

New Ways of Working: Sense making Processes of Non-managerial Employees – A Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose - The existing research on New Ways of Working (NWoW), initially a Dutch concept in which employees are able to work anytime anywhere, where and in which they should be able to manage their own work supported by 'unlimited' access and connectivity, lacks clear and convincing evidence for a relationship between intervention and its effects of NWoW on the non-managerial employees. The purpose of this paper is to reveal elements of this relationship.

Methodology - In this case study NWoW is approached through the lenses of organizational change and sense making theory to gain insights into the experiences, thoughts, ideas and interpretations of non-managerial employees with the change to NWoW and their own role in it.

Findings - The findings indicate that the expressions and experiences of non-managerial employees in relation to NWoW were based on cultural and individual characteristics and the absence of sense giving of managerial level employees. Employees perceive NWoW as a management fashion, as a temporary phenomenon in time.

Practical implications - Since non-managerial employees are assumed to be key to success, it is important for managers to know what is going on with their employees. Not only related to content, but also on a personal level, such as preferred ways of working.

Key words - New Ways of Working, Organizational and Cultural Change, Sense making Processes, Grounded Theory, Management Fashion, Case study

Paper type - Research paper

INTRODUCTION

Charles Darwin once stated that 'it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change'. Through the years, organizational life have been changing fast: New technologies, such as internet and social media, are now within everyone's reach, which affects the client demand and changes internal organizational processes. The challenge for organizations lies in coping with this rapidly changing environment.

An organizational development that keeps both employees as well as employers engaged in different work environment is the so-called New Ways of Working (NWoW), translated from the Dutch term 'Het Nieuwe Werken'. NWoW is initially a Dutch concept in which employees are able to work anytime and anywhere, where they should be able to manage their own work supported by 'unlimited' access and connectivity, and where they can adjust their work conditions to personal preferences (Baane, Houtkamp & Knotter, 2011). The emergence of new technology, changes in work environment, and calls for behavioral changes are interrelated.

RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

The limited research on NWoW has shown positive and negative assumptions. Positive outcomes seem mostly expressed through financial indicators, such as lower premises costs, higher productivity, and higher profitability, as well as in results that refer to the image and the profiling of the organization, such as employee satisfaction, work-home balance. Negative aspects of NWoW seem to be based on the difficulty to change people's mindset and routines which have been embedded in their systems over a long period of time and the chance to fall back into their old habits is plausible (Baane et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, this existing research lacks clear and convincing evidence for a causal relationship between intervention and its effect of NWoW as a whole on the non-managerial employees (Baane et al., 2011; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Batenburg & Van der Voordt, 2008). Subsequently, every actual organizational change starts with the intrinsic motivation of employees to change their selves, making insights in employees' understanding the key to success for change in organizations. While NWoW may contribute to for example cost savings or increasing productivity, a precondition is that this organizational change has to be accepted by the employees. An important aspect in accepting NWoW is what employees find important in their work, how they want to be facilitated through technical support and the organization, and also whether they know about the possible personal benefits. Non-managerial employees are key to success of change and therefore this paper will focus on non-managerial employees.

Furthermore, most research on NWoW is done through quantitative research methods (Baane et al., 2011; NYFER, 2012; TNS NIPO, 2010; Volberda, 1999), in which no attention is paid to qualitative research especially in relation to non-managerial employees. Considering the lack of clear and convincing qualitative evidence, especially for lower level employees, and since both positive and negative experiences of initiatives related to NWoW have never been mapped together before, an in-depth analysis focusing on the experiences and expressions of non-managerial employees may provide better understanding whether non-managerial employees actually adopt NWoW and how they incorporate it into their lives. The purpose of the study described in this paper is to gain insight in how non-managerial employees give meaning to their experiences and actions of NWoW. Therefore, the main research question examined in this study is as follows:

How do non-managerial employees make sense of New Ways of Working (NWOW) and express and experience this in their work?

