# Front and Backstage in the Workplace: An Explorative Case Study on Activity Based Working and Employee Perceptions of Control over Work-related Demands

Mari Ekstrand
Ph.D. Candidate at Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU
Mari.Ekstrand@ntnu.no
+ 47 95 85 50 13

Sigrid Damman
Research Scientist, SINTEF Technology and Society
Sigrid.Damman@sintef.no

Geir Karsten Hansen
Professor. Arkitekt M. ScNorwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU
Geir.Hansen@ntnu.no

Morten Hatling
Senior Researcher, SINTEF Technology and Society
Morten.Hatling@sintef.no

**ABSTRACT**
Employees' ability to handle work-related demands, structure their own work and manage workflow has become highly important in today's complex organisations. This study explores the impact of the office environment on employees' ability to control interaction, structure own work processes and handle work-related demands. Our focus is on the influence of the physical premises, especially on how work within private, privileged and public work zones may affect perceptions of, and possibilities to control, customer interactions and other work related demands.

The paper is based on a qualitative case study in a Norwegian finance corporation. The study was carried out as an evaluation of an on-going process to roll out a new branch office concept. The core method was semi-structured interviews, carried out with 29 employees and managers. The triangulated research design further included observations, field notes, user logs and document analyses.

Our findings indicate that, in a customer centred work process, separate zones for customer related and intra-departmental work provide employees with increased scope to handle work demands and perceive control in their work. Zoning helped structure the workflow and provided employees with new resources in customer interaction and other work tasks. Additionally, the study indicates an increase in employee satisfaction and improved internal communication. Increased operational flexibility and improved customer relations were further benefits associated with the new workplace concept.

**Keywords**
Workplace, Activity based working, Control, Privacy, Front and Backstage

## 1      INTRODUCTION

Individual control over work-related aspects is a high priority among today's knowledge workers (Myerson et al., 2010). This is commonly referred to as the degree of control, discretion and responsibility an individual has over location, methods, content and tools for the work process (Laing et al., 1998).

Demerouti et al. (2001) state that employee well-being, job strain and performance are affected by the balance between job demands and resources. In their model, job demands refer to organisational, social, physical or psychological work-related aspects that require sustained mental and/or physical effort and hence are associated with psychological and/or physiological costs. Job resources*,* on the other hand, are aspects of the job that are supportive of achieving work goals or reducing job demands.

This paper explores the impact of the office environment on how work in different task specific zones may affect employee perceptions of environmental control, customer interactions, and work-related demands.

The paper is based on a qualitative case study in a Norwegian finance corporation. The study was carried out as an evaluation of an on-going process to roll out a new branch office concept. Four offices were included, where three had gone through a full transition to the new concept. The time since the transition was three, two and one year/s, respectively. The fourth office was in the process of restructuring, thus broadening our basis for understanding and comparing perceptions of work and control in the new and old concept.

The core method was semi-structured interviews, carried out with 29 employees and managers with different roles and work tasks. The number of interviews conducted at each office varied between 6-9. Field notes on observations and informal discussions during a 2-day visit at each office, as well as an employee self-reporting log on work in different zones across two working days, also provided important data. Secondary materials in form of internal reports and company statistics were used to triangulate and verify the findings.

Interview and observational data from the units were coded and analysed separately. However, our focus here is on cross-unit analysis. The reported observations, views and experiences cut across all units that had fulfilled a transition, unless otherwise stated.

## 2      ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL IN THE WORKPLACE

Environmental control refers to the degree of freedom to choose how and when to use the physical workspace to pursue one's work goals and work processes. This is opposed to being controlled by space and organisational policies (O'Neill, 2010). Danielsson (2010) found that flexible workplace concepts, providing control in form of autonomy over where and when to work, were positively linked to work satisfaction.

Strategies to control the environment may occur at individual, group, or organisational level (O'Neill, 2010). Current literature has mainly focused on individual experience of control through personalisation, adjustability, control over where and how to work and how this impacts on individual and work related outcomes (e.g. O'Neill, 1994, Wells, 2000, Huang et al., 2004, Lee and Brand, 2010, Robertson et al., 2008).

