

# PERSONALIZATION IN NON-TERRITORIAL OFFICES: A STUDY OF A HUMAN NEED

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - Personalization and the non-territorial office seem to be contradicting concepts. It is generally accepted that it is not possible to personalize workplaces in environments where no fixed individual workplaces are allocated. However, people seem to have a human need of personalization. Personalization can be done in different ways and for different reasons. Based on a literature review and a qualitative case study at a Dutch governmental organization, this article aims to explain why and how personalization occurs in environments where non-territorial office concepts are introduced.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative interpretative research design, in which literature study, document analysis, observations and talking and interviews are combined, to understand the actor's perspective and behavior in the non-territorial office of organization X.

**Findings** - Conclusions of the study indicate personalization to be a relevant factor for consideration when implementing a non-territorial office design: although it is prohibited to personalize workplaces, people seek ways to do it anyway.

**Research limitations/implications** - Access to organization X went via top management, which makes it possible that the position of the independent researcher was not clear to people. The research took place in three months, but not fulltime. Missing important behaviors is amongst possible consequences for the findings.

**Originality/value** – personalization is a well researched subject; as applied in non territorial offices it is not well researched yet.

**Keywords** - Personalization, flexible workplaces, non-territorial office, experience, meaning, sense making.

**Paper type** - Research paper

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Organization X is a regional office of a Dutch governmental organization. In June 2007 organization X moved into a new building with a non-territorial workplace concept, of which an impression is given in figure 1.



Figure 1: Impression of the design at organization X

After working in a traditionally designed cellular office building for many years, with fixed workstations and long corridors, the employees of the organization had to adapt to a new and non-territorial office environment. Here no fixed individual workplaces are allocated and a clean-desk policy is the reality of the day. Employees are placed at different floors of the building, related to their functions. The different workplaces settings support different activities and people should use them as intended. The change from a traditional to a non-territorial office had some consequences for the employees. First of all, they lost their own fixed workplace, which they had for many years. Second, by losing that own workplace they also lost the ability to personalize their space. Third, they had to get used to clean desk behavior.

Based on this situation the research project is executed at the organization in question. The hypothesis was that people have a need to make somehow a personal space or place in an office where no official own space is allocated. This would mean that the actual behaviour of the people working in the organization does not match with some of the intentions of the office design. This personalization could appear in different forms, from having a personal screensaver to making sure of working at the same desk every time if possible. This research project aimed to find out more about the way of, the reason for and (symbolic) meaning of personalization of the work place in a non-territorial office design. Why do people personalize? Because of identity, status, place-ownership, comfort, control or culture? And if people cannot express concepts like identity and status by space, how then? This paper gives a short literature review concerning personalization, followed by the method and findings of the research project at organization X and a discussion.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Personalization**

According to Sundstrom (1986: 218) the term personalization comes from environmental psychology: "It describes the display of personal or work-related items or the arrangement of the workspace to distinguish the occupant from others". Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002: 39) state that personalization does not only refer to distinguishing oneself, but that the term also refers to making oneself familiar with a place, both at home and in the organization, although at the organization in less extent than at home.

Several authors (Wells, Thelen and Ruark 2007; Wells 2000; Van der Voordt and Van Meel, 2002) state that personalization is associated to psychological well being. Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002) discuss several psychological factors that are relevant in an innovative office like the non-territorial one. They wondered what the tension is between flexible working and universal human needs as personalization, territory, social interaction and privacy. Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002: 40) mention four, both personal and work-related reasons for personalization at the office: practical, marking one's territory, creating recognition and expression of identity.

### **Identity and emotion**

From literature it seems as if personal space is needed to express one's identity. Elsbach (2003) explored the identity threat by the non-territorial office design. She says that non-territorial work arrangements remove most physical markers of status and functional group boundaries. Because the workspaces are meant to be interchangeable, employees lose the ability to personalize and mark the boundaries of their surroundings (Ibidem: 623). This is mostly an emotional aspect of people's workplace, the workplace identity. "Workplace identity refers to the distinctiveness and status self-categorizations used by an individual to signal his or her identity in a specific workplace" (Ibidem: 623). Workplace personalization helps employees to develop a workplace identity. When there is no real possibility to do so, Elsbach suggests that employees may devise substitutes or "proxies" for lost identity markers as a means of affirming their workplace identities (2003: 627). According to De Heer (2003: 32) people attach value to their identity and by personalizing their environment; they can have non-verbal communication of that identity to colleagues. It says something about interests, emotions and someone's life outside of work. Van Riel (in De Heer 2003: 33) states that identity at the work place can be created by behaviour, communication and symbolism. These help the individual to distinguish oneself from others and to decrease the amount of anonymity in the non-territorial environment.

