

# Social Interaction in Activity Based Workplace Concepts

Ekstrand, Mari  
Ph.D. Candidate, NTNU  
mari.ekstrand@ntnu.no

*Activity based workplace concept may increase employee and manager ability to control and handle social interactions in the office. This due to increased possibilities for applying privacy mechanisms according to: social rules, moving away from the context, structuring different activities in time, creating spatial separation, and by using physical devices to control social interaction. Semi-structured interviews with a total of 86 employees provided the main bulk of the data. The different areas, zones spaces and tools provided employees and managers with new resources to use. The findings however indicate that managers and employees use different strategies, this especially to handle unwanted interactions.*

Keywords: Activity Based Working, Privacy, Control, New Ways of Working

## 1. Introduction and Objectives

New ways of working with focus on mobile, flexible and distributed work processes, as well as new technological innovations, are changing the modern workplace. In this process, more and more organisations have started to emphasise that ‘work is not a place, rather a state of mind’ (Skjæveland, 2012; Bakke, 2007). Here, the physical workplace is designed and deployed as a strategic instrument with the intent of ‘changing minds’. This has resulted in a change in how organisations think about and design their workplaces, – often leading to new contemporary and activity based workplace concepts planned to increase spontaneous interactions, collaboration and knowledge sharing. Going from traditional workplace concepts, focus is put more and more on autonomy and individual choice over how and where to conduct different work tasks, – both within and outside the office building (Robertson et al., 2008; Lee and Brand, 2005). By providing employees with control over their work environment, the organisation allows them to self-manage the work situation, modify features in response to work flow, tasks and job demand and influences decisions on where and how to conduct work (O’Neill, 2007; O’Neill, 2010).

For employees and managers, new workplace concepts often result in radical spatial changes as well as expectations to adapt to new ideas. Especially the introduction of activity based workplace concepts, supported by free seating and clean desk policies, require organisations and individuals to start to explore new ways of working, learn new skills, change their routines and the way they interact with others in the workplace. Thus, employee and manager ability to handle work related demands, control social interaction, structure own work processes and learn how to cope in the new office environment is highly important.

Within the workplace, control of unwanted interaction is particularly relevant. Employees assess privacy at the functional level in form of ‘architectural privacy’ – (separateness and freedom from distractions provided by boundaries in the environment) and in form of ‘psychological privacy’ (exclusivity, status in the organisation and sense of control over information and environmental control). Architectural privacy contributes to psychological privacy by control of accessibility of others (Vischer, 2005; Sundstrom et al., 1980).

According to Rapoport (1980), privacy may be controlled through; *rules* (manners, avoidance, social hierarchies etc.) 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). In cellular office workplaces a common way of controlling privacy is carried out by closing the door, – sending out a privacy signal to the surrounding (Baldry and Barnes, 2012). Thus, going from a cellular office workplace to an more open and activity based workplace concept, can result in a loss of both architectural and psychological privacy (Vischer, 2005).

However, Laing et al. (1998) argue that employees with greater level of work autonomy and more varied work processes are likely to spend more time away from the desk and work in several locations – this both inside and outside the office building. Such flexible use of space may provide employees with a greater degree of autonomy regarding factors such as timing, content, tools and locations of work, thus providing more resources to handle and structure social interaction (Laing et al., 1998; Van der Voordt, 2004; O'Neill, 2010).

## 2. Methods

The study explores how managers and employees in two larger Norwegian organisations have learned new skills and changed their strategies for handling own and collaborative work processes, this due to introduction of an activity based workplace concept. The two organisations are located in the same business district and houses approximately 800 employees respectively. The activity based workplace concepts in the two organisations were structured based on free seating and clean desk principles. Both offices had public areas with spaces for meetings and interactions with externals, semi public areas such as lunch places, social meeting places and internal meeting rooms and private areas with smaller multifunctional rooms, project places and workspaces assigned to different departments or groups. Both offices also had a separate quiet area or 'library' where employees could go to conduct concentrated work.

The discussion is based on 50 semi-structured individual and group interviews with a total of 86 employees and managers from the two organisations. Observational studies as well as analysis of secondary material in forms of organisational evaluation surveys were also conducted. Work processes varied amongst the employees, this especially with regards to mobility, autonomy, routines, responsibility, costumer interaction, individual and collaborative work. Data from the interviews were analysed by coding the findings into the main five categories of privacy mechanisms, according to Rapoport (1980).

## 3. Results

Employees at both organisations report a high level of satisfaction with their new workplace concept. Internal quantitative evaluation studies from both organisations also indicate increased environmental satisfaction levels. Employees were especially positive regarding the aesthetic appearance, the flexibility, different areas and tools to choose from to conduct work and freedom to do so. Also work in open landscapes was reported to support social work processes, knowledge sharing and learning. Mobile work was reported to enable more impulses and create more possibilities for interaction as well as a more varied workday.

The activity based workplace concept provided employees and managers with more resources to use in order to handle social interaction. The findings illustrate a shift in strategies for controlling social interactions, going from behavioural rules and physical devices, to use of strategies such as moving away from the context and structuring activities in time. In the old workplace concept, where employees were assigned own desks, the most used strategy to control social interaction was found to be behavioural rules and spatial devices. Spatial devices such as closing a door to the office or putting on headphones were used most frequently. In the new workplace, the strategy of literally *moving away from the context* was reported to be used the most to control social interaction. This was often done with the motive of hiding away when doing individual work in times of high pressure. Managers especially had a lot of responsibility

with regards to inquiries and questions from co-workers, and often used this strategy to control employee accessibility and balance the workday. *“Out of sight, out of mind – you may be anywhere in the world. If I work from another floor, from home, from London or from a client’s office – nobody knows. However if I am at the floor assigned to my department people come up to me all day”* (middle level manager). Spaces such as meeting rooms, quiet areas, the ‘library’, a corner in a social area or a desk at another floor or department were often used for this purpose. Working from home or outside the office was also used for this purpose. However, wanting to be close to co-workers and available for inquiries, some leaders and managers deliberately chose to work either close to their department or at a visible place close to main communication paths. These managers tended to conduct concentration-demanding work at home or worked from other locations outside the office. Some occasionally also preferred to work in a lounge area or from the central coffee bar. Such places were chosen to be social and non-social at the same time. Here employees had the possibility to get away from their own department but still run into people, collaborate or work in a place surrounded by other employees from the same company. *“As long as there is room I don’t feel the need to work from the same place every day. Some times I want to work close to one person, another time I need to work close to another. Some times I just feel for some variation... Previously I had to work from home a lot to be able to concentrate. Now I just go to the quiet place when I need to”* (employee). Employees with more mobile work patterns also reported higher levels of spontaneous interactions with people outside their immediate work environment.

Prior to the transition, both organisations had to some extent addressed managers and invited them in discussions on how to behave and act in the new workplace, this with the intention of ‘changing minds’ through leading by own actions as a form for ‘management by walking’. Although some lower level managers state that they were sceptical towards the new workplace concept, most of them stated that in the beginning they tried to be true to the concept and the company’s intentions. At both locations employees report that managers and especially the top-level management had become more visible and actively involved since the transition to the new workplace. In this respect, one manager mentioned that he deliberately had started to choose unusual places; this was to move away, create variation and a ‘new context’ for a routine work process. This leader had for example started to conduct employee development meetings in a ‘private’ corner in the lounge area by the main coffee bar. The manager experienced that the change of context made the conversation more relaxed and also more efficient. Here, the manager also used the strategy of separation of activities in time, this as the meeting was booked early in the morning or late in the afternoon, when few people were around.

*Structuring activities in time* was an often-used privacy mechanism. Due to the transition to a new workplace, most employees had been moved to larger open plan environments shared with other departments. Working close to other departments seemed to affect team communication and socialising. As a result some employees experienced a reduction in ‘small talk’ while others felt that it was more challenging to make phone calls. Thus, some tried to make phone calls early in the morning or later in the afternoon when the landscape were not that crowded. Others chose to go into an adjacent room, here moving away, or even wait to make sensitive phone call until they got home. Due to pressure on meeting facilities some employees conducted meetings early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the facilities were emptier. This eased handling interaction with externals without getting distracted by internal collaboration processes and activities. The strategy of separation of activities in time also functioned as a cultural informal rule at lunchtime. In one of the organisations, higher-level organisational members had a culture for having lunch later during the lunch service, when the lunch area weren’t that crowded. Thus, some employees also went later to lunch, this was done to increase the chances of accidentally bumping into a manager to ask a question that one did not want to send by e-mail.

The need for *rules* to manage social interactions and especially sound levels in the workplace had to some extent diminished due to the transition to an activity based workplace concept. Rules in the new workplace concept were mainly structured according to acceptable

behaviour in different zones. The new rules placed focus more on emphasising that social interactions were not prohibited, rather allowed and appreciated, this especially in the common social interaction spaces. However, informal rules and cultures are often difficult to change. Thus, although rules for the new workplace concept were created in advance old habits, rules and social hierarchies were also brought to the new workplace. Especially some cultural norms seemed to prevent employees from utilising the public and semi public social places intended for social interaction, communication and collaboration. In the months after the transition, many had the idea that working from these places was by others seen as 'being lazy', 'taking a lot of breaks' or 'not working'. "*I get a little worried when I work or collaborate with others in the social areas. What do others think about me then, – does she work or are she just wasting time?*" In an attempt to change this norm, managers at one organisation had put up signs with words and statements emphasising social work processes. In addition these managers had deliberately started to spend more time in the social areas. Ultimately, by their use of space created a new statement. These strategic choices had a positive effect and shortly afterwards employees also started to use the social areas to conduct different work processes.

The free seating structure allowing anyone to chose any desk was a central rule implemented at both organisations. However, as some individuals repeatedly chose the same desks day after another informal rules were created, restricting other employee categories to choose certain places. Especially where groups of managers had located themselves, informal hierarchical structures had materialised. Here, the strategy for handling social interaction in form of *spatial separation* comes into play. Occasionally, managers may need to be fully or partly separated from employees, this in order to be able to handle social interaction with other managers. Sensitive discussions amongst managers were mainly conducted away from the core department, at more private locations in the office or when employees were not around.

The use of *physical devices* to control social interaction had somewhat decreased and been replaced with the other strategies. However, at some departments, especially by those where employees did not use as many of the other strategies to handle social interaction, there was still a strong wish for more possibilities for separating individuals and groups with physical devices such as doors, flexible dividers and walls. At some locations, storage cabinets or other physical devices had been placed in the open area to divide groups and signal group belonging. Some employees also mentioned that they often used headphones – some times even without playing music – this to signal that they did not want to be disturbed. For the employees and managers that previously had worked in cellular offices, the ability to have informal and spontaneous meetings in the office and close the door was lost. Some experienced that this had made spontaneous interaction harder and that it was more difficult, as they did not have the possibility to just drop by a managers or colleagues office. Several employees and managers had however started to solve this by using the organisations chat messaging software. Thus, they began using physical and technological devices to send a short message asking if the other person had time for joining in on a short talk at another location in the office.

Although all employees reported that they used one or several of the five privacy mechanisms, some managers and employees were seen to have developed a wider range of individual strategies and in a better way learned how to utilise the workplace to handle and control individual and social work processes. For these employees the different privacy mechanisms were used not only in order to diminish social interaction but also in order to increase and support social work processes. On the other hand, other employees seemed to have clung to old and 'ineffective' ways of handling social interaction. Employees with fewer strategies also seemed to be less satisfied with the new work environment, stating that the workplace did not fully support work processes such as concentration and individual work processes.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The activity based workplace concept is substantially different from many traditional workplace concepts. As some employees suggested, the new concept makes it possible to better structure and plan the workday. Thus, with the freedom, flexibility and technology to utilise different spaces, new resources to handle social interaction also increased, providing employees with greater opportunities to handle social interaction the way Van der Voordt (2004) and Laing et al. (1998) suggested. In activity based workplace concepts employees may freely choose from the five privacy mechanisms defined by Rapoport (1980). For many, the new concept was seen as a positive change that increased their own possibilities to control unwanted social interaction. However, for those that did not change their strategies, the environmental control level was seen to have been decreased, ultimately resulting in dissatisfaction with the workplace concept.

Some employees and managers were seen to use the facilities differently than originally expected, – or not to use the resources provided by the facilities at all. In order to create well functioning workspaces, organisations and workplace consultants need to better understand what kind of control behaviour is wanted and why. Furthermore, in order to fully act on the idea that ‘work is not a place, rather a state of mind’, the organisation and its members need to change and challenge the cultural and organisational behavioural norms and develop new structures for interaction, while simultaneously maintaining and building on familiar ways to behave. The fact that some employees did not choose to use the full range of privacy mechanisms available, although organisational policies and modern technology supported employees to do so, may also reflect a lack of knowledge of what resources are available to use. Here, existing cultural norms and old ways of doing things may restrict employees in fully utilising the opportunities provided by the new workplace. O’Neill (2010), argues that management and the influence of organisational policies, technology, and training are important factors in order for employees to adapt to new behavioural norms such as applying specific control behaviours. As some employees and managers gradually started to experiment with the new workplace and try out new strategies for handling social interaction, their own – but also others – ‘environmental competence’ level increased. Thus, visual trial and learning activities related to use of space is essential in developing a broad base of resources to use for handling social interaction. By continuously doing so, employees and managers may develop a broader range of architectural privacy, ultimately supporting psychological privacy the way Vischer (2005) suggests.

## References

- Bakke, J. W. 2007. A Nordic guide to workplace design. Oslo: Norden: Nordic Innovation Centre.
- Baldry, C. & Barnes, A. 2012. The open-plan academy: space, control and the undermining of professional identity. *Work, Employment & Society*, 26, 228-245.
- Laing, A., Duffy, F., Jaunzens, D. & Wills, S. 1998. *New Environments for Working*, London, Construction Research Communications Ltd.
- Lee, S. Y. & Brand, J. L. 2005. Effects of control over office workspace on perceptions of the work environment and work outcomes. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 25, 323-333.
- O’neill, M. J. 2007. *Measuring workplace performance*, Boca Raton, Fla., Taylor & Francis.
- 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.
- Skjæveland, O. 2012. Arbeidsplass, arkitektur og psykologi. In: Helena, N. (ed.) *Norsk miljøpsykologi: Mennesker og omgivelser*. Trondheim: SINTEF akademisk forlag.
- Sundstrom, E., Burt, R. E. & Kamp, D. 1980. Privacy at work: Architectural correlates of job satisfaction and job performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 23, 101-117.
- Van Der Voordt, T., J. M. 2004. Productivity and employee satisfaction in flexible workplaces. *Journal of Corporate Real Estate*, 6, 133-148.
- Vischer, J. 2005. *Space meets status: designing workplace performance*, London, Routledge.