The perception of new office spaces by office workers

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Introduction

The aim of the design studio *The Place of Work* is to design a new working environment where civil servants from a number of different municipalities can eventually work together. The main objective is to create an environment which can accommodate people of different positions, teams of different sizes, but which also provides flexibility and openness in the place of work, where people can pick where they want to sit on day-to-day basis. Within this design studio we therefore strive to achieve a rather communal environment, which is directed on flexibility, openness and the new way of working.

When I think about an open plan working environment, I cannot say what I think positively about all its aspects. When having to experience working in such a space, I have experienced positive and negative sides of it. On one hand I thought it was very convenient to be able to communicate with all members of your project team and exchange the knowledge with them. Being able to sit wherever I wanted also gave me an opportunity to interact with new people and learn from them, rather than being bound to a smaller silent room with the same people all the time. But on the other hand there were times when I needed to concentrate on a problem solving and needed a more quite place with no noise and other distractions. One might say that the library is that kind of place. But to me the library is not always convenient for a concentrated work. The reason for that is that I am still surrounded by a large amount of people and sometimes, whether I like it or not, my eyes get distracted by the surrounding activities, which distracts me from what I am doing. In those cases I prefer to work at home, because there I try not to get distracted randomly, but prefer to take short breaks every hour to recharge my mind. But then when I work at home I do not have an opportunity to personally discuss things with my group mates, unless I invest time into travel.

These are my personal experiences of working in an open plan office. But in order to understand, what other people experience, when working in this sort of environment, I need to go deeper and conduct a study, which will help me get a more clear idea of the general opinion on the matter. What interests me is how much comfortable (personal) space does a person need to be able to work well? How important is privacy in the working environment? How can you combine privacy and working in a team? These are the questions that I want to answer to help me understand the culture of the new working environment. In turn, answering these questions will help me understand which direction I should be moving with my design proposal: should I obey completely to the wishes of the client or should I make alternative proposals, which are supported by a set of arguments?

Research

First of all I would like to talk about why it is important to know how people experience the space they are in.

The space is not designed for chairs or tables, but it is designed to fit the chairs and tables that are needed for people. So, it all comes down to accommodating the user of the space – the people. According to Jeroen van Dijk, when you design a building, you thrive to facilitate people’s needs: work, study, living and so on\(^1\). When he talks about facilitating, he really means providing an environment which will help people reach certain goals in whatever field they are active in. It does not only have to do with physically comfortable surroundings, but also implies a mentally pleasant and challenging environment, where you would not get distracted from your thoughts, feelings and attitude towards succeeding. But what kind of environment does one need in order to work efficiently?

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\(^1\) Van Dijk 2014 [http://www.omgevingspsycholoog.nl/](http://www.omgevingspsycholoog.nl/)
As Theo van der Voordt states in his paper on productivity and employee satisfaction in flexible workplaces, a trend of making flexible workplaces has been already developing in the early 1990s. According to him the reasons for this change were to improve labour productivity and induce the teamwork, but also economic reasons such as low occupancy of expensive workplaces and therefore the need to cut down expenditures on offices. In my opinion, these issues are still — or again — relevant today. Nowadays more people work part time or work from home. This means that, if they were to have their personal office, if it would stay empty part of the week, when at the same time the employer is paying the rent for the space. That is why creating a flexible work environment where an employee can choose where they want to work on a day-to-day basis helps to manage the expenditure of the employer. But the question is whether it is actually beneficial, not only for the overall productivity of the company, but also for the productivity, health and satisfaction of separate workers.

Another reason for choosing for an open office plan is because the user of an office building — the company renting a space — changes with a frequency of 6-10 years. Therefore it is much more efficient to make buildings with open plans which can fit current and future user of the building. Joost P. Poort and Jun Hoo state in their paper on flexibility in the Dutch office sector that it is very important to keep the office buildings flexible in order to be able to adjust them to economical and market changes. So, it really seems that there is more to it than just creating a new working environment for the workers, but in this report I will not focus on those external aspects.