Another psychological factor in personalization at the office is emotion. Scheiberg (1990: 334) states that emotions play a vital role. He says that personalization is used as an unconscious outlet of emotions and to provide specific and concrete stimuli. It acts as reflexive communication and as indication of individuals and their relationship with the organization, of their organizational identity. Scheiberg (1990:

336) says that: "There seems to be a connection between the emotions regarding the workplace, job satisfaction and job performance." Blom states that personalization can be motivated by the need to express individual identity, but also by expressing a social identity of the group one associates with (2000: 313). It can give a feeling of belonging.

Wells (2000: 246) shows that the reason for personalization tends to be different among men and women. Women would personalize more to express identity and to improve the feel of the workplace, to personalize more esthetical, while men personalize more to show status within the company. According to Barber, research showed that 73 percent of office workers said that personalizing their space to their individual work style would make them more productive and more satisfied (2000: 3); a good feeling about the workplace can help people to feel better about their jobs (2000: 2). Blom (2000: 313) mentions work-related motivations to personalize too, like personalizing to accommodate work goals or to enable access to information content, but he also mentions to accommodate individual differences and to elicit emotional responses.

### **Control and territoriality and sense making of space**

A regularly mentioned motivation for personalization is the feeling of control and creating a territory. People can feel a psychological ownership over a certain space or workplace (Spicer and Taylor 2006: 4). Sundstrom (1986: 225) says: "personalization may represent a demonstration to co-workers and visitors (and the occupant) that the workspace is, in fact, that person's zone of control. If so, personalization is a central component of territoriality in the workplace." Others are expected to accept this territory.

Also Wells (2000:240), Koppejan and Edelkoort (2002: 38) and Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002: 44) mention that a feeling of personal control is an important motivation for personalization. Baldry (1999: 539) relates this extent of control to someone's identity; by personalizing their space they tell something about them as people. Wells (2000: 241) adds that personalization can be used to feel like an individual rather than a 'cog in a machine', to cope with stress by relaxing and inspiring, to reminding of lives outside the office and to enhance a person's attachment to the environment. Personalization is used to make sense of space.

People struggle with and make sense of space to cope with tensions between individual, private and team-based collaborative work areas (Haynes 2007: 158). According to Spicer and Taylor (2006: 11) the "most immediate and widespread struggles that occupants are engaged in involve small-scale intervention into the organizational spaces that their daily routines take place in. This encompasses activities from where an employee sits to the pace they move about in a building to how they arrange personal items on their desk." Baldry adds to this: "Although apparently trivial, this is an important way of saying this is where I work and this is the sort of person I am" (1999: 544). On the collective level of struggling with space Baldry found "frequent accounts of the deliberate breaking rules, written or unofficial, about how space is to be used and workers using space for purposes other than intended, in order to bypass prescribed organizational structures" (1999: 544).

The importance of personalization can differ for people per organization or department. Wells, Thelen and Ruark (2007) say that the primary predictors of personalization are organizational rather than personal, for example, the company policy on personalization, the possibility for personalization by having an assigned workplace and the accessibility of space for customers and visitors. Donald (in Elsbach 2004: 101) found that "the organizations' strong stance against office personalization led to conflict, subversive personalization of workspace, and apathy among employees – all leading to decreased productivity." In a non-territorial office it is common that personalization is limited, if not prohibited. Sharing a desk with your colleagues will not be possible if personal items mark it as your own.

Scheiberg (1990: 332) mentions the aspect of accessibility of a space for customers or visitors. In an area that is only accessible for employees the extent of personalization is usually higher than in a space that is accessible for visitors as well. In these areas 'public persona' standardization and uniformity is most wanted. Personalization is only used to project the desired image, while personalization in a closed area is used more to brighten up the place.

### **In summary**

Personalization helps to place oneself in an organization and can be linked to identity, emotion, job satisfaction, work productivity, control, territoriality, status and organizational factors like company policy,

having assigned workplaces and functional group boundaries. It is clear that there seems to be a tension between the non-territorial office concept and the concept of personalization. Organizations can perceive personalization as office clutter, while the individual can perceive personalization as a way of establishing his or her identity in the workplace (Haynes 2007: 161). Nathan and Doyle (in Haynes 2007:162) reiterate the tension that can exist between individual requirements for privacy and territory, and the organizational requirements for open-plan collaborative workspace: "The challenge facing organizations is to create offices, and cultures, that enable both activities to coexist."

### **3. METHOD**

This research project was executed from an anthropological approach with an interpretative perspective, which focuses on methods of understanding from the perspective of the actor in the given situation, a perspective "from within". During the ethnographic fieldwork the researcher wanted to find out about how people called things, what things meant to them, and how place and space were used.

To execute this research project several qualitative methods were used to explain why and how people personalize in non-territorial offices. In addition to the literature review a period of fieldwork of three months came along, in which a triangulation of methods is used to understand the situation and behaviors, from the actor's perspectives: document analysis, observations and talking.

First, an analysis of organizational documents was made to understand the change process, from the traditional to the non-territorial office design, and the history of the organization. Second, observations of the building and its interior in relation to the behavior of the people in it were made and written down thickly. By looking and experiencing how the building was designed, how people acted in it and if this matches with the intentions behind the design, a look through the eyes of a stranger and noticing things that were taken-for-granted in the organization were possible. But, looking from a distance was not enough. Being at the organization for three months, made it possible to become more familiar with the situation and the people in it as well. Third, to see and hear the difference between what was said and what was done, talking with the users of the building gave insight in their experiences and motivations. While chatting in coffee corners, near the copying machine and in the different office spaces, people expressed their experiences with the environment to me. The more formal conversations, of which transcripts were made, went from this experience to the actual use of space and place in the organization.

### **4. CASE STUDY FINDINGS**

The data from this research project at organization X suggest that personalization is important for most people and is used to make sense of the environment and give meaning to the (variable) workplace. Personalization is officially prohibited. However, as long as expression of personalization is gone at the end of the day and nobody is bothered with it, it is allowed.

Different types of personalization can be distinguished. First of all, the display of items, which varied from photographs of children, family and friends, coffee mugs, plants, baskets with personal items and paperwork, personal keyboards and trophies won on social days of the organization (see figure 2). Second, the personalization of objects, like cleaning the desk before doing any work, and spaces, like changing the position of the desk the way you prefer and hanging calendars at the walls.

A third distinction in personalization can be found in temporarily and permanent personalization. Temporarily in the way that items were removed at the end of the day, permanent in the way that items or adjustments stayed left behind. Especially collective personalization, a fourth distinction, like the adjustments of the coffee corners or decorations on a wall, seemed to be permanent. Individual personalization only seemed permanent when someone had his or her own fixed place, which was the case for the top management of the organization and some employees with physical or psychological limitations that hindered the flexible way of working.

A fifth distinction can be made in personal and work-related personalization. Most items were personal and said something about the owner. But, for example, adjustments to desks or the spreading of paperwork around the workplace were work-related. A sixth and last way of personalization noticed was a more mental way of personalization through social contacts, to make the environment comfortable and familiar.

The extent of personalization differed between different floors, departments or groups. The extent of personalization seemed to be influenced by occupation of the workplace, by the work style of departments and floors, but also by personal factors like gender. This is mostly the case for personalization through personal items and decoration of spaces. It seemed to be the case that mostly women used more esthetical ways of personalization like photographs of family and decorations, while men seemed to personalize more through social contacts.

Another aspect of space that seemed to influence the extent of personalization is the accessibility for customers and visitors. In the waiting area and cubicles of customer's service, no expression of personalization was to be seen. But backstage the situation differed. Although personalization is prohibited, even in the area that is inaccessible for customers and visitors, it did happen anyway. Maybe this was because of old habits and because of being used to having an own place for a long time.

One last factor that could have influenced the extent of personalization is the satisfaction about the non-territorial office concept. Employees that liked the office concept and were satisfied about the arrangements and spaces, tended to personalize less, if they personalized at all. People that were unsatisfied and complained about the office concept and the space, tended to personalize much more.

