identity and personal control are automatically compromised in a space sharing environment.

The most central finding from the study was that the culture of an organization is the key factor when determining whether a workforce can own their own space in a space sharing environment. In terms of trying to increase workplace satisfaction and performance, the researchers identified that all space planning techniques and methods will fall short, if an organization does not have the right culture to support the ideas. One example of a practical way to give some form of assistance to the employees in this new environment was introducing an electronic and easily accessible employee profile system. The profiles told the reader the position of the person in the company, their academic and professional qualifications, previous projects and provided a link to their electronic CV. This was one way of compensating the reduction of possibilities to showcase one’s identity and status to coworkers in this low-hierarchy promoting environment.

The case study also brings forth another important notion: a simple path to ensure employee satisfaction is to involve end-users in the space planning process. It has been proven that employee involvement will almost certainly enhance their overall perceptions of the workplace. The idea was embraced by Drivers Jonas LLP and their new work environment was designed as a cooperative effort by the planners, interior designers and the actual users.

Alternative strategies to workplace design and management

The positive and negative examples showcase the complexities of workplace change management. Human beings are the crucial factor in the success or failure of the non-territorial office concept – of any kind of an office concept. It is evident that these change processes are not as simple as cause-effect logic which would mean that “if we change this, people will do this”. How users experience the office space influences their behavior in spite of the rules of a particular design. This is why business ethics is being brought up in literature as the tensions between user experience, efficiency and effectiveness ought to be taken into close consideration by managers.

Some case examples have extended the understanding of successful change processes: “it becomes clear that preparing a future change in the workplace might include an explicit discussion of human needs to identification and sense-making by personalization”. These “softer issues” have not been widely addressed by managers in the past, but evidence has started to pile up, and a deeper understanding and consideration of the human needs is being asked for by many well-established researchers.

Several topical insights were summarized by two Dutch researchers after conducting a case study in a governmental organization which had moved into a space sharing environment: “The situation at organization X shows that employees used their talks and complaints about the new work environment as a new binding element which probably influences the effectiveness and efficiency more than expected. Increased usability might be gained when the user’s knowledge, expectations and perceptions about the new work environment were better inquired, developed and implemented not only in the new work environment itself but also in development and design processes”.

The power and possibilities of a well-executed spatial change process is mentioned time and time again in the most current research. Complementary suggestions have also been provided through experimental research. Craig Knight and Alexander Haslam from the University of Exeter made interesting findings by conducting experiments in which office space management was manipulated through specific conditions. The aim of these experiments was to find evidence on the impacts of different kinds of workspace management strategies on organizational identification, wellbeing and productivity.

The two experiments conducted revealed that lean conditions at the office may actually induce lower performance. The result contradicts with the popular idea that lean (minimalistic and tidy) offices would be the key to efficiency and productivity. A striking finding was that empowering users to participate in designing their office spaces increased productivity up to 32%. The experiments provided consistent support to the idea that design and user empowerment play a crucial role in determining people’s response to their work environment.
The gathered data provided strong evidence that design-led change processes can have positive effects on employees but the greatest gains seem to be made possible only through involving the users in spatial design and even in the space making processes. Knight and Haslam concluded: “Having input into the design of their work space increased participants’ feelings of autonomy and decisional involvement and this led to increases in comfort, job satisfaction and productivity. However, as a corollary, these effects were attenuated when participants were disempowered”.

These kinds of research results provide crucial pieces of information for professionals who are concerned with creating the built environment. The trend of involving users more fully in change processes, participatory design, is nowadays gaining more attention in design education and practice. Thus, to find evidence that user-involvement in office design can actually increase productivity is an important indication for the whole design field to continue on this track. Some pioneering companies have been using participatory design methods already from the seventies and the approach has strong roots in Scandinavia. When participatory processes were developed in architecture and design, the focus was in promoting democracy. In a properly executed participative change process, the design professionals would examine and fulfill the employee’s explicit requirements regarding their work spaces. Nevertheless, the experience has shown that the process has not always gone as planned. It has for example been noted that sometimes the level of participation remains only shallow: “The role played by the workplace designer was to let the employees feel their input had been taken care of and at the same time represent the client so that she/he still is in control of the overall process”.