Theo van der Voordt has done a number of studies on how people experience a new working environment. According to a number of analysed projects, some of which have been transformed from having a fixed plan to having a flexible set up, productivity and satisfaction levels differ, depending on different factors. In some projects the flexible floor plan configuration lead to an increase in the communication within a team. In my opinion this can be explained by the fact that within an open office plan it is easier to form groups from the same team members. In this case the work is more efficient because the issues and problems can be discussed right at the spot without having to email each other or schedule a meeting. But, on the other hand, it has been observed, that productivity of individual workers dropped in some cases, specifically for the reason of being distracted by other people working and discussing matters with each other. Dissatisfaction was also caused by the lack of suitable workplaces, as it is difficult to predict how many open workplaces of private or team units an office would need. Therefore sometimes an employee would have to work in an undesirable location, and can lead to overfilling of certain rooms. This in turn can lead to dissatisfaction and therefore decrease in productivity. In other cases the productivity levels have increased and the workers viewed it as a privilege to be able to choose where they want to work — open workplace or a private booth — depending on the tasks they need to work on that day. The study also showed that even though people were less satisfied with things like lack of personal climate control, the need to set up your personal workplace every time and not being able to personalise your spot and set up an individual territory, they were rather satisfied with the fact that this flexibility gives you an opportunity to meet more people from your company. So, it creates more opportunities for communication and interaction. In my opinion, if you are in some way involved in this interaction you think of it in a positive way. But if you are an outsider sitting next to a group of people — interacting with each other — trying to concentrate on your task, you might view this interactive feature differently. And it is true; the studies show that there are many complaints about reduced privacy, both visual and acoustic. These dissatisfaction levels are significantly higher in the higher staff positions.

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2 Van der Voordt 2003
4 Joost P. Poort, Jun Hoo 2008
5 Van der Voordt 2003
There is another study that has been specifically conducted in order to establish a connection between the working position and the satisfaction level of the flexible workplaces. The study was conducted on a building which undergone a change from a conventional to an open-plan office. In this study the employees were interviewed 6 months prior and 6 months after the layout of their work environment changed. The authors have divided the interviewed people into four groups: secretaries and their supervisors (1), staff specialists (2), and managerial employees (3 and 4). Before the reconstruction employees 1 were located at unenclosed desks. Employees 2 were placed in double offices, and employees 3 and 4 had their own private offices. The new layout of this office had no private offices, but it had free-standing partitions and tall storage units, which could function as space separators. It also seems that the idea of the new organisation was to locate the higher managers farther away from the passageways and the secretary locations, by placing higher separators there. As a result of this study it has been found that the satisfaction with the privacy levels has become lower in the new plan and people’s speech confidentiality level dropped as well. Especially it can be observed amongst employees of rank 3 and 4. The reason for that, in my opinion, is that these groups usually deal with more confidential information – making important calls, receiving special visitors in their office – which they do not want to put out there for everyone to hear. These two groups have also experienced the biggest change in the noise levels. When before the relocation they had their private offices with good noise insulation where they could concentrate on their work, now they had an open office, which would not have such an extensive level of noise cancelling. This means that the managers would get distracted much more than they used to be before. On the contrary, the groups 1 and 2 did not experience a large jump in the noise levels, because both have either been working in an open space already before (1) or have been working in a shared office (2) which also affects the noise levels.

