Report 2:
Contradictions in the New Way of Working: Creative Office Spaces or a Cost-cutting Strategy?

Joris Korbee
St. no. 1518496
Joris.korbee@gmail.com

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Joris Korbee

Contradictions in the New Way of Working: Creative Office Spaces or a Cost-cutting Strategy?

A few years ago, the lay-out of the office spaces of the Dutch Ministries was changed according to the principles of the New Way of Working (NWW, in Dutch: Het Nieuwe Werken). The main difference was the change from private desks in small office rooms to shared desks in open office spaces. With the so called flex working, employees no longer had their own desk. The idea of flex working also includes a clean desk policy, which implies that when an employee is leaving the desk, he stores his belongings in a locker, leaving an empty desk behind.

The NWW is popular in the Netherlands. Since 2007 the number of companies working with the principles of the NWW has doubled and also in Europe more and more companies are changing into the NWW.[1] There are several reasons a company imply the principles of the NWW. One of the reasons is to create a more inspiring workspace and a space where employees can work together. Another reason is to create a higher efficiency in the company which results in a higher productivity.[2,3] With the NWW caused a big change in the thinking about work: According to principles, in the NWW the company is no longer looking at the presence of an employee (the input), but looks at the results for an employee (the output).[4]

After reading some articles about the NWW and investing some case studies I found some fundamental contradictions in the ideas of the NWW. One of the principles of the NWW is to create a creative working environment. At the same time, due to the clean desk policy, it is no longer allowed to put or hang personal belongings in the office. There is a possibility that at crowded days there is more interaction between employees in the open work spaces, but on a quiet day, when most of the office spaces are empty, there is nothing creative about the space. In contrast: in comparison with the traditional offices which are full of personal belongings, the spaces could become very uncreative. How can a company expect a creative working environment if the clean desk policy requires that the office spaces remain empty?

In this report I hope to find out how the NWW is implemented and how it deals with this contradiction. I first shall have a look at the rise of the New Way of Working. Secondly, I will show how the NWW is implemented in the Ministry of Environment and Infrastructure and in the third part of this report I will name the pros and cons of the NWW. The last paragraph consists of a small comparison between the NWW and the way of working at the Faculty of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology and I will ask myself the question: can this system be implemented in the NWW?

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[1] De Ruiter 2014.
[2] The primary objects at the case study from CBRA Amsterdam where they successfully implement the NWW. *https://cbreprojects.nl/hetnieuwewerken/site/index*
[3] Overhetnieuwewerken.nl is a website about the NWW gathering news and information and is publishing articles about the NWW. *http://overhetnieuwewerken.nl/dossiers/kantoorinrichting/achtergrond/d-succesfactoren-bij-het-invoeren-van-hnw*
[4] Ibid.

1. *The New Way of Working*

The traditional views on working are no longer applicable to the way of working in the present time.[5] In contrast to the way people worked fifty years ago, when all employees started on the same time and were working in production chains, in the present time there is no reason to start working at the same time as your colleagues. A working day at the office consists of different activities and each activity will need its own space: a space for working, a space for meeting, a space for making telephones calls etc.[6] The NWW is in line with the information and creativity driven professions, which are becoming the most important aspect in our 21th century knowledge and communication economy. Also since 1990 more and more people work part-time with the result that at some days the occupation of office spaces is very low.[7] The realization that changing the layout of the office and the way of working could result in cost savings, made people rethink how people should work.

The philosophy of the New Way of Working emphasizes autonomy and freedom as basic concepts.[8] Teleworking and a different office layout are the starting points for the NWW. There are different definitions for the NWW. According to Statistics Netherlands *(Central Bureau voor de Statistiek)*, the NWW is about time and location independent working.[9] Baane explains the NWW with four principles: time and location independent working, self-directed working, excess and circulation of knowledge and information, and flexible working relations.[10] The Dutch National Service (*Rijksdienst*) goes even deeper into the definition and has nine principles for the NWW.[11] The definition from the National Service states that the NWW is not only about efficiency but also about creating a pleasant office environment.

2. *The office culture at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment*

To see how the New Way of Working was implemented, with the research group we made a visit to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment in The Hague. At the ministry we got a guided tour and could ask questions about the NWW and how the new system was experienced. A few years ago the office spaces of the ministry was changed from a traditional layout into the NWW. The main reason was to achieve a higher efficiency, meaning less square metres per employee. In the old situation the occupancy of the workspaces was only 40 percent and an employee had 1.3 desk (a personal desk and a part of a meeting table).[12] In the new situation an employee has 0.7 desk, 0.15 formal meeting place and 0.15 informal meeting space. The occupancy in the new situation has increased to 56 percent. This percentage is still low because most people do not work at the office on Wednesdays and Fridays when people work at home or do not work that day.