New frontiers: about partner engaged design and placemaking

Looking at the findings from Knight’s and Haslam’s research, their idea of empowered offices goes well with newer approaches in the field of design that are taking participation into the level of “full empowerment” of the stakeholders letting them to be active participants in the design process. These novel collaborative design processes have been widely discussed and tested out but they are not commonly used in office design — at least not yet.

A group of researchers from Interactive Institute in Sweden aimed at refining the process of collaborative design through a real project related to workplace design. The aim for this “Experiment Office” project was to develop a design process that would better integrate the complex and fast changing conditions of today’s work environment. Their argument was that the workplace of tomorrow will be developed together with the users who are the real experts of their needs. The goal for the design researchers was to construct the right kind of a setting for fruitful collaboration. In practice this meant that they created structured design workshops where collaborative inquiry and the actual design took place.

The researchers from the Interactive Institute tested out the collaborative design process by utilizing various tools and design artifacts to ease the dialogue regarding possible designs of the new environment (video cards, board games, scenario building and interactive digital space visualization). These methods are often used for user-involvement in design and they were tailored for this specific project in order to promote creativity and facilitate a shared understanding of the design problems at hand. They explained the process further: “A partner engaged collaborative design process develops new concepts through joint interaction and dialogue. It includes active collaboration between users, different stakeholders and designers -- The partners play an active role in exploring existing workplaces and the whole making of new work environments”.

The experiment revealed that collaborative design approaches in workplace design are possible and can lead to suc-
cessful outcomes (not chaos) through careful planning. The researchers emphasized that the participants need to have a clear purpose in participating. This shared mission is required in order to keep the process going. Overall, the process indicated that collaborative methods might have much more to give in terms of user engagement than the traditional participatory approach but further research needs to be conducted to validate this. They argued that the methods used seemed to utilize the competences of the people to a greater extent than the traditional methods.

As in the case of the “Experiment Office”, many practitioners have woken up to the need of developing their product - the design process. The experiments that have tested out the possibilities of participatory and collaborative design seem to be acknowledging the complexity of designing for groups of people better compared to the old and simpler ways of conducting the same task. A British architect and a Professor from Sheffield University, Irina Bauman, summarized many of these new changes in mindsets in her text *At best architecture is about placemaking*. Insights from her own practice tell the story of a complicated endeavor which aims at systemic excellence: “At its best, architecture interfaces with its context to create man-made places that enhance our experience of being together”.

According to Bauman, the future of spatial design is in resilient and sustainable placemaking – and achieving this is not a simple task. This means that in change processes the aim would be to understand the complexities of changing needs by finding a balance between what is permanent and what is temporary, and to understand the complexities of humans and their experience of space by finding ways of using stepping stones, temporary trials, evaluation and modification. Again, close collaboration is being asked for by Bauman, but also a crucial change in the prevailing attitudes: spatial changes ought to stem from a deep understanding, humility and reflection.

**PRACTICAL TIPS**

**Enable personalization to reap the many benefits of it**
- Fighting the battle against workplace personalization might not be the smartest move as companies who have allowed and promoted personalization have been found to have a better organizational climate and less turnover.
- A strict “no” to workplace personalization might also create a reduction in productivity.
- In an office with individual desks / rooms: build flexibility and spaces for personalization into the office design (bookshelves, tackable surfaces, etc.)
- In an office with shared desks:
  - Provide dedicated places for “the most important things” such as trophies.
  - Create possibilities to use portable identity markers: mobile carts, mobile walls, project rooms that you can acquire for longer times.
  - Explore the possibilities of digital personalization.
  - Think about possibilities to have groups / departments / floors personalize spaces in some ways.
  - On a larger scale: if there is a need for bigger changes, consider “procedural personalization” = participatory and collaborative processes in designing and making of the spaces.
  - Remember a holistic perspective: creating a culture of an organization that supports the decisions that are being made regarding personalization and space ownership is the key.

**Respect human needs**
- Understanding the bigger picture: user experience, effectiveness and efficiency can create tensions which ought to be noticed and balanced.
- Empower people: empowerment (sincere user-involvement) creates good results so this should not be overlooked when conducting any changes at the office.
- Invest in real empowerment opportunities: giving freedom to the employees and then taking it away can have extremely negative impacts.
- Co-creation can save costs: employees are the best experts of their own needs. Appropriate design can take place when it is done with real facts not assumptions.
Main references: