

Employee behaviour and effects of modern (activity-based) offices

As an editor of this journal, I was very happy to receive so many submissions for our special issue on “the modern work environment and new ways of working” that we were able to fill two issues on the topic. This second special issue presents more studies on identifying well-being and the productivity effects of modern office aspects. Additionally, it contains research on methodologies to identify the productivity potential and on the places that mobile workers can use to work when they are not in the office.

A very important aspect of activity-based offices is that people can work anywhere they want. In many offices, there is not enough room for everybody to work in the office at the same time, because workspaces are supposed to be shared. Both working inside and outside the office have their own challenges. The first article in this issue is a literature review of empirical studies on the work behaviour of mobile knowledge workers when they are not in the office. Cheuk Fan Ng discusses how physical and social characteristics of public and semi-public spaces might support or hinder various work processes. Not each setting is appropriate to do various types of work activities, but empirical work on the subject is still quite limited and thus a recommendation for future research.

The next two articles describe detailed case studies of an organisation getting to grips with designing the modern office itself in the most optimal way. Both studies included measurements of behaviour of the employees while in the office, as it is increasingly realised how important this is to actually achieve the intended effects of design changes. Firstly, Mark Mulville *et al.* report on effects of the ambient environment on employee outcomes after taking measurements of temperature, CO₂, humidity and noise levels and employee surveys. Like many studies on effects of office design, productivity is not actually measured but seen as an extension of perceived comfort, health and well-being. Until someone discovers a good solution for measuring actual productivity while in the field (so not perceived productivity or performing tasks in a laboratory experiment), this will probably remain the most common choice for researchers. In this case, noise especially turned out to have an important impact on employee outcomes, but also their behaviour was significantly relevant.

Occupant behaviour is hard to change and deserves more research and management attention when changing ways of working. Chiara Tagliaro and Andrea Ciaramella studied the impact of relocation on employees of an international company when moving from ten locations to one headquarter with a hot-desking principle. The authors used a combination of several methods to obtain insight into the effect on behaviour, namely, walk-throughs, observations, questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Results show that although personalisation of the workspace is usually not allowed in the activity-based office, in this case one out of four of the workstations was marked with personal objects. Some 44 per cent of the employees would have highly appreciated the possibility to do so. This confirms how important change management is to help employees accommodate to the new office concept. In addition, it highlighted that alignment between reality and perception could be poor, as some employees stated they

experienced a lack of space, although observation showed more than sufficient availability.

The fourth paper further emphasises the value of using multiple methods, as they can complement each other and thus provide better insight in how effects can be realised. As the authors, Miikka Palvalin and Maiju Vuolle, state: “Measuring the impacts of NWoW and related work environment changes on knowledge work has various challenges”. The authors sum up the strengths and weaknesses of interviews, questionnaires and multi-dimensional performance measurements as research methods and discuss their application in different phases of implementing new ways of working.

Where the first special issue focused on describing the modern office and measuring employee satisfaction, this second special issue dives further into measuring behaviour of employees and shows how this influences effects on their outcomes. The importance of behaviour for realising desired effects of modern office designs further complicates the task of corporate real estate management. Therefore, I hope (and expect) to see a lot more research on this in the near future.

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