Regarding service sector workplaces, control of unwanted interaction is particularly relevant. According to Rapoport (1980), privacy may be controlled through; *rules* (manners, avoidance, social hierarchies) making unwanted interaction in a specific context impossible, *moving away* from the context (literally or by internal withdrawal), structuring different activities

in *time*, through *spatial separation,* or *physical devices* such as walls, doors, etc. How such mechanisms work is dependent on the culture and clarity of cues in the setting (Rapoport, 1980). Here, management and the influence of organisational policies, technology, and training also come into play (O'Neill, 2010). Steele (1973) emphasises the role of learning how the workplace may be used to support work processes, through the concept of *'environmental competence'* – *"a person's ability to be aware of the surrounding environment and its impact on him; and his ability to use or change his setting to help him achieve his goals without inappropriately destroying the setting or reducing his sense of effectiveness or that of the people around him"* (Steele, 1973: 113)

## 3        SPACE, ZONES AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

Chanlat (2006) argues that all organisational space is divided into internal and external worlds, as well as divisions inside the organisation. Such divisions organize space, mirror the organisation structure, and are fundamental for the identity of employees (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006). Goffman (1959) suggests that all social interaction may be seen as role-play, framed in the *region* where it occurs. In this perspective, employees are actors on stage, who behave and apply impression management guided by the specific regions and social settings where they work. Space and its boundaries give indications for which actions and interactions that are deemed appropriate (Rapoport, 1980).

Goffman distinguishes between a front stage, which is *"the place where the performance is given"* (Goffman, 1959: 107), and a backstage which is off-limit to customers, providing employees with the opportunity to be 'off stage'. Here, they can 'rehearse' and 'prepare' for the front stage performance. Ashforth et al. (2008) suggest that the backstage serves as a place to resolve conflicts, and as a place for *role relaxation,* where employees may 'step out of the service role' and have an informal tone with colleagues. Others suggest that backstage locations are important for organisational communication and learning (Wägar, 2007, Ellingson, 2003).

Front stage and backstage can be defined by visual, aural and/or contextual boundaries. A front stage area may be used as a backstage when the audience is not around and a backstage region may temporary become a front stage when a member of the audience enters into this area (Goffman, 1959, Ashforth et al., 2008), for example through customer interaction over the phone (Ellingson, 2003).

Harrison (2002) operates with a distinction between *private*, *privileged* and *public* zones. Each zone consists of a number of different work settings divided by physical and non-physical boundaries. Privileged zones are areas requiring invited access for visitors. Due to planned and un-planned presence of different audiences and co-staging of different performances, privileged zones may be associated with blurring boundaries.

Creating workspace environments based on this and similar distinctions, organisations may use *zoning* to divide functions and activities. Most research on front and backstage in service workplaces has focused on the backstage as in relaxation locations, social areas, lunch rooms etc. (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2008, Wägar, 2007). Our concern is rather with the separation, interplay and blurring of boundaries between work in private, privileged and public zones.

## 4       THE NEW OFFICE CONCEPT IN THE CORPORATION

The offices studied had recently been restructured from a traditional branch office design into an activity-based workplace concept (figure 1). Each office represented the three divisions of the corporation; private banking, corporate banking and real estate brokerage. Both banking advisors and brokers described their work as highly demanding, due to focus on individual sales and productivity. In addition, brokers worked under high time pressure, in constant movement between other sites and the office. Frontline personnel, responsible for customer service in the customer area, linked job demands mainly to customer interaction, efficiency and inter-disciplinary communication.

        While most work previously was conducted in cellular offices, customer contact in the new office was assigned to a specific customer interaction zone. Internal work was assigned to a range of open back office locations, separated from the customer area with a code-looked door. The customer area consisted of different locations including a reception, a waiting area, a 'coffee area', different open and semi open meeting areas and a self-service area. More secluded meeting rooms were located further in from the public zone. This zone was privileged (Harrison, 2002), in that meetings were appointed and customers were not to move there unless accompanied by staff. A new virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI) enabled employees to access their own desktop from any PC in the office. A video screen ensured good contact between the front and back office.

