EXPLORING NEW SPACE APPROPRIATION STRATEGIES IN FLEX-OFFICES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Since the covid-19 pandemic, telework has developed and became the norm in companies worldwide. With people working from home several days per week, offices' occupation rates have plummeted, leaving open-spaces partly empty. Companies have seen this phenomenon as an opportunity to reduce costs by reducing the number of workstations per employee. As a result, workers in such setups do not own a specific desk. They rather belong to an area, in which several positions are available for them to use, but none of these can be considered "theirs". But it has been demonstrated that developing a feeling of appropriation or ownership over one's workspace through a range of processes (i.e., personalization) has a range of positive consequences such as improving work satisfaction (Rioux & Pignault, 2013) or reducing emotional exhaustion caused by lack of privacy (Laurence, Fried, & Slowik, 2013). However, although flex-offices are promptly developing, research about the impact of such design on appropriation and related issues are scarce. To address this topic, we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews, with workers from a French telecommunication company, some of whom had a personal desk and some of whom were in a flex-office. We interrogated their relationship to their own workspace and the ways they relate to it. We conducted a thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's guidelines (2006) to shed light on issues related to space appropriation. Our results show that a vast majority of individuals value their feeling of workplace belonging. Even when individual personalization is severely hindered, workers will express feeling like they belong to their workspace or are working towards developing this feeling. They will develop strategies and habits to develop a new feeling of appropriation through collective and individual processes (i.e., collective personalization, habits forming, team space regulation) more compatible with flex-offices. This study allows us to postulate that space appropriation goes beyond individual personalization and knowledge of the physical environment. When hindered, this complex and multifaceted psychological process can translate in many ways. This study points out the importance of letting employees turn their space into a place. It will be followed by quantitative research to further investigate these processes and their consequences in terms of behaviors and attitudes in the workplace.

Keywords: *Flex-desk, flex-office, workplace appropriation, workplace attachment.*

1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 crisis, new regulations regarding social distancing and sanitary constraints profoundly impacted how companies view and organize their workspaces. In the French telecommunications company where this study was conducted, individual offices are disappearing in favor of centralized, nomadic offices, also known as "flex-offices." These offices are standardized spaces equipped and organized uniformly, offering workstations on a daily basis to employees as needed. However, the number of workers assigned to the shared space exceeds the number of available workstations, necessitating a rotation system so that, thanks to telework, the number of on-site employees does not exceed the number of available workstations each day. This setup promotes flexibility in workspace use and allows for significant cost savings for the organization. However, since the 1980s, when open and flex office spaces emerged, studies have highlighted mixed effects of these configurations on employee performance and health. Van der Voordt (2004) reported positive effects on job satisfaction, while De Been & Beijer (2014) demonstrated improved interpersonal communication. Conversely, Maher and Von Hippel (2005) identified negative impacts on individual performance, particularly when tasks are complex. Regardless of the results, researchers consistently emphasized the influence of workspace design on health (Öhrn et al., 2021), employee cohesion and collaboration (Arundell et al., 2018; Haapakangas,

Hallman, Mathiassen, & Jahncke, 2019), and individual performance (Kim, Candido, Thomas, & De Dear, 2016; Jahncke & Hallman, 2020).

This study was conducted in a French telecommunications company in which three types of offices can be found: individual offices, assigned desks in open-plan spaces, and increasingly common flex-offices as described above. The progressive disappearance of individual and assigned offices is perceived by employees as a break from company's culture. Official communications from the company reference the concept of a "regenerative workstation", aiming to create work environments promoting employee health, performance, work engagement, and brand identification. However, the coherence between these goals and the development of flex-offices is not straightforward. As mentioned earlier, literature suggests that these factors are influenced by the ability to appropriate the workspace (Rioux & Pignault, 2013; Barbillon, Moch, & Rioux, 2006). This raises the question: what does workspace appropriation look like in flex-offices?

Fischer (1989) describes workspace appropriation as a set of spatial practices involving control over workspaces and a psychological process of transforming and personalizing spaces. Authors using this conceptualization identify two common appropriation strategies: personalizing the workspace with personal items (Barbillon, Moch, & Rioux, 2006) and mastering and developing first-hand knowledge regarding the environment through its regular use and exploration (Morval & Judge, 2000; Rioux, 2004). The first strategy involves bringing personal objects into a space to define one's territory, regulate social interactions, and express one's identity (Wells, 2000). The second refers to increasing knowledge and understanding of the environment through movement and use of the space (Rioux, 2004).

Studies in the UK and US highlighted the positive effects of workspace appropriation through personalization in reducing stress at work (Halpern, 1995), improving job satisfaction (Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986) and enhancing well-being and physical health (Wells, 2000). Flex-offices, however, inherently involve shared workspaces, impacting certain appropriation strategies such as individual personalization. Consequently, it seems relevant to explore the broader psychosocial impacts of this spatial reorganization through the lens of workspace appropriation strategies used by employees.

2. Methodology

The aim of this protocol was to thoroughly understand the various workspace appropriation strategies implemented by employees depending on the type of configuration in which they worked (i.e., flex office, individual office, fixed desk in an open space). Specifically, the study sought to gather answers to the following questions:

- How do different workspace configurations affect the importance employees place on workspace appropriation?
- To what extent does the development of workspace appropriation differ among employees in flex-offices compared to those in other office types?
- To what extent do new forms of workspace organization (i.e., flex-offices) hinder versus facilitate certain appropriation strategies?

2.1. Participants

Seventeen employees (11 men, 6 women) from four subdivisions of the company participated in this qualitative study. Their age ranged from 36 to 66 years old (M_{years} = 50; SD_{years} = 7.71) and they had an average tenure of 23 years in the company (SD_{years} = 10.15) and 5.27 years in their current roles (SD_{years} = 3.45). Among them, nine worked in flex-offices, two had private offices, and six had fixed desks in collective spaces.

2.2. Procedure

The study was conducted across four sub-divisions of a telecommunication company, distributed throughout France. Invitations to participate in semi-structured interviews regarding their relationship with their workspace were sent to employees via their managers. The interviews were conducted via Teams and lasted 58 minutes on average. At the start of the interviews, participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. They were then invited to answer a series of open-ended questions about the arrangement of their workspace and their relationship with it (e.g., "Can you tell me about your current workspace? How would you describe your relationship with your workspace?"). Participants were encouraged to respond freely. Additional questions were occasionally added to elicit more detailed or precise answers.

3. Analysis

Following the guidelines of Braun & Clarke (2006), we conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews.

The two researchers responsible for the study read the 17 interview transcripts and coded the segments according to the themes mentioned. The two sets of coding were then compared, and differing parts were discussed. At the end of this process, 473 segments of interest emerged, coded into 19 categories such as communication, logistics, social relationships, or noise. The links between each category and our research questions were then examined.

4. Results

Ultimately, our findings are summarized in five key points, developed in this section:

4.1. Importance given to workspace appropriation according the type of office

Out of the 17 employees interviewed, 16 associated workspace appropriation with benefits, notably for their well-being and comfort. However, significant differences were observed depending on work configurations. For most employees in flex-offices, appropriation is described as a difficult goal to achieve: "I miss the comfort of knowing where I'm going, having my desk, putting up the photo of my little boy, my daughter. It's impersonal; you arrive, put your stuff down, the day goes by, and you leave." In contrast, for employees in private offices or fixed desks in a collective space, appropriation is described as an acquired and beneficial element: "In my office, I have some privacy. I like arriving in the morning, closing my door, and telling myself, 'This is my personal space.'" "This place is mine, because I get back to it every morning." These opinions align with what the rest of our data suggests, namely that workspace appropriation is, seemingly, a rather challenging process in a flex-office environment. However, this does not mean that employees in flex-offices have abandoned this psychological process. Rather, they must rely on new dimensions over which they do not always have control, making their sense of appropriation more fragile. Our interviews revealed four of these dimensions, contributing to the appropriation of the workspace for our participants.

4.2. First dimension: Familiarity with the workspace

This is the dimension that participants most frequently associated with the appropriation of their workspace (11 out of 17 respondents). Employees with fixed desks explain that maintaining a quasi-"intimate" sensory relationship (spatial arrangement, visual perspective, smells) gives them the impression that it truly belongs to them: "Humans have a gregarious instinct. I have my place; I always sit here. My phone charger is here, my manager is on my left. The view is familiar to me." "This feeling [of being at home] comes from the fact that I always sit here. I always have this view. The carpet smells the same. I know I'm at my desk." On the other hand, employees in flex-offices explain that this familiarity is what they lack to develop this feeling: "In the morning, I lack a form of habit that you can't develop here. You arrive and don't know where you'll sit or what your work position will be like."