In order to give an answer to this research question, answering the following sub questions is needed: How do non-managerial employees express NWoW in their work? How do non-managerial employees experience NWoW through their work? How do non-managerial employees interpret NWoW?

THEORETICAL LENSES

In this study, NWoW is approached through two (theoretical and analytical) lenses, which are organizational change theory and sense making theory. NWoW affects the whole organization from higher management to lower level employees. Therefore, it may be seen as an organizational change. In addition, sense making theory gives the possibility to approach NWoW through expressions and experiences of non-managerial employees. Both lenses are explained independently. We also demonstrate how they are connected to each other and why NWoW is related to both lenses.

Organizational change theory

Within the past twenty years, literature about organizational change has become theoretically richer and more descriptive (Weick & Quinn, 1999). According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), change involves “an attempt to alter the current way of thinking and acting by the organization’s members” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: 433). Organizational development theory describes change as:

“a set of behavioral science-based theories, values, strategies, and techniques aimed at the planned change of the organizational work setting for the purpose of enhancing individual development and improving organizational performance, through the alteration of organizational members on-the-job behaviors” (Porras & Robertson, 1992: 723).

In context of this study, the organizational development theory is further elaborated since NWoW involves a strategic change that “concentrates on work-setting changes that either help an organization better adapt to its current environment or improve its fit into an expected future environment” (Porras & Silvers, 1991: 54).

Change may be continuous, which is something that emerges (Weick & Quinn, 1999), without explicit intentions (Orlikowski, 1996), and in which work processes (Brown & Duguid, 1991) and social practices (Tsoukas, 1996) (want) to be improved continuously. Still, organizational change is also often mentioned in conjunction with failure (Weick & Quinn, 1999) because employees might not be adaptive to the constant changes (Dunphy, 1996). Weick and Quinn (1999) argue that “the challenge is to gain acceptance of continuous change throughout the organization so that these isolated innovations will travel and be seen and relevant to a wider range of purposes at hand” (p.381).

Therefore, one of the aspects that may be taken into consideration when entering a strategic change process is managerial cognition (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997): i.e. knowledge structures, core beliefs, cause maps, and schemas, through which managers determine their environment. Top managers identify and interpret problems and issues in the organization through their set of assumptions from which a strategic change arises. In addition, research about change often takes a top management perspective (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997), because managers are primarily responsible for setting a strategic plan and direction and guiding the actions that will realize those plans. Therefore, top management activities are key to the effectiveness of the overall change process in the initiation phase (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

However, launching an organizational change is one thing, but managing its acceptance and institutionalization is another (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994). Considering that Gioia (1986) suggests that, at the basic level, any substantive change leads to the alternation of existing value and meaning systems, and others claim that strategies often reflect the existing values of top managers (Bourgeois, 1984; Bower & Doz, 1979; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Quinn, 1980), it may be assumed that values of other organizational members, such as non-managerial employees, also have influence on the change process.

Some researchers indeed point out that lower level employees have a crucial role in implementing new strategies (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph & DePalma, 2006, Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Balogun and Johnson (2005) even wonder what the feasibility of top-down control of change programs is. Senior managers are providing a ‘blue print’ for change, but it is unclear how this is received by lower levels in the organization. Management cannot assume that employees will simply accept their plans and adopt new behavioral routines. It depends on the amount of autonomy and dependence whether individuals act or not (Stones, 2005). These statements make clear that the non-managerial employees may play a powerful role in organizations, when existing work conditions and ways of controlling employees are replaced by new work conditions and ways of control. That is why this study pays attention to how *non-managerial* employees experience the managerial approach of change and how it influences the NWoW of non-managerial employees.

Sense making processes

To understand how non-managerial employees translate and transform management concepts into their day-to-day work activities, sense making processes help to gain understanding and appreciation of these dynamics. It focuses on local perceptions and experiences and therefore helps to gain insights into non-managerial employees’ thoughts, ideas and interpretation of NWoW and their role in it. Sense making is described by Weick, Sutcliff and Obstfeld (2005) as something that:

“...unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. Situations, organizations and environment are talked into existence.” (p. 409).

Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe (2003) describe meaning of work as socially constructed, dynamic and fluid. When employees have more control and power in shaping their work environment (e.g. Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and are motivated to search for interaction in order to enhance their view of themselves (Swann, 1987), it creates a powerful dynamic to shape “the kinds of contexts employees compose for themselves” (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003: 98). In NWoW, employees receive more freedom to organize and share their work environment. This means that they are empowered by their supervisor to adopt ways of working that suits them best. However, meaning is not fixed, but an ongoing process that both reflects on and shapes patterns of action (Blummer, 1966).

Furthermore, research shows that sense making processes are important to understand change (Isabella, 1990; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), as well as to recognize shifts that occur during change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Poole, Gioia & Gray, 1989). For managers it is crucial to understand how change recipients react to change and the way they give shape to change.

Therefore, sense making processes give insights into the experiences of non-managerial employees and contributes to a better understanding of non-managerial employees’ thoughts, ideas and interpretations of NWoW and their role in it.

CONTEXT / CASE DESCRIPTION

This research was conducted in the back office of an organization, which is part of an executive organization of the Ministry of Finance in the Netherlands. The umbrella organization has over 30.000 employees; the back office that is examined in this case study had 87 employees, which were divided into four clusters (staff, management team, a service center and an information management team).

Across the umbrella organization, several programs are in progress, so is the Program ‘New Ways of Working’. This Program was officially launched in August 2012 by the Program Bureau. At that time, there were already several small studies on other ways of working. However, it was still unclear what NWoW meant for the organization. Within the vision launched a couple of months after start, the umbrella organization sees NWoW as a gradual structural change. It is a continuous and constructive process, in which the time to adapt to the new situation is taken into account. According to the Program, NWoW is based on three main components which are the foundation for a new logic of work: the mental, virtual, and physical environment (figure 1). E.g. employees do not have fixed work stations, but choose whatever work place or location fits their activities of the moment, which is accompanied by technological innovations and a different way of control.

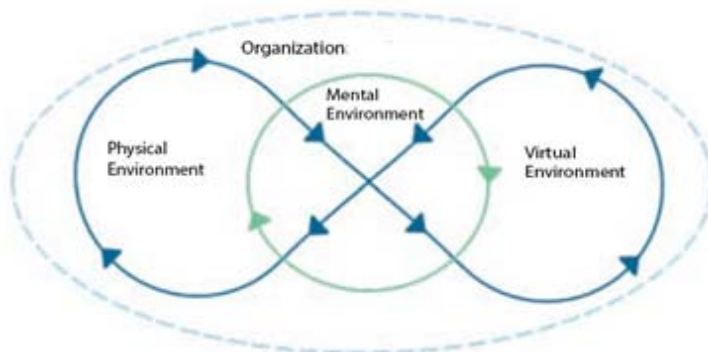


Figure 1: The consistency of the mental, physical, and virtual environment (source: Vision document NWoW umbrella organization)

Several departments are taking steps within the scope of NWoW, and some pilots have been developed, implemented and evaluated. What these developments mean for the umbrella organization is not clear. The Program manager states that it is up to the subdivisions to apply these overall ideas to their own values, their

goals, and so on. The perceptions of non-managerial employees will provide more insights in the way to which NWoW is developing.

RESEARCH PROCESS

In order to capture experiences of non-managerial employees, this study follows the interpretative approach, focusing on the uniqueness of human situation (Crotty, 1998), in which it addresses a deeper level of understanding human experiences because we gain real knowledge through acting on our beliefs, and on expressions and experiences and contribute to opportunities. The interpretative approach focuses on how the social world is constructed by those involved in the process (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, it provides understanding of meaning that respondents ascribe to various phenomena (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Since, each employee has a different interpretation and therefore will respond differently to events that shape the process, the organization consists of many different realities. The experiences and expressions of non-managerial employees give an in-depth picture of how they deal with the changes in the organization. Therefore, the interpretative approach has been adopted.

Since interpretations are difficult to capture grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were chosen, because they provide the possibility to let non-managerial employees speak and act for themselves, and for the researcher to induce new insights from the data. The study is grounded in the sense of “being derived from the study itself” (Robson, 2011: 135). To gain more insights into how non-managerial employees give meaning to NWoW, data has been obtained particularly in the action, interaction and processes of those involved. Initially, the researcher viewed NWoW through the theoretical lens of organizational change in order to create some guidance. During the data collection, the researcher opened herself up for new theoretical insights by means of expressions and experiences of respondents. It has been an ongoing process of zooming in and zooming out (Nicolini, 2009); a constantly pendulum of induction and deduction (Kastelein, 1990). The process has brought surprises, sparked ideas and honed the researchers analytic skills; it also fostered to see the data in fresh ways (Charmaz, 2006). Since the researcher has been in an ongoing process of data collection and data analysis, she has been able to capture those experiences and interactions. Data is thus the foundation for the researchers theory presented in this article and the analysis of these data generates the concepts the researcher constructs.

Method

Data have been gathered through qualitative research methods, because of the interest in the understanding of non-managerial employees’ expressions and experiences of NWoW in terms of organizational change. The primary data were gathered through interviews. These interviews were in-depth and semi-structured to increase the researchers understanding about the embodied experience of NWoW. In this process, the researcher tried to create a comfortable environment in which the respondent felt at ease, allowing to receive the most sincere information of their experiences.

The secondary data collection consists of direct observations and document analysis. In order to attain a more in-depth analysis, the interviews were complemented with observations. Doing direct observations has not only provided the researcher the opportunity to capture activities and behavior, it has also enabled her to take the (physical and flexible) work environment into account. Document analysis gave insight in where in the process the organization was in the process regarding NWoW.

Sample within the organization

For this case study the sample consists of ten non-managerial employees who work in the back office of the organization and have their work basis in the same location. The respondents work across the four clusters that are part of the back office, to gain the broadest possible picture of the organization. The respondents were all interviewed twice, so that twenty interviews were conducted. The first round of interviews was conducted at the main work basis at which the employees work. The second round of interviews was conducted in a location of the employees’ choice. The precondition of this location was that it was used regularly as an alternative workplace.

During one day the respondents were each individually observed and followed in their work routines. The ambiance was informal; employees involved the researcher in their work, and familiarized her with the goings of the enormous umbrella organization. Beyond these observations, direct observations at the main home base

gave impressions about the physical work environment, the way employees used it, and provided the researcher of some statements that support or complement experiences that have been said in interviews.

Data analysis

Grounded theory generates the theory from the data. In order to organize, analyze and interpret the data collected during the study, a thematic coding approach is used. New themes were generated from the conducted data. An overview of this data structure is presented in figure 2.

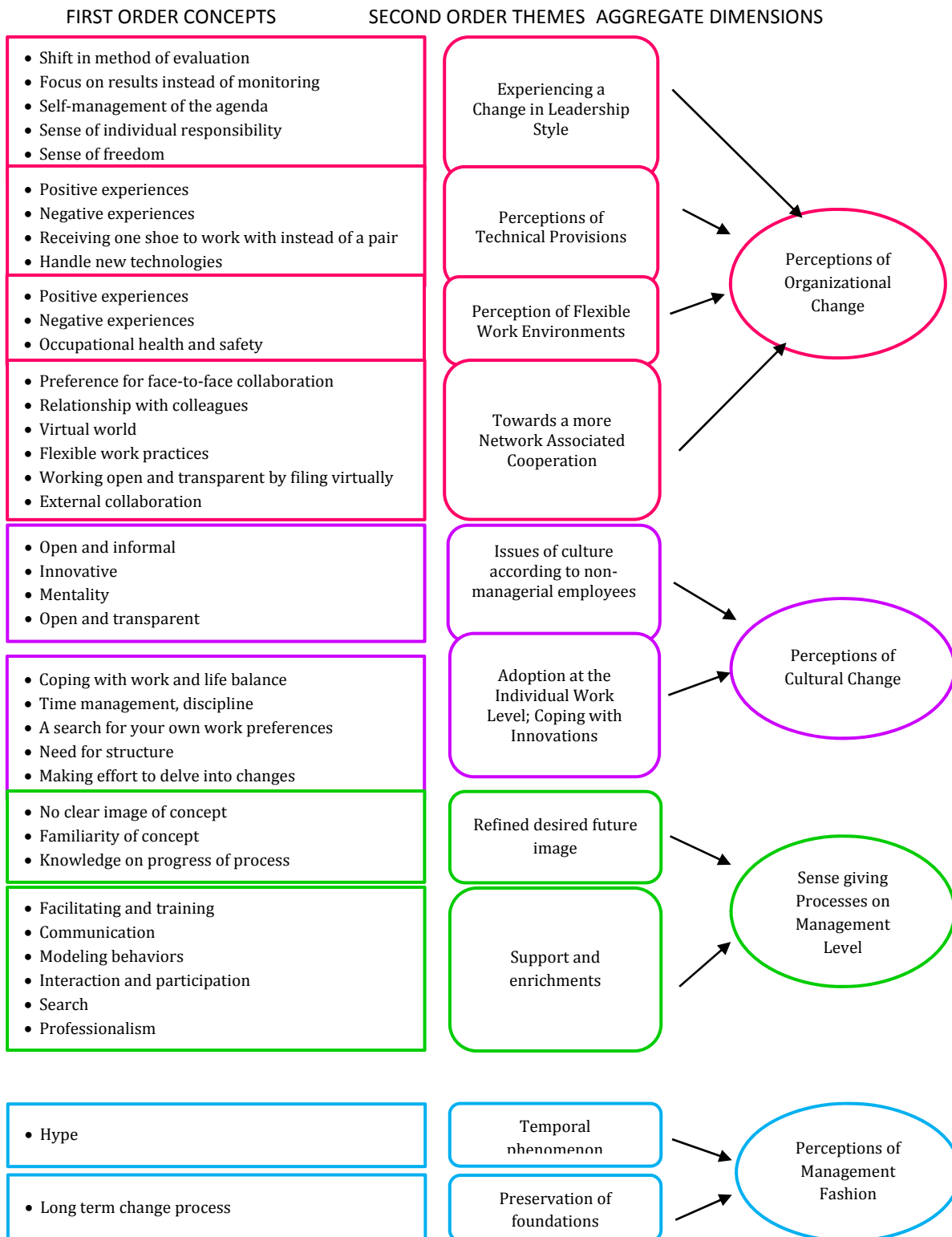


Figure 2: Data structure of the case study

FINDINGS

From the case study data four dimensions came up. Each dimension consisted of several themes, of which we describe the findings in the following paragraphs.

Perceptions of an organizational change

Within the dimension of perceptions of organizational change four themes have been differentiated:

1. Perceptions of technical provisions

The first theme that comes up while talking about NWoW is technological developments. Within the back office employees have to deal with a tablet, smartphone, personal computer, videoconference, a social collaboration platform and wireless network. The differences in experiences vary per employee.

Positive aspects of the technological features are less travel time using videoconference, making it easier working at home using their personal computer, and the efficient use of the tablet during meetings.

"The use of tablets during meetings] just offers more advantages because you can take notes. You can directly put things in your notes and mail it to yourself when the meeting is over. Less time is spent. And it saves a lot of money, paper en printing," (Martijn, first round)

However not all non-managerial employees use the tablet intensively during meetings; by means of pen and paper one can remember things better and the focus is more on the meeting than on what happens on the tablet.

Furthermore, the organization uses a social collaboration platform for archiving documents and having discussions to share information and knowledge. Although the platform has been in existence for several years, the platform is experienced differently in use. Mainly, it takes time to find the advantages and to implement it in their work.