*Figure 1: Zoning in the new office concept.*
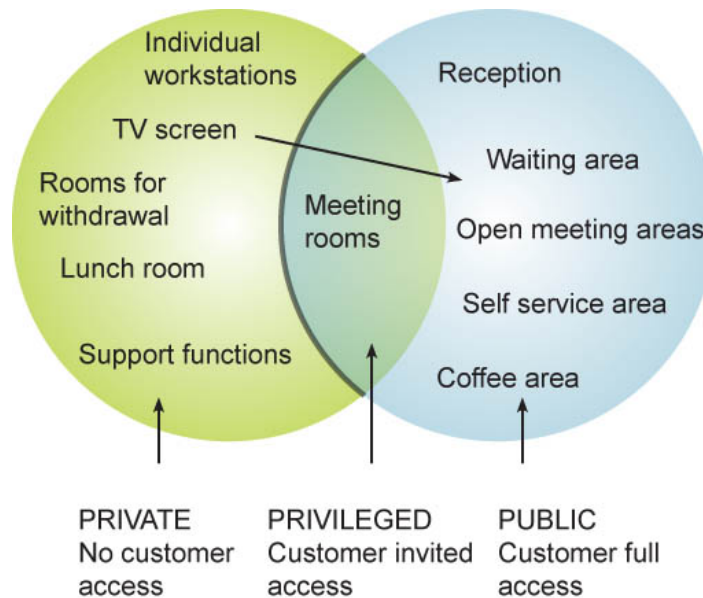
## 5        OVERALL RESPONSE TO ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING

The overall employee response to the new workplace concept was positive. The layout and design were perceived as attractive and functional, with a positive impact on customer satisfaction. The technological solution was also well received, and regarded by many as a necessity in an activity-based workplace.

Advisors and brokers were especially positive regarding the separation of the customer and the internal working space. One said: *"It feels natural that you have a place where you do your follow up work and paper work, and a place where you meet customers".* A leader also commented that: *"You provide the advisors with the possibility to be protected from disturbances and manage their own day".* Several advisors explained that under the previous workplace concept customers often dropped by their office without prior notice. They were *"time thieves",* compromising employees' ability to handle the workload. The private zone provided greater possibilities to plan and structure the work. According to some, this had a positive impact on their productivity. As customers did not have visual contact with the back office, flexible hours were permitted for advisors and brokers, adding further to their autonomy.

Although most frontline personnel were positive about the zoning, the separation also involved certain strains. The new concept was intended to be customer-centred, with advisors assisting the frontline in hectic periods. In practice advisors spent only limited time in the public zone, and frontline workers sometimes struggled to handle queues alone. Still, some claimed that the workflow between front and back office had improved. Some frontline personnel also claimed that when advisors were assisting in the frontline, this somewhat reduced organizational hierarchies and increased the competence level in the public zone. The arrangement also opened up for more operational flexibility in terms of part-time presence by employees from other offices, staffing the public zone in accordance with fluctuations in customer traffic, and handling absenteeism without the need for substitutes.

## 6   CONTROL OVER WORK-RELATED DEMANDS IN THE PUBLIC ZONE

Most employees interviewed, emphasised that the new concept involved a new way of relating to the customers. As one said; *"You create a customer area and a work area. Additionally, you open up the customer area and say 'welcome in, here we are and you may use us'".* The public zone set the stage for a different kind of performance. In the traditional office, the public zone was dominated by a neutral waiting area, visible queue management, counters and cash registers, – making a sharp distinction between customer and employee areas. This ensured a certain distance between the two categories, turning attention to their professional transactions and away from personal dimensions. With the new concept, the customer was placed in focus. The concept was implemented with a training process, where frontline personnel were trained to use the various locations and devices and meet customers on the floor, interacting with them not as officers, but as more personal 'hosts'.

This development was associated with new role expectations. Several of the frontline personnel, especially younger ones, appreciated being 'hosts'. The new status, combined with the spaces and technologies available, gave them more responsibility and freedom in where and how to handle customers and play their front stage roles. The different locations contained new resources that could be used to stage quite different performances depending on the customers'

needs and preferences. The public zone constituted a front stage most of the time, but was also used as a backstage, for internal meetings, etc., when customers were not around.

On the other hand, when approaching customers on the floor, some employees experienced a sense of vulnerability and insecurity, which they did not feel before. Some suggested that peak periods had become more stressful, due to less overview and unpredictable support from the advisors. Many advisors, on their side, found it difficult to contribute in the public zone. Some claimed to not have enough time or technical competence, while others did not really consider it part of their job.

