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A photograph of a board game board with several cards and pins. One card in the foreground is numbered '84' and contains text about booking a meeting room. The board has various colored paths and pins in black, blue, and red.

# THE WORKPLACE GAME

## NETHERLANDS RESEARCHERS DEVELOP BOARD GAME TO ADDRESS BEHAVIOR IN THE WORKPLACE

BY EVI DE BRUYNE AND FIEN THOOLEN

**D**o you know the feeling you get when you fail to organize a meeting because all meeting rooms are booked months in advance? Or when you are in urgent need of some coffee, but the cups are finished? Yet again, your colleagues appear not to have felt the need to replace them. And one of your colleagues always arrives at the office after you, but also seems to leave earlier. Does he continue his work at home or is he enjoying the good weather instead?

There are often many little irritations between colleagues, caused by each other's behavior in the office. Sometimes they are well known, but rarely are they openly talked about. Not everyone is as comfortable with addressing these issues and talking to colleagues about their behavior.

To create a more comfortable atmosphere to talk about these kinds of issues, the Center for People and Buildings (CfPB) in the Netherlands

has developed "The Workplace Game." As a communication tool, the game enables office workers to exchange ideas about the use of their office environment, and makes the implicit thoughts and norms about office use, explicit. This helps to make office life easier and more pleasant, because these issues and potential problems are now clear to everyone. And hopefully, next time you find there's no more cups, it will be easier to approach your colleagues about it.

“I learned the most from playing the game with someone at a completely different level in the organization. Now I realize how they work. I never could have imagined this.”


“At first I was reluctant to spend my time playing a game. But, from the moment we started I realized that it is important to discuss the kinds of issues this game raises.”

**4**

*Expertise and knowledge*

Who is responsible for keeping the workplaces clean?

- A The Facility Management.
- B Members of staff must ensure that they leave their desks clean and in order.
- C No idea.
- D Other, namely ...



**Office use**

Many of us spend a substantial part of our time, about eight hours every working day, at the office. Here we spend all our time amidst our colleagues, each with their own particular character and way of behaving and moving through the office. Some we know very well and might even be close friends with; others we hardly know, or even dislike.

Still, in a professional setting, you have to work together during the hours spent in the office environment. Of course there are rules to this behavior that dictate how we approach situations and each other. Some are explicit and written down, but most are more implicit. In particular, employees who have worked together in the same building for quite some time tend to have their own habits and have developed implicit rules on how to use the office.

However, over the last several years work environments have changed. Technology and a more flexible way of dealing with work have changed how and where we work. In some organizations it is possible to work from home, in some employees are allowed to determine their own work schedules and some have implemented new, flexible office layouts where individuals no longer have their own desks. This new way of working has changed our work and also our behavior. It has changed the way we interact with our colleagues and it has changed the “office rules.”

From your own experience you may know that this can be quite a challenge.

**53**

*Attitude and behaviour*

On the same floor there is a communal print and copy area. Other people's documents are often strewn around there. How do you deal with this?


- A I read the documents so I am aware of what is going on in the organization.
- B I give the printouts to my colleagues if I know who they belong to.
- C I leave other people's documents where they are, and take only my own documents with me.
- D Other, namely ...

**79**

*Values and norms*

It turns out that meeting rooms are empty more often than not, but at the same time there is a shortage of workspaces. How would you solve this?

- A I would leave things as they are, because it is important that we work together on a more regular basis. That is what we need these spaces for.
- B You could turn a number of meeting rooms into workspaces.
- C I would leave things as they are, for it is no problem to work in the meeting rooms if they are not occupied.
- D Other, namely ...

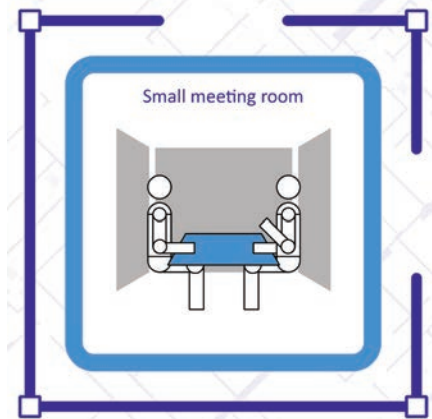
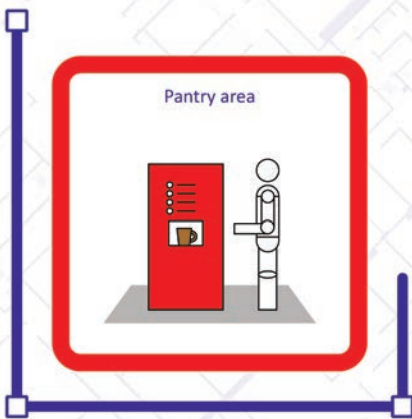


**104**

*Values and norms*

A colleague has a game of football every Friday afternoon. What do you think of this?

- A No problem; he probably catches up on the work during the weekend.
- B We can't have that – you should be available on a nine to five basis.
- C That is all right, provided he has made watertight arrangements with the manager.
- D Other, namely ...







For example: You have just arrived home from a dinner with friends and quickly check your work email inbox, where you find a message from your boss about a project you have been working on for a while. So do you reply, to show what a good employee you are? Or is it natural that you wait until tomorrow when you are back at work to answer? You will have to agree on what to expect from your colleagues and make arrangements on when and how you can reach each other. Some people like to start working earlier than others or prefer to work on the weekends, while others stick to a nine-to-six working schedule five days a week, but you will still have to work together.

These changes could also have a substantial impact on management. Managers will learn that even though they do not see all employees at the office every day, they are nevertheless all working. This requires a shift from management focused on presence to

management on output. This means that employees are evaluated on their work output over a certain period, but can decide when or where they work.

### How it began

In 2007 the Dutch Land Registry office (Kadaster) built a brand new building with what they called a dynamic new office environment. Hot desking was implemented in an effort to improve communication and collaboration among the office workers. However, within a couple of weeks of moving in, it appeared to management that people were not using the environment as it was intended. Most had settled in and chosen their own desks, where they sat every day.

At that time the CFPB was collaborating with the Land Registry Office, doing research into their change process. The question arose: How do we re-address behavior in the work environment? How can we stimulate people to use

the office in a more dynamic way? It seemed clear to us that we did not want to just give them a set of rules, with a presentation of how they should, and should not, be working.

We expected that such a one-sided story that assigned blame and stressed what was wrong would not be easily accepted by the workers. We wanted to involve the employees, empowering them to recognize and address certain behaviors that could cause problems. Why not make behavior issues open for discussion? In most cases people will come to a solution, and if they do, it is easier for the group to accept the rule knowing its background and reasoning.

What we needed was a way to do exactly this: address behavior openly among employees. What we came up with was The Workplace Game. It actively involves office workers and prompts them to consciously think about their own behavior and its consequences.

The game was designed to meet several goals:

- Stimulate awareness of the changes in the work environment;
- Stimulate awareness of employees' own assumptions and norms;
- Develop shared values and norms; and
- Stimulate desired behaviors in the new work environment.

### Playing the game

We developed a board game, a playful, tangible tool, which focuses the discussion between four to six people. During the game people wander through a fictional office floorplan with different kinds of workspaces: regular workspaces, meeting spaces, support areas and different locations. The terminology and classification of these spaces was derived from the “Werkplekwijzer”

(or “amenagements tertiaires”) (van Meel, Martens and van Ree, 2012). This book provides an overview of different types of spaces that might exist within office environments. It describes and illustrates the different workplace settings and their names, characteristics and design requirements.

Just like any other board game, the players throw the dice and move their pawns accordingly along the floorplan. When a player encounters a card in a certain color and “enters” a certain room, he/she is given a situation that could realistically occur in the workplace.

For example: Large meeting rooms are always booked far in advance, usually for meetings where only a few people actually turn up. You need a meeting space for eight people at short notice. What do you do? In order to hear everyone's opinion we found that it is very important that each person first answers this

question individually before starting a discussion, otherwise the opinion of one or two people may overpower the whole discussion. This is what the game is all about: sharing opinions about how each person would like to use the work environment. It brings forward the issues at play in the work environment.

In order to capture a multitude of situations that could take place in and around an office, the game categorizes 120 situations. These are first organized based on the location where the situation takes place (work space, meeting space, support space and — since 2013 — “other location”); next, on the level of behavior. There are questions about: values and norms, information and knowledge, and attitude and behavior.

It is of course not possible to address all 120 situations during a single session of about an hour. It is up to the organization playing the game to select those that

they want to talk about. For instance, when an organization does not have shared desks, they can leave out all cards about this topic. Or, if there are major issues relating to meeting spaces, the organization can select and give more emphasis to the cards that address this.

### Timing

Although the game was originally developed for an organization that wanted to address behavior after moving to a dynamic work environment, the game has since been played in very different organizations and contexts. It can be played during the ideation phase to see how people like to do their work and what they need to do it well. Sessions in this phase can inspire architects to develop offices that better suit the needs of the users.

It is also possible to play the game before moving to a new office to visualize what a flexible environment would be like. It helps people imagine what might happen in their new work environment and the impact it might have on them. It can also help to address behavioral issues in traditional workplaces, such as: How do you book a meeting room? Who is keeping them tidy? What do you do if you have a meeting, but you are stuck in a traffic jam? Can you postpone the meeting or turn it into a teleconference?

These are just a few issues that may arise in any work environment. Because of the different modalities of the game we recommend training prior to facilitating, especially if you plan to play several times and in larger settings. In France this training is provided by CFPB's associate HR&D, which has adapted the game to the French-speaking context.

### Experiences so far

Since we designed The Workplace Game it has been played in more than 150 organizations. Many of these are in the Netherlands, but it has also been played in Switzerland, Finland, Germany, Belgium and France. We have received a lot of positive feedback and can say that the game works to open up the discussion about behavior in the office.



We have also developed French and English versions of the game to help address office behavior in other countries. We tested these in workshops to determine the relevance of the game and its questions in different organizational (national) contexts, and received positive comments and feedback.

Even though the game was originally developed for flexible working contexts, participants in a recent session in Paris also saw it as useful tool to also address behavior in more traditional environments. This is where our new challenge lies: to produce the game in different languages and to its value in other companies. Once the game is developed and played in different countries, we would like to investigate the cultural differences and how they could possibly be bridged by this simple tool.

One of the first companies in France to be convinced by the game was Haworth. They used it to discuss behavior with their employees in their new innovative and dynamic office. They have been great advocates of the game since then, allowing others from different worldwide branches to undergo training to be able to facilitate the game and use it in their consulting activities. Another fast mover was Colliers France (formerly AOS). They also saw the potential and

wanted to be able to apply the game in their consulting work.

While we are glad to see these and other parties using the game in France, we would of course like to extend this list. So, are you experiencing some behaviors in the office you would like to address, or are you advising a company that is moving to a new office? Consider playing The Workplace Game!<sup>2</sup> **FMJ**

### REFERENCE

1. van Meel, J., Martens, Y. and van Ree, H. J. (2010). Planning office spaces: A practical guide for managers and designers. Laurence King Publishing.
2. Learn more about The Workplace Game at [www.cfpb.nl/en/instrumenten/#c778](http://www.cfpb.nl/en/instrumenten/#c778).



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