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Expected user needs towards the post-Covid office: better support of social interactions and concentration

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ABSTRACT

Background and aim – While remote working is not a new phenomenon, Covid-19 has forced many office workers to work from home for long consecutive periods. Recent research shows that while most of them say they can work productively from home, many feel less connected to their colleagues. This study explores how these experiences may influence employees' needs towards the office workplace.

Methods – Cross-sectional data were used from an online survey among four Dutch public sector organisations conducted between November 2020 and February 2021. These data include perceptions of 567 office workers regarding their workplace, both at home and at the office, and their motivations for working at the office.

Results – The survey data show that the main reason to (want to) work at the office has shifted from meeting expectations to the need for informal social interaction. On the other hand, many still need the office for doing concentration work. Although the home workplace feels more comfortable, ultimately it is not rated better than the office workplace. The respondents indicate several shortcomings of their current office regarding support of socializing, belongingness, and privacy.

Originality – While in the media different assumptions have been made about consequences of Covid-19 for future office use, few empirical studies have been conducted to substantiate these expectations.

Practical implications – This study shows that Covid-19 has increased the need for in-person interaction at the office without decreasing the need for silence, and indicates how offices could better support socializing balanced with concentration work.

Type of paper – Short research paper.

KEYWORDS

Office, user-needs, workplace design, Covid-19, working from home, social interaction, affordances.

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, it seemed the end of the office age had arrived (Walsh, 2020). In April 2020, 59% of the current home-working office workers in the U.S. said they wanted to work remotely as much as possible once restrictions on businesses and school closures were lifted (Brenan, 2020). Companies already foresaw a reduction of costly office space as they would mainly hire remote workers (KPMG,2021). Prior to Covid-19, organizations were not very willing to embrace working from home, despite technological possibilities and many benefits for employee well-being, productivity, and the environment (Sander, Rafferty, & Jordan, 2021). Among the impediments were managerial concerns over employee supervision and social stigmatization of physical absent co-workers (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Now these concerns were overruled by the emergency situation of the pandemic, it looked like the benefits could be cashed.

However, as the pandemic and the accompanying working from home continued, it became clear that there is no substitute for in-person collaboration and that the office workplace has a role in fulfilling the human need for connectedness. After all, face-to-face communication supports activities that are crucial for sustaining social relationships at work (Nardi & Whittaker, 2002). While the digital substitute of in-person meetings, video conferencing, is being experienced as particularly exhausting, possibly because of nonverbal overload (Bailenson, 2021). Already in May 2020, U.S. office workers ranked scheduled meetings, socializing with colleagues, impromptu face-to-face interaction and being part

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of the community as the most important reasons to want to come to the office, and 74% said what they missed most about the office were the people (Gensler Research Institute, 2020). A global survey showed that employees felt mentoring, collaboration, service to customers, and keeping aware of what is going on in the organization are considerably better at the office than from home (Kamouri & Lister, 2020). Currently, companies expect the 'new reality' will look much like the old, and most offices will keep their size (KPMG, 2021).

Hence, the office probably will survive the pandemic, but it may have to adapt to changed user needs. Several predictions regarding this change have been made by workplace experts so far. Kirkpatrick and Marinho (2020) assume that the post-Covid office will become purpose-driven, offering individuals the energy of being around colleagues as well as being able to work productively. Leesman (2021) states that the pandemic has changed workplace value ('home is the new benchmark') and intentions to return to the office depend on the home working experience and the workplace quality.

The purpose of this study is to gather scientific insights indicating which user needs the current and post-Covid office should support in particular. It therefore explores how employees' motivations for working at the office have changed during the pandemic, how their home workplace performs compared to their office workplace, and how the workplace design could be improved to fit their needs.

METHODS

Qualtrics survey software was used to create an online questionnaire including multiple choice questions about workplace characteristics and motivations, Likert scale items on satisfaction with the working environment, ratings of office characteristics, and questions about working situation, personal background and organizational context. Four organisations in the Dutch public sector (local and regional government and education) were recruited to participate in the survey. They distributed an anonymous link to the questionnaire among their employees. In this manner, data were collected during November 2020 and January to February 2021. During this whole period, working from home was strongly recommended, most shops were closed, and home visitors were restricted. After removing 22 cases because of respondent abandonment or misconduct, 567 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis; 42% of those were completed during Covid-19 primary school closure (Dec. 18 to Feb. 7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample characteristics

Most respondents (65%) were completely working from home when taking the survey, 32% had not been working at the office since the first lockdown, and only 8% continued working in the office regularly. Two third has a full-time job, 13% has a managerial position. At the office, 43% has an assigned desk. A minority (21%) usually works in an open workspace; most have small (up to three persons) or medium-sized rooms (four to six persons). Almost one third (31%) is younger than 40, 14% lives alone. A large group (47%) sees themselves as extrovert, 19% considers themselves reserved and quiet.

Changed reasons for working at the office

In the survey, the office workers were requested to mark the most important reasons for working at the office *before* the first lockdown (March 2020) and *at present* (eight to eleven months later), if going there would be possible. Their aggregated answers show a shift from feeling obligated towards the need for social interaction (Fig. 1). At the text entry some respondents explained this change out of culture ('it was normal [to work at the office]', 'I felt I was expected, but looking back maybe I wasn't') and availability of technology ('because the digitalisation was insufficient', 'we did not know that the necessary facilities were there'). Currently, only 6% feels their job requires their presence at the office.

Across the board, motivations for working at the office have significantly decreased (as shown in Fig. 1). Apparently, the respondents feel that many activities can be done from home as effectively as at the office, or even better. This change indicates that currently (and possibly after the pandemic) they would visit the office for different activities and less frequently, if they have a choice. Only the need for

diversity in working environments and being away from home have significantly *in*creased, which is not surprising considering the lockdowns and working from home for months on end. Being able after the pandemic to distribute working time between home, the office and elsewhere probably will meet these needs.
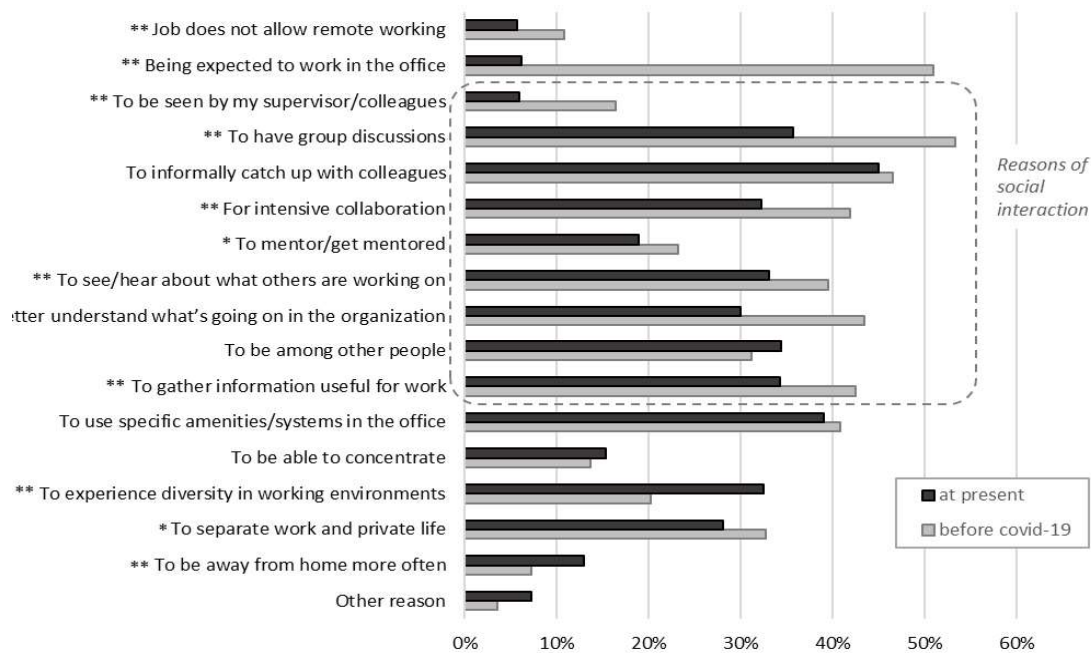

Figure 1 Main reasons for working at the office before COVID-19 and (wanting to work at the office) at present (*N*=540);
* (p<.05) and ** (p<.01) mark significant differences between before and at present according to McNemar's symmetry test