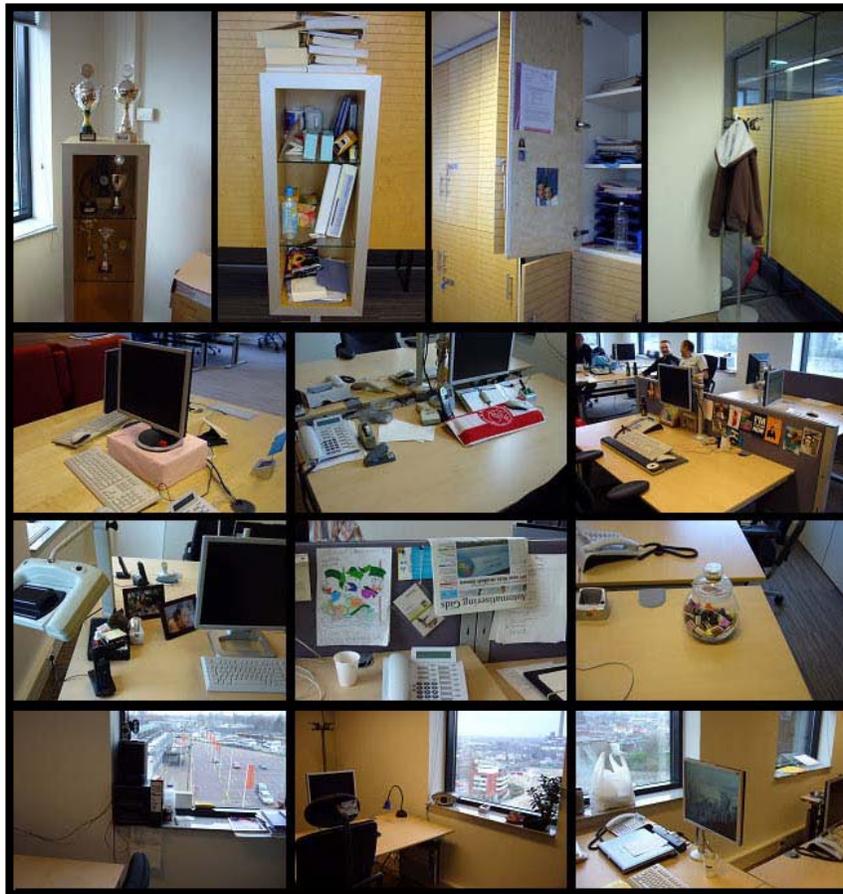


Figure 2: Individual personalization with items

### Meanings of personalization

But why did the people personalize their work environment, both materialistic and mentally? What does this mean for them? During the fieldwork different meanings were discovered, which can be divided in several categories. Although these categories are related to each other, they will be described separately to clarify each.

### *Comfortable and familiar environment*

Many employees complained about the bare white walls and the sterile and business-like atmosphere of the office space. Personalization seemed to have the function of improving the feel of the environment, although this seemed to be more important among the women in the organization than among the men. Making oneself comfortable, by items, but also by social contacts, and creating a sociable and pleasant environment was one of the most mentioned meanings of personalization, often expressed in almost the same words by different respondents. It should give more pleasure at work, improve the satisfaction with the workplace and enable to work better and easier (especially the work-related personalization). Related to an environment one feels comfortable in is the meaning of familiarity. People seemed to be attached to a familiar environment, in which one knows who sits where and how to recognize colleagues or the 'own' workplace.

### *Status and achievements*

Personalization to express status or achievements is not something people explicitly mentioned often, but that was more visible in the actual behaviour and chats. Only a few people told that one should be able to show achievements of successful cases, like photographs or trophies. Trophies, however, did have their places in the building and they did not disappear at the end of the day. For most employees it seemed that having an assigned office space, like the top management, is the most important expression of status in the organization.

### *Territoriality*

Although territoriality was almost never mentioned directly, the actual behaviour showed that it was an important aspect that needs to be considered in the non-territorial office concept of organization X. This seems to be a paradox, but the data showed that the several employees created little territories by personalizing and claiming space. For example by sitting at the same desk every day if possible or by hanging a jacket on the coat rack, even if someone is not at the office, by adjusting the monitor by putting it on a pink painted box or by giving personal characteristics to a desk. This way people showed that they used that work place often, if not always. At all floors were (un)spoken agreements between colleagues about who sat at which desk. Even if employees did not feel the need to personalize, almost everyone mentioned that they preferred a place of their own.

### *Control*

Another meaning that is related to territoriality is control. Employees seemed to dislike the aspect, of the non-territorial office design, of not having control over the environment, for example being able to close the door of your office when you need silence or no disturbance. People were depending on solidarity and the behaviour of good colleagues, instead of being able to choose for themselves where to sit and how to decorate their environment.

### *Recognition, clarity, certainty and rest*

Meanings given to personalization that are related to this (lack of) feeling of control and to the specific culture of the organization are clarity, certainty and rest. Values that seemed to be important in the organizational culture were clarity and certainty. By personalizing the work environment people tended to create a recognizable and familiar environment, as described before. This recognizable workplace or little territory at the office, helped people to be rather certain that they could work on the desk they preferred. It gave clarity about who sat where and tranquility of the minds of those employees that were attached to that workplace.