In a way, work-related demands increased, partly through organizational policy bringing a more active, open role for employees, and partly through physical changes removing pre-existing boundaries between employees and customers. On the other hand, new job resources were made available, and the layout and technology provided more flexibility. The environmental control increased, through added spatial and technological options, as well as increased room for individual privacy mechanisms, such as spatial separation and moving away. According to most frontline employees, this made it easier to handle work-related demands linked to customer interaction, and increased their level of job satisfaction.

## 7   CONTROL OVER WORK-RELATED DEMANDS IN THE PRIVILEGED ZONE

Several advisors and brokers preferred to have brief, non-sensitive meetings in the public zone, to make them 'shorter', 'more efficient' and as this fitted more with the purpose of the meeting. However, the most common place for regular meetings was the privileged zone. The meeting rooms had a bright and airy modern design, with some elements pointing to the future and some links to the organisational identity and local community. They also came with the above-mentioned VDI and a corporate instruction for customer meetings. Most interviewees said these changes facilitated more streamlined and well-prepared meetings. The separation from the normal workspace ensured confidentiality and decreased the number of disruptions from phone calls, colleagues and other customers.

Unlike the cellular offices, the privileged zone provided a space without any 'personal mess', where the customer was placed in focus. This set a professional standard, at the same time as it gave the employees extended freedom in how to define the situation and use the workspace as a resource in their role play. The meeting rooms were, as one employee put it; *"sales theatres"*. This was linked to the physical design, but also to being out of the public gaze, removed from the control of other employees and customers.

Brokers, advisors and frontline personnel also worked individually in the meeting rooms, especially before and after meetings. Thus, the privileged zone was home to both front stage and backstage situations, when employees could 'rehearse' and recharge their batteries. The boundaries between front and backstage were blurred spatially, but kept up by separation in time. Employees got more freedom to decide where, when and how to meet their customers. This increased their control over time use, structuring of work, and role demands. Whether for front or backstage situations, they could reserve a space where they controlled access, unlike in the public and private zones, where they controlled their own movements but had less control over the movements and possible intrusion by others.

In the latter sense, the privileged zone was the zone where employees had most control over their environment, and at times received the highest level of privacy. Although the rooms

were small and spatial flexibility was more limited than in the other zones, the technology and interior were important new job resources. Interestingly, this was also the zone most unanimously appreciated by the employees. This could be because it added job resources and increased environmental control for all categories of employees without introducing new work-related demands to the same extent as the other zones. The observation further underlines the importance of distinguishing between environmental control and spatial flexibility, suggesting that other people also constitute a part of the environment and that a privileged zone has important social functions for employees as well as customers.

## 8    CONTROL OVER WORK-RELATED DEMANDS IN THE PRIVATE ZONE

Initially, most employees were sceptical towards open workspace solutions. This scepticism was also prominent at the office that still was in transition to the new workplace concept. After the open workspace had been implemented, most advisors stated that it worked well for them.

Working in an open environment was reported to improve workflow and made it easier to: 1) make and maintain contact with colleagues, 2) share information and stay updated, 3) learn from each other, 4) motivate and support each other through sharing success and failure stories, 5) create stronger relationships and 6) notice when colleagues and managers are available or not, and 7) have and create closer relations between employees and managers. Linked to these conditions, most advisors stated that the open-plan solution greatly increased their sense of well-being at work.

Challenges were related to lack of concentration, mainly due to noise and interruptions. The brokers, who often made critical negotiations and decisions on the phone, found more challenges with the open landscapes than the advisors. Due to the amounts of printed documentation required, some brokers felt they lacked space to work, and some said they had to adjust their sales technique and way of talking to customers on the phone, – ultimately compromised their results.

The private zone also provided a retreat for frontline personnel. Though time pressure and organisational hierarchy between the different categories of personnel were said to limit this option, all employees appreciated that it was there. According to some back office and frontline personnel, this also reduced the social distance between the different employee categories.

In relation to colleagues, the private zone was front stage most of the time, with few opportunities to 'drop the mask'. The zone contained one or two 'quiet rooms', but employees complained that these were too small and too few. However, the observations and user logs indicate that the need for individual privacy went down with time, as employees learned how to use and shift between the various spatial and technological resources.