The previous examples mentioned how (a change to) an open office plan affected employers’ productivity, satisfaction and comfort levels. But what is also important to know, is whether these organisational proposals affect people’s health and well-being and with that also a job satisfaction. The main concern of the paper written by Christina Bodin Danielsson and Lennart Bodin was to investigate into this direction. In their research paper they compared findings on seven different types of offices: cell office (1 person), shared room office (2-3 persons in a room), small open plan office (4-9 persons in a room), medium-sized open plan office (10-24 persons in a room), large open plan office (>24 persons in a room), flex office, and combi office. The results of their research are not one sided. They mention that the perception and experience of a particular office space can depend on the factors such as type of work people do and their age. They found out that people working at cell office and flex office have reported the highest levels of health and work satisfaction. Shared offices and small and medium-sized open offices showed the best results for the general health level. The large but also small open plan offices were inferior with respect to physical and psychological problems. Small and medium-sized offices ranked lower for efficiency, accuracy, calmness and harmony and quality of sleep. When it comes to recording the work satisfaction, the lowest was the combi office, and medium and large-size open offices just above those. In their discussion they state that the reasons that medium sized open plan offices score low is because they are not large enough for people to form subgroups, but at the same time not small enough for everyone to get to know each other. They also report that the lack of “back-up”, where one can seek privacy, also lacks on smaller and medium sized offices, as these are not large enough to accommodate these extra enclosed spaces. On the contrary to these are cell and flex offices, which show a high level of health, well-being and job satisfaction. The reason for it is most likely because

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6 Sundstrom, Herbert and W. Br own 1982
7 Bodin Danielsson and Bodin 2008
in these office workers experience a personal freedom and independence. These offices offer a more personal control of a workplace, easy access to meeting spaces, which increases the job satisfaction level. The ability to control your working environment has a tendency to affect people’s psychological and physical condition in a positive way.

For me it was also interesting to ask people myself and see what they think about the flexible office spaces. For example, my step father is currently working in an open office plan – he does have his own space within the department – and he likes it. He used to work in an enclosed office room, but he found it to be a worse working environment and he would not want to go back to that setting. He likes open plan office because he feels better connected to his team and that everyone – even the managers – work in the same space. This way there is more interaction between people of different ranks. He appreciates an open plan office, but points out that there still should be enough of meeting facilities and rooms/spaces where people can talk on the phone or with each other, so that other employers do not get disturbed.

When we visited the building of the ministry of infrastructure, I have talked to a couple of people about their working environment. One man said that he was already working in an open office plan and found it rather exhausting. He had to use his lunch break in order to get away from the business of the working environment. Another worker pointed out that he likes the idea of flexible working space – different table every day – but he would still prefer to stay in room of maximum 4 people.

Not so long ago we have visited the building of Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague where the designers implemented a new office plan and organisational strategy. Here, on the reorganised floors, they have implemented the idea of flexible office space. Meaning there was no office assigned to anyone – with the exception of secretaries and ministers. People come to work in the morning, take their personal belongings from their locker and take a sit wherever they want. There would also be separate formal and informal meeting rooms and spaces, which could be used for louder events. During their presentation, the interior designers pointed out that at the beginning people were coping with this change quite difficulty. They wanted their place to be personalised, they would get easily distracted by people but also distract other people too. But with time they got used to the new situation. They started to understand the concept of the flexible working space. They became more quiet and respectful to other people’s environment, so, if they want to chat they go to an informal meeting space or a coffee corner. Even the secretaries now want to move around the floor like everyone else.

**Conclusions and architectural solutions**

The researches mentioned above give a better understanding into how different types of offices, and open-plan offices, affect health, well-being and with that also productivity and job satisfaction of employees. The findings presented in the researches also show similar results.

It is brought to our attention that the attitude towards a certain kind of office layout or type can be related to the type of work a person does or a position he or she has in the company. It seems that most of the time the staff members that hold the highest managing positions in the company prefer to have their own personal cell office rather than to feel uncomfortable and intimidated when being placed in an open office space.

As shown in the example of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it might just also take time before people get used to the new situation and learn how to react to new conditions. But there might also be people who would always prefer to work in a more quite setting, but still maybe would like an opportunity to interact with colleagues every once in a while. That is why I think that a flexible office is not just an office with an open plan. It should be an office, which can satisfy needs of different working
styles of workers. People should be given an opportunity to choose, that’s why there should be different types of spaces: meeting rooms, informal meeting spaces, coffee corners, quite working areas where one can concentrate. Even though employers should think about costs of putting the building to use, they should also realise that the working environment affects the productivity and job satisfaction of their employees, which in turn affects the company.
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