The visit to the Ministry was on the Friday afternoon when most people worked at home or had the day off. The quiet offices, in combination with the clean desk policy, resulted in empty and anonymous office spaces.

In the Ministry there were two types of office layouts. The first type was designed more traditionally, with rooms with one to five desks. In the other type, half of the floor was designed as informal meeting space. This space was a big open area with a variety of tables and sitting elements.

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[5] Broere 2012.

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid.

[8] Stichting Innovatie en Arbeid 2014.

[9] De Ruiter 2014.

[10] De Spiegelaere 2013.

[11] The principles are: 1. Chose for yourself where you work at and who you work with. 2. Not an employee's function, but his talents determine his value in the office. 3. An employee is responsible for his own development. 4. Variety of activities is the standard. 5. The topics and tasks in the office are leading, not the boundaries of the organisation. 6. Leadership on collective ambitions of the organisation. 7. Activities related workspaces and optimal ICT support. 8. Transparency in the organisation. 9. Digital knowledge and skills are part of the profession of a civil servant. Source: Broere 2012.

[12] This occupancy is calculated during week-days from 9.30 to 16.00.

The idea of the informal meeting space was to have a space that employees could use either as a meeting place or working place. Apart from the big informal meeting space, there was a variety of offices rooms. In some rooms only one desk was provided, in other rooms up to eight people could work. Most of the office rooms were separated by (glass) walls and could be closed off, others were half open. At the centre of each floor there was a room with a coffee machine and a room with printers and recycle bins.
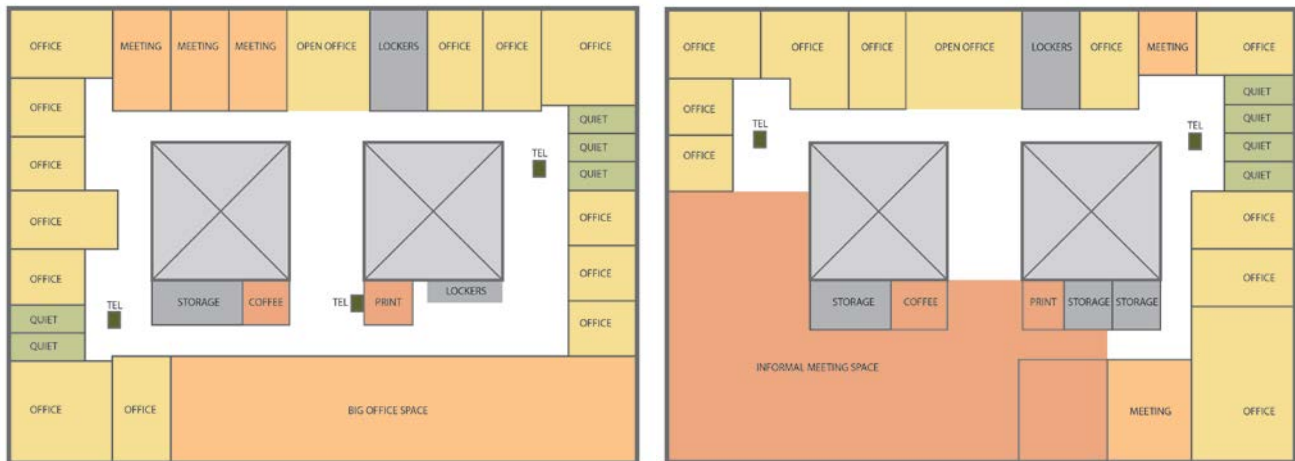

Figure 1 Two floors of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. Left: 7th floor, right: 11th floor. Diagram made by the author.