### *Identity*

At organization X it seemed to be the case that personalization is used to decrease the anonymity in the non-territorial office. Identity did have some expression through the display of portable items and artifacts, like photographs and trophies. Also recognition of persons and places, creating a pleasant environment, which is different for everybody, and memories were all part of identity. More group identity was recognized by the stories that employees and management created about the new workplace. Different individuals talked often in almost the same words and with the same arguments about their new work environment.

A more important way of expressing identity at organization X lies closer to a tactic mentioned by Elsbach (2003: 624), namely the display of salient behaviour. Many employees told that they felt that the non-territorial office did not threaten their identity. Their identity was more related to their specific tasks, that no one else could do, and in the many people they knew and who knew them. Most employees worked at the organization for twenty five years or longer. Working at the organization for such a long time helped them in being an individual instead of just 'cog in the machine'.

### *Dehumanization*

Another meaning of personalization, in any way, that was given many times was dehumanization. Many changes in the recent history of the organization, both on the level of laws and tasks and on the level of rearrangements in the old building, and the most recent change to the non-territorial office, felt for many employees as a decrease of humanization in the organization. It felt like it is all about business in the organization. The bare white walls and the prohibition to decorate the space, to hang something familiar for everyone, gave people the feeling that the human being did not matter anymore. Personalization helped them to give the environment a more human feeling, in which people would feel comfortable and 'home' again.

### **Conclusion**

The above meanings of personalization show that both materialistic and mental ways of personalization are important for many of the employees. Van der Voorde & Van Meel (no date: 1) distinguish three kinds of needs, based on the need-satisfaction theory of Maslow, which seemed to be the case at organization X as well. First the physiological needs, like comfort and physical well-being. The bare walls and the prohibition on decorating and personalization seemed to be in contrast with these physiological needs. Second, social needs like interaction with others. Interaction with others seemed to be another way of making oneself comfortable at the workplace. Third, psychological needs, like respect, appreciation, acknowledgement and recognition, and identity. At organization X especially the need for recognition and acknowledgement of the individual was a meaning of personalization.

Another need that can be distinguished is the need of emotional expression. The data have shown that personalization may have both instrumental and expressive components. Instrumental in the way of making work easier or more pleasant, and expressive in the way of showing emotions, showing something of oneself, creating other group bindings and decreasing the anonymity in the overall organization.

In addition to the relations between personalization and identity, emotion, job satisfaction, work productivity, control, territoriality, status, and organizational factors, mentioned in the literature review, personalization can also be linked to recognition, clarity, certainty, tranquility of mind and create new stories that bind. But most of all the data of this research project show that personalization can be related with humanization of work and the workplace. Personalizing the work environment to give it a more human feeling can be seen as a counterforce for the business approach of organization X.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The non-territorial office concept at organization X seemed to be a failure, at least in the aspect of flexible working and personalization. There are several factors that can have influence on this non-success, like the organizational setting and cultural aspects.

### **Organizational setting**

Organization X based its decision to change to a non-territorial office on corporate policy and wanted to increase space efficiency. Local management of organization X had to implement this decision, but their interest was more in the field of primary processes like effects and outcome. They hardly gave attention to organizational aspects or to communications about how to work in such a new environment.

Part of this context relates to the people in the organization and their acceptance of the new situation. Although some attention paid to the participation of employees in the realization phase (employees got the opportunity to participate in the decisions concerning the interior of the different floors), there was no real attention to employees' experience and what the new environment meant for

them. Maybe employees felt they lacked participation in decision making. Maybe a lack of mental preparation for (individual and group) work conditions in a non territorial environment has created a need of personalization. The (opportunity of) employee participation did not lead to a higher acceptance or to a feeling of ownership of the work environment; we assume that both are success factors that should have made it easier to work flexibly.