4.3. Second dimension: Personalization

The second dimension is mentioned by 10 out of 17 participants. As described by Wells (2000), these participants say they bring personal objects to work for various reasons: to decorate (paintings, plants) or improve their work environment (better-quality keyboard, computer screen). Participants working from a flex office mention this dimension but emphasize that changing desks daily makes personalization of their workspace impossible and associate it with the perception of an anonymous space: "In a flex office, you don't create your own environment. All the desks are identical, like Airbnbs. You never really feel like it's yours... But it's not really 'not yours' either. You're in an anonymous place." However, some workers in flexible offices describe other modalities of personalizing their space than those mentioned in scientific literature, such as more collective personalization strategies like printing photos or buying plants to decorate the shared space, as well as creating areas of conviviality: "We don't have paintings, we don't have decorations, nothing. But in the cabinet, we have cookies, tea, and coffee for the team. We've made this place ours with sweets."

4.4. Third dimension: Physical and psychological proximity with the team

The third dimension refers to perceived proximity with the team. This was described by four people, all working in flex offices, as a true determinant of their sense of workspace appropriation. In short, the strong psychological proximity between team members allows them, when occupying a space together, to develop a sense of appropriation towards it "We didn't decorate, we're not allowed to. This place is ours because we're all here together. It's the team. It really comes down to my team being here." "We feel like this place is ours because we have a sense of belonging to the team. There's a lot of solidarity among us. We share a lot. There's a strong team spirit and strong collaboration. So yes, since our team is so cohesive, I also feel like it's a place where we feel at home."

4.5. Fourth dimension: Co-creation and co-regulation of the workspace

The fourth and final dimension related to workspace appropriation, mentioned by three employees in flex-offices, is what we call co-creation or co-regulation of the space. This strategy involves taking control of a space by establishing common rules and defining ways to occupy it as a team. In the scientific literature, it corresponds to an aspect of personalization (Wells, 2000), but in our study, it takes a different form due to the specificities of flex-offices. Indeed, the employees referencing this strategy adopt an approach to appropriating their space by personalizing not the decoration or the items around them but rather the overall layout, rules, and collective functioning governing it. In fact, the physical modifications they describe do not involve bringing objects as studied thus far, but rather designing the layout of the space (e.g., the number of desks and quiet booths, the size of the break room). Thus, their space reflects the characteristics and specificities of their work group. This process was implemented both officially and unofficially. The company planed workshops to allow employees to design their future collective space according to their needs: "We organized some workshops to design the functioning of the future space. Except for a few grumblers, everyone was quite happy. We arranged our space as we wanted it." Additionally, in some cases team members decided on their own accord to collectively define and implement rules for their workspace : "We set some basic rules with my colleagues. If you take a spot on one day and you are here the next day, you get to keep it. This doesn't apply from Fridays to Mondays." "The managers in my area really involved their teams. They asked them what rules they wanted to implement, what they thought about this or that. These are things that absolutely need to be defined by the team members."

5. Discussion and conclusion

From the analysis of our data, it emerges that regardless of the type of workspace occupied, employees generally do not give up on appropriating it but rather adapt the way they strive to achieve this. In our sample for instance, the topic is considered important by 94% of participants. Additionally, some of the levers of workspace appropriation, even in the new types of spaces considered (i.e., flex-offices), are related to previous scientific observations (Barbillon, Moch, & Rioux, 2006). For instance, the importance of personalization and overall mastery/knowledge of the environment stands out from our interviews as particularly significant.

However, two dimensions from our interviews are more unique, as they are exclusively associated with flex-offices. These dimensions—psychological and physical proximity with the team, and co-creation/co-regulation of the space—are not mentioned by employees working in other types of offices. Two lines of research can then be envisioned. The first questions the role and conditions for the emergence of these two workspace appropriation strategies. Specifically, can they be considered substitution or compensation strategies in an environment (flex-offices) that makes individual workspace appropriation behaviors impossible? The second point concerns the precise nature of the links between certain workspace appropriation strategies and associated psychosocial dimensions. Indeed, while Laurence, Fried, and Slowik (2013) demonstrated that workspace personalization correlates with a lesser negative impact in terms of perceived promiscuity and lack of privacy, our own results lead us to observe that physical and psychological proximity with the team could promote a sense of workspace appropriation. Can we then hypothesize a bidirectional effect between these different dimensions?

These results open the door to future studies to confirm the aforementioned antecedents of workspace appropriation through enriched study protocols (e.g., mixed methods), examine the predictive power of each dimension on effective appropriation of different office types, and analyze the variety of consequences at different levels (individual, collective, organizational) of these processes.

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