There were big differences between the two types of floors. The traditional floor type was less nicely furnished than the type with the informal meeting space. The layout of the traditional floor consisted of narrow rooms with the result being that the corridor was very dark. The furniture was standard and lacked colour. On the floors with the informal meeting spaces, the space was much more light and therefore a nicer area to work in. Also the furniture was much more diverse (different kind of tables and sitting elements) with different colours. The traditional floor type lacked an informal meeting space. This is unfortunate because there was enough space in the rooms with the coffee machine or the printer to provide some tables and chairs for a small informal meeting space.
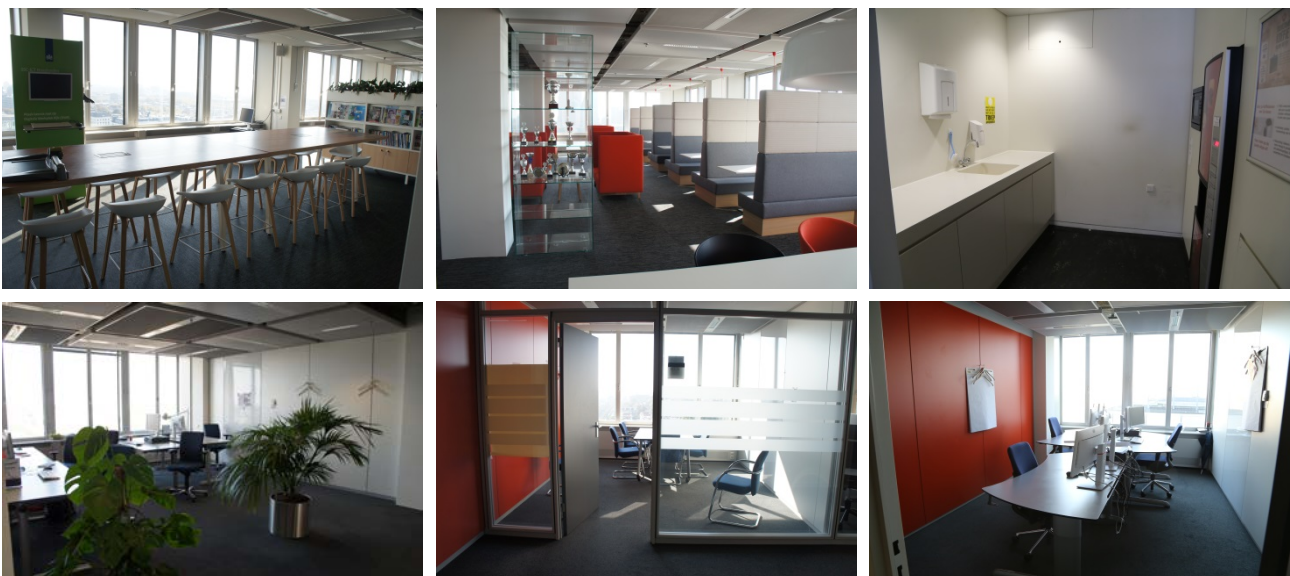

Figure 2. from left to right: 1. big table in the informal meeting space. 2. informal meeting space. 3. room with the coffee machine. 4. one of the open office spaces. 5. a meeting room. 6. an office room.

On every floor there was a special room for the secretaries. The idea was that the secretaties would not have their own desk, but at the visit we saw personal belongings on the desks.
In the building there were rooms for people who need a special chair or other extra facilities. For these people a fixed space was available.

On every floor there were some telephone boots for employees who had to make telephone calls and did not want to be disturbed or disturb others. However these boots were not used much. The boots were nicely designed but were not very functional. In the small boots there was no place for a laptop and there was no space to sit. It was a solution for a problem (noise during telephone calls) and sometimes it is better to have a bad solution than no solution at all, explains the guide from I&E.
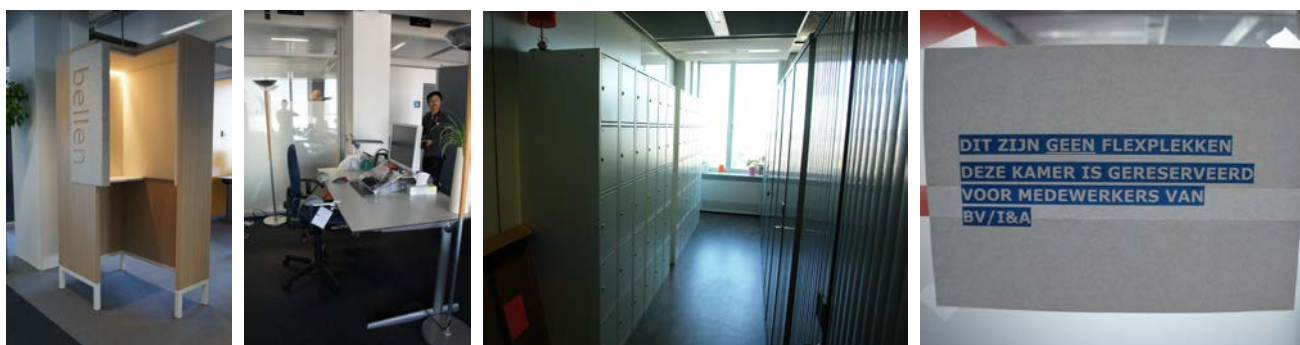

Figure 3. from left to right: 1. One of the telephone cells. 2. a special workspace for a person with a handicap. 3. the room with the lockers. 4. an note saying "These are no Flex spaces. This room is reserved for the BV/I&A staff".