### **Culture**

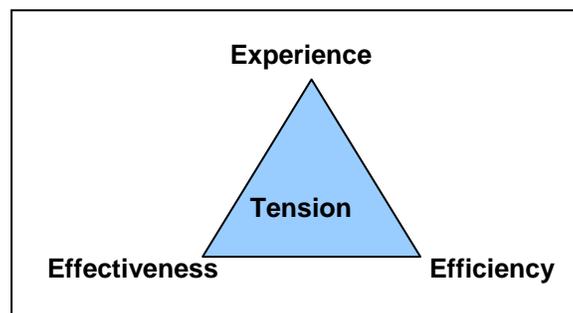
Cultural aspects, like uncertainty avoidance, can also have influenced the failure of the non-territorial office. The organizations own context, which has not been taken in consideration, consists not only of amount of workspace per person, activities and tasks, but also of workforce demographics and the culture of the organization. The workforce had an average age of 45 years and older. Most of those employees worked at the organization since high-school and have never left the company. All those years they were used to having their own workplace, which they used and personalized the way they preferred. The change to the non-territorial office was rather sudden for them and for some it felt inhuman. Most employees fell back in old habits, like working at the same desk every day, with the same people around you and adjusting the environment as it was their own.

Looking more broadly to the concept of culture, we could even say that the Dutch national culture influenced the way employees dealt with the non-territorial office concept. Hofstede (2008: website) characterizes the Dutch culture as highly individualistic, which means that the society should have “individualistic attitudes and relatively loose bonds with others” and that privacy is considered the cultural norm. Also democracy or anti-authority should be characteristic for the Dutch culture. If we follow Morgan’s opinion (1997: 126), the chance that Dutch organizational cultures have characteristics of individuality and democracy is big. Morgan also points out that many aspects of organizational culture are embedded in routine aspects of everyday practice (Ibidem: 144). Dealing with the non-territorial office by personalizing the environment of organization X can be a way to make it more individual, it seemed to give people more certainty at the office, and it is possibly an outcome of an anti-authoritarian feeling. The top management can say that personalization and claiming workplaces is prohibited, although they do have an own fixed office, people do it anyway.

### **Corporate Real Estate and Human Resource Management**

At organization X it seemed that the business focused approach of the managers to work and the workplace neglects the human being in the organization. Although people are the most important resources (management says so), they seem to be reduced to a working resource. But the human being is a crucial factor in the success or failure of the non-territorial office concept. It is not as simple as cause-effect logic like ‘if we change this, people will do that’ (Vischer 2008: 233). Buildings are not just spaces where people are brought together. The experience of the users of the building influences their behavior, whether this is according to the rules of the design or not. “...building users’ behavior is influenced not just by the space they occupy but by their feelings, intentions, attitudes and expectations as well as by the social context in which they are participating” (Vischer 2008: 233).

The usability of the non-territorial office can be discussed by its efficiency, effectiveness and the experience of the users (Alexander 2008). The tension between experience (the feelings and attitudes towards the environment), effectiveness (do the users achieve their goals), work productivity, and efficiency (how long does it take to get there and what does this cost) is one that needs to be taken in consideration. Dealing with this tension requires explicit attention for business ethics.



Usability has to be defined in users' context (changes in behaviour) rather than through the use of artifacts. Consideration of the specific context, the situated action, the cultural issues and user experience shows the real usability of work environments. The situation at organization X shows that employees used their talks and complaints about the new work environment as a new binding element which probably influences the effectiveness and efficiency more than expected. Increased usability might be gained when the user's knowledge, expectations and perceptions about the new work environment were better inquired, developed and implemented not only in the new work environment itself but also in development and design processes. One could wonder what the risks of outbalancing are for labor productivity. We assume that emotional costs can increase, especially when people are not satisfied with the work environment or find suitable ways to do their work. Traditionally CRE departments care for workplace solutions that both are efficient and effective. The experience of the end user is often left out. HR departments are too often busy hiring and firing staff. Top management talks strategy and targets not ethics. From this research project it becomes clear that preparing a future change in the workplace might include an explicit discussion of culture and ethics.

### **Limitations**

In this research project we had to deal with a couple of limitations. First, the introduction to the organization was through the top management. The independency of the researchers might not have been clear to the employees. Second, researchers were not fulltime at the office, which makes it possible that they missed important things.

Because this research project consisted of one case analysis, one could wonder where the findings are the same or differ in other organizations, contexts and cultures. Future research could focus on this.

### **Ideas for future research**

Personalization can be studied from different disciplinary perspectives: The psychologist might ask "What makes that employees do or do not find their comfort zone in a non territorial office?" The economist might ask: "What are the costs and benefits of the prohibiting of personalization? and "How can organizations in the context of personnel economics deal with insubordination like at organization X"? The anthropologist or sociologist might ask: "Does the feeling of belonging somewhere have influence on the (work) identity as well? And what makes that a collective identity, expressed through collective personalization, feels comfortable?"

Practitioners both from a CRE or HR background might open their organization for observational research.

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