In the current situation, informally catching up with colleagues is the most important motivation (marked by 45%) for the participants to go to the office if possible. Being among other people, having group discussions and intensive collaboration at the office are still important to a third of the office workers. Employees who were still or again completely working from home when taking the survey show a stronger need for being among others (X^2 (1, *N* = 488) = 14.916, *p* = .000) and other types of social interaction. Also younger employees, especially those under 30, more often indicate being among other people as an important reason for wanting to work at the office (X^2 (4, *N* = 499) = 16.252, *p* = .003). Living alone or with others does not play a role in these social needs. Extroverts more often want to go to the office for intensive collaboration (X^2 (1, *N* = 496) = 4.077, *p* = .043), but beyond this their motivations do not differ significantly from the others. Managers more often than others want to work at the office to mentor their team (X^2 (1, *N* = 499) = 18.840, *p* = .000).

However, in-person meetings are not the only reasons for currently wanting to work at the office. Second in the top-5 of most important reasons is using specific systems or amenities at the office, such as printers and ergonomic furniture. Furthermore, 15% still needs the office for doing concentration work ('my wife runs a day-care facility from home'), especially those who don't have a separate room serving as home office (X^2 (2, *N* = 548) = 14.767, *p* = .001) and young employees (X^2 (4, *N* = 499) = 32.342, *p* = .000). Working at the office to separate work from private life is especially important to managers (X^2 (1, *N* = 499) = 8.706, *p* = .003), young employees (X^2 (4, *N* = 499) = 44.547, *p* = .000), and to employees that are completely working from home (X^2 (1, *N* = 488) = 7.214, *p* = .007). Other reasons mentioned for wanting to work at the office include health (keeping a day-rhythm, getting outside, cycling to work), feeling part of the work community, and meeting with clients or students.

Comfort home workplace compared to office workplace
The reduced motivations for working at the office may be explained by adaptation to working from home and discovering its benefits. Our survey data show that on average the respondents' home

workplace clearly is perceived as more comfortable than the office workplace, except for the furniture and personal storage (Fig.2). The biggest differences are the ambiance and the amount of privacy and noise, which are all much better at home and important to concentration work. This better experience of comfort at home may increase expectations towards the office to offer a similar quality.
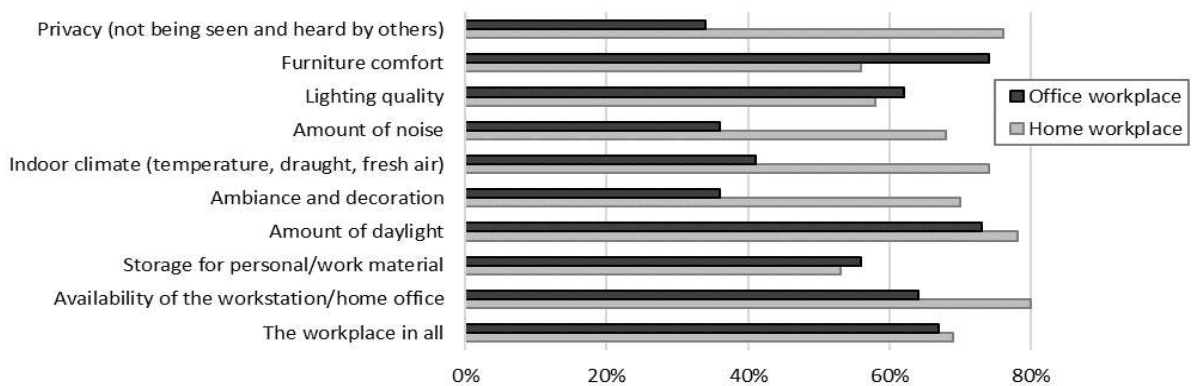

Figure 2 Total amount of respondents that answered 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' at the question 'To what extent are you satisfied with the following features of your (home/office) workplace?' (Office workplace as remembered from last visit.)

Interestingly, satisfaction with the workplace *in all* does not significantly differ between home ($M = 3.73$) and office ($M = 3.64$), according to a Wilcoxon signed-rank test ($Z = 1.403$, $p = .161$). Apparently, other workplace characteristics are as important as comfort, so ultimately the quality at home and in the office on average is considered equal. Indeed, a multiple regression analysis shows that together the features listed in Figure 2 explain 70.8% of the variance of home workplace satisfaction ($F(9) = 139.497$, $p = .000$) and only 52.4% of office workplace satisfaction ($F(9) = 55.143$, $p = .000$).