"We have had a few discussions on the social collaboration platform, but that does not really work. It is especially useful for status updates and sharing files. That's really practical." (Interview, Tess, first round)

"At first I was not working with it at all, but now I am. I notice that some people – regardless of their age – totally get stressed when you say 'I've just put it on the social collaboration platform'". (Anniek, second round)

Additionally, the correlation between flexible workplaces and technological developments is still not efficiently. Working properly at home is lacking access to the network that is available at the office.

"It also includes a certain kind of support, for example, ICT tools, access to network and files through other places. And that part goes a bit 'wrong' on the way we entered it. Because we have for example that organization focused housing – say NWoW – introduced in which we have given our employees one of the two shoes and the other saying 'you may walk on your sock'." (Berry, first interview)

This also leads to frustration ("When I work from home, I just want to be able to work with the laptop and that it actually works"). Now they have to plan ahead what they need when working at home so that they can send the files needed to their private email. These expressions and experiences show that the opportunities to work from home are not yet optimal.

2. Perceptions of a flexible work environment

Since three years, the employees of the back office switched from a traditional working environment with fixed work places to an activity related work environment. This means that employees choose their workplace or location that fits their activities of the moment best. Thirty percent of the workplaces expired and a number of rules and standards have been established. The environment offers several workplaces in accordance with health and safety workplaces, such as concentration cubicles, and non-conform health and safety workplaces, such as the coffee table, the couches and the library table.

Although the workplace concept contributes to the purpose of the kind of meetings or work, it is still not fully respected in practice. Observations show that non-managerial employees give their own interpretation to their work environment. Rules and standards are not always followed up. Often clustering of certain employees occurs depending on the type of work they have or the connection with some colleagues. In addition, flexible workplaces are kept occupied throughout the day regardless of the meeting employees enter. This affects the possibility for others to work at workplaces that are conform occupational health and safety, which leads occasionally into dissatisfaction and complaints about back pains. One even turned on his computer when he entered the office at 9 am, unpacked his bag and then went from meeting to meeting until 3 pm keeping his computer occupied without even being there.

Thereby, mainly non-managerial employees who live further away and are present at the office later on the day, are working at more different workplaces. They play by the concept and experience the changes as pleasant.

“Some people find it so important to have small pictures and stuff. I don’t care that it should be anonymous. I’ll go and sit on the benches, for example, on a day like Friday. That gives a different setting. If I’m behind a desk or in the back sitting on the brown couches, it does something to me. It depends on what I want to do that day. I sometimes just take that into account.” (Kim, first round)

Flexible workplaces also enhances collegiality in the way that employees come in touch with employees with whom they do not work together frequently and increases the involvement from colleagues. However, the open space create noise that influences their concentration.

“I almost always worked flexible. I think it’s even a lot of fun. It means that you speak to people that you normally don’t speak to. But it really is too noisy; everyone walks past you. People then begin telling a story to you. Then I just turn on my music. I’d rather sit in my loft so I can concentrate well.” (Tess, first round)

In addition to the flexible work environment at the office, employees also have the opportunity to work outside the office; at another establishment, on the go, or at home, wherever they want. Although all employees have the opportunity, there is a distinction in people who live far away from the office and employees who live near the office. For those who live far away, it is more efficient and in this way they can better adjust their work and life balance. Employees are also less disturbed by colleagues because the barrier to call a colleague at home is higher than asking a fellow colleague at the office. The latter always work in the office, while people from far away often use the train, another office, or their home to be their workplace. Although they use these opportunities, they are also often found in the office.

When it comes to the perceptions of the physical work environment, employees express themselves proudly about their office:

“I have the feeling that from the moment I get in, it feels like it is definitely ‘our’ space. Well, you’ve seen it when you entered for the first time: you enter a space in which you immediately think ‘Jesus, wow, what a calm feeling, much light too’.” (Martijn, first round)

Other descriptions are ‘corporate, but friendly through the use of glass, wood and funky lamps’ or ‘Heaven’, in relation to the congress center on lower floors of the building that is called The World.