On every floor there was a space with lockers. After a day of work every employee could store his belongings in a locker, leaving an empty desk behind. The room with the lockers was a grey room without any sign of identification apart from some small sad plants at the window. This sad and anonymous image could be found in most of the office spaces.

3. *Pros and Cons of the New Way of Working*

After the visit of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment some questions about the motives of the NWW arose to me. Does this new system create a creative workspace or is it only a result of budget cuts? A report from Stichting Innovatie en Arbeid (Foundation for Innovation and Labour) describes the advantages of the NWW, but highlights also the disadvantages of the system. The open offices function well for the cost-cuttings, for meetings, and a to create a transparent work environment but the open spaces also cause concentration problems. A good balance between the different aspects of the NWW is needed for a successful implementation.[13] There are different aspects related to the New Way of Working: organisation, interaction, terms of employment, working hours, trust and leadership, and working conditions. Not all of these parts are easy to do research on. Little is known, for example, about the effects of interaction. This subject is difficult to do scientifically research on. Also there are some uncertainties about the NWW, for example what the long-term effects are on the social relationships in the NWW.

Hans Korbee is an employee at the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland) which is a department of the Ministry of foreign affairs, situated in Utrecht. Three years ago the office spaces of the company were changed according to the principles of the NWW. According to Korbee the reactions of his colleagues on this change was mixed. Korbee himself is no supporter of flex working because this includes the clean desk policy. After the switch the

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[13] Stichting Innovatie en Arbeid 2014.

concentration of the employees has deteriorated. A big disadvantage of the clean desk policy is that the office spaces became very anonymous and are not inspiring at al. Korbee: "sometimes I have no idea what the person at the opposite desk is working on. Documents, flyers, and posters, things that normally give a start for a conversation, are hidden in a locker." Also employees spend much time searching for documents and stationery, which have no fixed space anymore in the NWW setting.

There are no informal meeting spaces in the office. "You meet people at the coffee machine in the corridor, but there is no place to sit and have a conversation." Also the building does not provide a meeting place where colleagues can meet after work (for example a coffee bar or a pub). This is regrettable because meeting colleagues after work can result in a positive work environment and stronger bond between colleagues.

Korbee likes the idea of the changing work environment and is willing to work in a big open workspace. But the current situation with the anonymous workspaces and the lack of informal meeting spaces results in a very uninspiring work environment.

The findings from our visit of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment and the information from Hans Korbee confirm that the New Way of Working is not yet working as it should. The problems in these two cases have to do with the office layout (In the layout of the NWW there is need for well-designed informal meeting spaces and open workspaces) and with the anonymous office spaces which are a result of the clean desk policy.

4. The New Way of Working 2.0

Could the problem of the anonymous and uninspiring workspace that emerged from the clean desk policy be solved? To find out more about this, I look at the way of working at the Faculty of Architecture of the Technical University in Delft. In this faculty, students do not get a fixed desk but share a table with their project group (8 to 10 students). The faculty also provides an open shelves unit behind the table where the student is able to store things. During the project or semester the student can store his drawings, models, and other belongings in this shelving unit. It is also possible that the student make use of other tables in the big open spaces, but when there is a meeting, the project table is used. After the semester the student has to remove your belongings from the shelving unit.

In this system you are provided with a space where you are guaranteed of a small work place. If you want more space, a quiet place, or a more informal place you can move to other spaces, for example the library. The good thing is that the shelving units are open. If you walk through the spaces students can see where the students are working at. Also near the project tables there are some exposition walls where you can hang work.