Support of socializing and belonging
As shown in Figure 2 before, the current office workplace could better support concentration work, since for many respondents their needs regarding noise and privacy are not met. To explore how much their current office workplace supports informal social interaction, the employees were asked to rate their office on 12 *social affordances*, physical characteristics of the work environment that support socializing and belonging (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2020). Over 70% of the respondents agree that their office supports spontaneous encounters and locating colleagues, but the other affordances are recognized by less than 50% (see Fig. 3 below). Their offices especially lack appropriate locations for having a telephone call (according to 61%), spots for personal expression (according to 48%), and places to chit-chat without disturbing others (according to 39%).
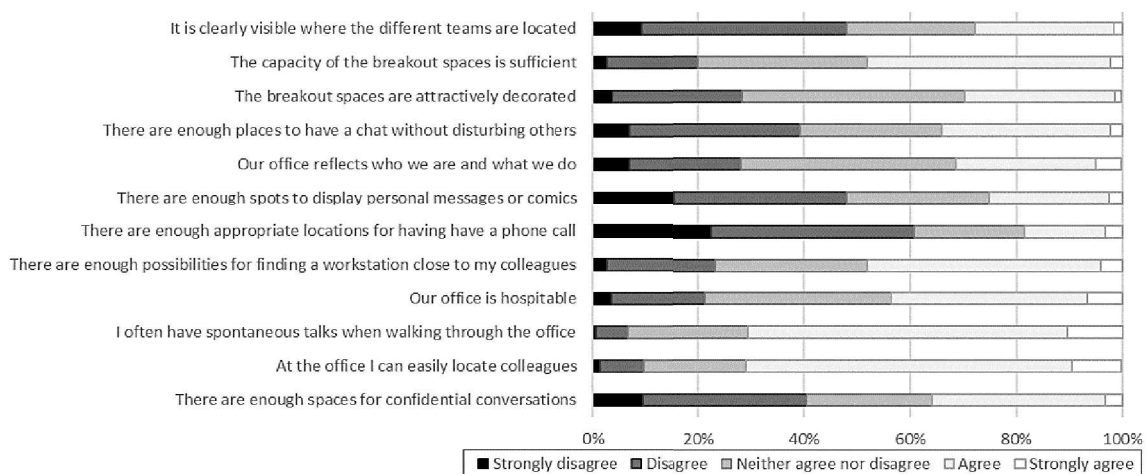

Figure 3 Social affordances of the respondent's office workplace supporting socializing and belongingness

Respondents without assigned desk (flex-office) rated their office workplace significantly *better* regarding hospitality (X^2 (4, N = 484) = 23.099, p = .000) and significantly *worse* regarding spaces for confidential conversations (X^2 (4, N = 483) = 17.992, p = .001) and spots for personal expression (X^2 (4, N = 484) = 69.654, p = .000). This may be explained by the usually more modern but standardized décor of flex-offices, their open spaces, and restrictions for personalizing such as a clean desk policy. Offices with assigned workstations and flex-offices equally lack appropriate phone call locations and equally provide (or lack) the other presented social affordances. Independent samples t-tests show that the opinions on social affordances do not significantly differ between younger and older employees. These results suggest that to support informal social interaction office workplaces should offer more private spaces and possibilities for customizing team spaces, especially flex-offices.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the influence of the Covid-19 situation on employee needs towards their office workplace. The participants report a shift in main reasons for working at the office from meeting expectations towards in-person interaction. Due to the forced working from home, many activities that previously were an important reason for coming to the office have shown to be possible online as well. However, unplanned interactions, socializing, and feeling part of a community are more difficult to substitute by online communication; informal social interaction and intensive collaboration remain important and now are the dominant reasons for wanting to work at the office.

On the other hand, many still need the office for specific amenities and to do concentration work. This indicates that to fit the user needs the post-Covid office should not be a 'giant coffee shop', but that it should still accommodate a variety of activities and needs. Ratings of social affordances show there is considerable room for improvement of workplace design in the participating offices, especially regarding visual identity, privacy, and noise reduction, and especially in flex-offices. Although the home workplace in general is rated more comfortable, the fact that it ultimately is not rated better than the office workplace may confirm the office's importance in supporting in-person interaction.

Future research could explain to what extent the current need for informal social interaction at the office has been amplified by the social restrictions and forced working from home during Covid-19. However, in-person interaction at the office will remain important to fulfil the human need for connectedness and to build trust for collaboration.

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