## 9    PROCESS AND FLOW BETWEEN WORK ZONES

Generally, the new concept provided employees with more opportunity to 'read the situation' and choose what places and tools to use for various tasks and interactions. In line with Danielsson's (2010) findings, most interviewees indicated that the increased level of autonomy, ability to control work-related demands hade positive effects on job satisfaction and overall

satisfaction with the concept. Findings of increased job satisfaction were also supported by internal organizational development survey.

Employees applied control and played their roles according to Harrison (2002) categorization in *private*, *privileged* and *public* zones. Although not always clearly defined, and though blurring of boundaries occurred, the meaning and purpose of the different zones were easily understood and acted on, both by employees as well as by customers.

Employees' ability to use and benefit from the increased freedom in how and when to use the new options in the workspace seemed to increase with time, practice and training. Those who seemed most satisfied and benefitted most in form of environmental control were frontline personnel, who had least individual time, but most options to move between locations. These employees had also received most training in how to use the options and handle customer interaction under the new concept. Thus, our findings support O'Neill (2010) and Steele's (1973) argument that training and environmental competence is crucial in order for employees to fully utilize the potential within new workplace concepts.

Most difficulties and dissatisfaction with the new concept were found in instances were blurring of boundaries was a prominent issue. The least satisfied were the brokers, who beside other work-related demands seemed to experience most boundary-blurring situations. Their identity as dynamic, individualistic salespersons and lack of banking skills limited their contribution in the public zone, and they had less to gain from the spatial separation and exchange in the private zone than the advisors, who had more work issues in common. The private zone was for back office personnel found to provide almost full control of customer interaction, due to privacy mechanisms (Rapoport 1980) in the form of *spatial separation* and *physical devices*. The only exceptions were situations when phone communication was so persistent that customer became socially, if not physically present, a form for boundary blurring in line with findings from Ellingson (2003). Thus blurring of the boundaries between front stage and backstage were found to cause some challenges and role dilemmas.

 In relation to colleagues, one also had the option to use different spaces; move between the different zones and by active use of flexible working hours spread activities in *time*. The environmental control in the private zone did not only reduce work-related demands, but allowed for new job resources, in the form of increased learning as suggested by (Wägar, 2007) and (Ellingson, 2003), and further social support and high-quality relationships, which according to (Bakker et al., 2005) may buffer job demands.

Advisors experienced increased environmental control and added job resources through the private as well as the privileged zone, but were ambivalent regarding work in the public customer area. Their identity as advisors was bound to pre-arranged meetings and advanced case management, not reception services, and some felt insecure in the face of customers on the floor. While they should respond to frontline requests for assistance, some advisors and brokers had their strategies for controlling this too, referring to disparate competence, professional responsibility and performance indicators, or *rules*. This is to say that organizational hierarchy and identities affected perceptions of environmental control in the different zones, the way O'Neill (2010) suggests. They also influenced the intended flow between the zones, by way of motivating use of new resources, but most significantly by hindering the flow between the public and the private zone. At the same time, these structural and cultural conditions were used as group and individual privacy mechanisms (Rapoport 1980), supplementing the physical and organizational privacy mechanisms inherent in the new workplace concept. Thus, strategies to

control the environment occoured at both individual, group and arganizational level, the way O'Neill (2010) suggests.

Ultimately, the new concept was found to both add job demands in form of new work processes, social relations, roles and expectations as well as supportive organizational structures and resourses in form physical and technological aspects. According to Demerouti et al. (2001), such resourses are important in order to handle work related demands. The balance between the physical, social and organizational resources and job deamds were however found to wary due to different groups of employees and according to different situations.

Approaching work as role play across different regions and stages brings the social aspects of activity-based working more in focus, throwing light on how a workplace concept comes to be appropriated by employees and mirror the organization as Clegg and Kornberger (2006) suggest. Due to the interplay between social and physical premises and the broad repertoire of privacy mechanisms, front and backstage in the studied offices were not limited to specific zones. The situations rather shifted, depending on the presence and absence of customers, as noted by Goffman (1959) and Ashforth (2008).