Projecting this on the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment the floor plan could change into a more open space:
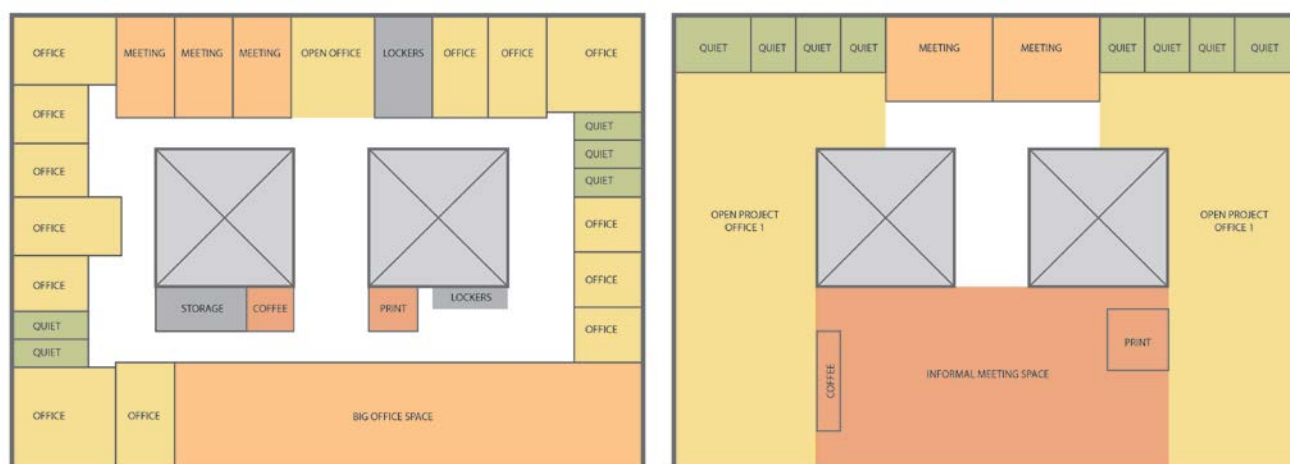
Figure 4 the current plan (left) and a new proposal (right). Diagrams made by the author.

In the current plan of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment (left image) you see different spaces but the layout of the plan is similar to a traditional office space. This current plan lacks an informal meeting space and big open workspaces. In the new proposal for the ministry (right image) there are two big open work spaces that can be used by a project group or a group from a department. Between the work spaces there is an informal meeting space. Both the project groups and the department can make use of this space. On one side of the floor there are some quiet rooms and two closed off meeting rooms.

A disadvantage of this proposal is that somebody in the company has to decide which project group use which space. Also a possibility is that there are problems with the occupation of the project spaces because not all projects groups have the same size. Because in both cases it cost the company more money, the consideration to change to this New Way of Working is not finance driven but rather to create a creative and inspiring space for employees. More research into this model is needed to see if the employees require an informal meeting spaces and what should be present in such a space.

5. Conclusion

In the introduction I question a contradiction that I found within the New Way of Working: the contradiction between creating a creative work space versus the clean desk policy. How can a company expect a creative working environment if the clean desk policy requires that the office space is kept empty?

In the NWW, the emphasis is on autonomy and freedom as basic concepts. Teleworking and a different office layout are the starting points for the NWW. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment has implemented the NWW three years ago. The ministry had two type of office floor layouts. In the first type there was a big open informal meeting space with different kinds of furniture, creating a creative and colourful working environment. In the second type, the office had a traditional layout with a variety of small office rooms. The lack of an informal meeting space, open work spaces and signs of identification resulted in a very empty and anonymous office environment.

There are some uncertainties about the claimed social effects of the NWW. According to Hans Korbee, an employee of a Dutch Ministry, the problems of the NWW are caused by the clean desk policy and the absence of well-designed informal meeting spaces.

The spatial organisation of the faculty of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology is providing temporary project spaces and could offer a solution for the problem for the anonymous atmosphere in the ministry, by creating spaces where one project group could work and where employees could store their belongings in open shelving units. In this layout employees share a big table during the time of a project. Projecting this on a ministry office floor, an informal meeting space can link the several work spaces and bring employees in contact with each other.

An open informal meeting space and (half)open work spaces are in my opinion essential for the succeeding of the NWW and for creating a creative work environment. A solution in which the layout of the office space is not changed, but in which the office floor still has many small office rooms without an informal meeting space, could save the company a lot of money but will most often result in empty and uncreative working spaces. When the clean desk policy is changed from a locker system to a system with open shelves, employees could see what other employees are working on and this can stimulate a more creative and inspiring work environment. With well-designed informal meeting spaces, which connect different (open) workspaces, and an open shelve system to store belongings, the NWW can still save the company some money but can create also a creative work environment compared to the traditional way of working.

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