## 10  CONCLUSION

The presented study has applied an employee perspective to how work in an activity based workplace concept, with separate zones for customer and intra-departmental work, impact employees' ability to control interaction, structure own work processes and handle work-related demands. Customer perspective and experience with the zoning was not included in the study. Such angle might however provide new perspectives and additional insight into how the activity based workplace affect customer perception and experiences with regards to quality of service.

From the employee perspective, opportunity to stage different kinds of performances in different locations was found to increase the environmental control and ability to handle work-related demands among all categories of employees, although to different degrees. The zoning helped employees to structure the workflow and provided new resources in customer interaction and other individual work tasks.

Further, as employees get more scope to move between locations, learn and decide how to handle various situations, divisions between front and backstage may become more flexible and fluent, adding to employee environmental competence. Added value was further found with regards to employee satisfaction, improved internal communication, employee perception of increased customer experience and relations and operational flexibility.

Broadening the focus in research on environmental control and work-related demands, from individual coping to social interaction, may provide more insight into factors influencing work processes and employee well-being in emerging workplace concepts. How various aspects play out in different work cultures and with relation to different work processes and how these physical aspects can be managed for the benefit of modern corporations are interesting topics for further research.

## 11      REFERENCES

Ashforth, B. E., Kulik, C. T. & Tomiuk, M. A. 2008. How Service Agents Manage the Person—Role Interface. *Group & Organization Management,* 33**,** 5-45.

Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E. & Euwema, M. C. 2005. Job resources buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. *Journal of occupational health psychology,* 10**,** 170.

Chanlat, J.-F. 2006. Space, Organization and Management Thinking: a Socio-Historical Perspective. *In:* Clegg, S. R. & Kornberger, M. (eds.) *Space, Organizations and Management Theory.* Malmö: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Clegg, S. R. & Kornberger, M. 2006. Organizing Space. *In:* Clegg, S. R. & Kornberger, M. (eds.) *Space, Organizations and Management Theory.* Malmö: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Danielsson, C. B. 2010. *The Office - An Explorative Study* KTH School of Architecture and Buildt Environment Royal institute of Technology.

Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F. & Schaufeli, W. B. 2001. The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied psychology,* 86**,** 499.

Ellingson, L. L. 2003. Interdisciplinary health care teamwork in the clinic backstage. *Journal of Applied Communication Research,* 31**,** 93-117.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life,* Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday.

Harrison, A. 2002. Accommodating the new economy: The SANE space environment model. *Journal of Corporate Real Estate,* 4**,** 248-265.

Huang, Y.-H., Robertson, M. M. & Chang, K.-I. 2004. The role of environmental control on environmental satisfaction, communication, and psychological stress effects of office ergonomics training. *Environment and Behavior,* 36**,** 617-637.

Laing, A., Duffy, F., Jaunzens, D. & Wills, S. 1998. *New Environments for Working,* London, Construction Research Communications Ltd.

Lee, S. Y. & Brand, J. 2010. Can personal control over the physical environment ease distractions in office workplaces? *Ergonomics,* 53**,** 324-335.

Myerson, J., Bichard, J.-A. & Erlich, A. 2010. *New demographics, new workspace: office design for the changing workforce,* Farnham, Surrey, England, Gower.

O'neill, M. J. 1994. Work space adjustability, storage, and enclosure as predictors of employee reactions and performance. *Environment and Behavior,* 26**,** 504-526.

O'neill, M. J. 2010. A model of environmental control and effective work. *Facilities,* 28**,** 118-136.

Rapoport, A. 1980. Vernacular architecture and the cultural determinants of form. *Buildings and society: Essays on the social development of the built environment***,** 283-305.

Robertson, M. M., Huang, Y.-H., O'neill, M. J. & Schleifer, L. M. 2008. Flexible workspace design and ergonomics training: Impacts on the psychosocial work environment, musculoskeletal health, and work effectiveness among knowledge workers. *Applied Ergonomics,* 39**,** 482-494.

Steele, F. I. 1973. *Physical settings and organization development,* Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley.

Wägar, K. 2007. Learning in a service context: going backstage. *Managing Service Quality,* 17**,** 635-655.

Wells, M. M. 2000. Office clutter or meaningful personal displays: The role of office personalization in employee and organizational well-being. *Journal of Environmental Psychology,* 20**,** 239-255.