3. Experiencing changes in leadership style

Non-managerial employees experience a high degree of responsibility to be good in their work accompanied by the freedom they receive to organize the work themselves. This gives them the opportunity to work for example from home or to be sharp and focused so that they do not get bored and continue to perform well.

“You are responsible for what you’re doing. If you have any questions, issues or policies, you can count on them.” (Paul, second round)

Although the responsibility and freedom are perceived as positive, accessibility is seen as a negative aspect. Employees are easier occupied with their work after working hours, which sometimes results in an imbalance in work and life.

Furthermore, an item that structurally returned in the interviews is the way employees are evaluated. Employees are not judged on what they do right or wrong, but in which way they engage with their managers about what they find difficult, what goes well, how they want to develop, and what they need from their managers to be able to do a good job. These formats help supervisors with some guidance which makes them focus more on the results instead of monitoring if employees are present at the office.

"I just do the things that are expected of me. And that the matters I address, also happen. The way in how we accomplish this, is not of interest to them, as long as we make it happen. That confidence is there." (Kim, second round)

4. Towards a more Network Associated Cooperation

Since employees have access to new technologies and are able to work more at home, this also requires a different way of working together. Employees are not always present at the office anymore, and walk in and out when they feel like. A recurring element in the interpretations of non-managerial employees is that cooperation is possible in several ways. Files are being increasingly shared through the virtual network, but for meetings employees prefer a face-to-face collaboration. Although employees are aware of the advantages, it helps to maintain the relationship with colleagues.

"And so even though I could say 'I'm not going to the office', I choose to do so. It is important that I see my colleagues again, and it is important that my colleagues see me again. I think that a home base is very important." (Berry, first round)

Respondents indicate that the virtual collaboration and working open and transparent is gaining ground slowly, but has a long term focus. It needs time to become accustomed to this way of working; employees need to implement it into their own system and using it in an efficient manner.

Perceptions of a Cultural Change

The perceptions of the cultural change that NWoW asks of the organization can be divided into the cultural aspects of the organization and the adaptation of the new work practices:

1. Cultural aspects of the organization

According to the non-managerial employees the organization has an open and informal culture, which is mentioned as due to the average age of employees. This average age is lower than at the rest of the umbrella organization. Observations confirm the open atmosphere. Also, non-managerial employees say that the organization has no nine-to-five culture. However, observations show that many employees do not work outside these hours: employees who live far away use their travel hours as working hours, they do not bring their work home, and when they do they stick to their hours. When they do, it is an exception. Furthermore, although employees indicate the organization is an innovative organization, interviews reveal that employees are not very adaptive and are even somewhat skeptical about the new things in the organization. Employees are preserved and they like to have structure in and control over their work.

"I do have structure. I am easy to approach. If somebody needs me, I'll be there. But we do have procedures; we do not change things overnight." (Tino, second round)

Moreover, non-managerial employees describe the umbrella organization as a follower, being part of their character. The first steps have been made:

"Concerning a profit organization, when your costumers walk out, you have to adapt immediately. We do not have costumers who walk out. It doesn't cost us anything. So you can work this way." (Paul, first round)

2. Adopting new work practices

Talking about changes, some respondents find changes pleasurable and comprehensible and some find it difficult to cope with changes and indicate that it is a learning process. Within this learning process, structure is the key word that helps employees with changes. Whether it has to do with coping with the work and life balance, new technologies, flexible workplaces, virtual collaboration, or something else, you have to learn how you can use it in your way.

The need for structure is what people think is important, and this is also deriving their way of working. The non-managerial employees like to manage their work and force themselves to adopt some structure. This is reflected in for example being informed of any progress in projects, the ability to organize the workweek yourself, and guarding the boundaries between work and life. One respondent indicates that managing expectations yields a certain bureaucratic skill and dexterity.

Due to technical provisions, the line between work and private life is blurring. Interviews reveal that non-managerial employees are very much aware of this line. Therefore, they are trying to manage this balance by having a clear structure and regularity in this, which requires discipline. This is often accompanied with success, and sometimes with less success. They also are aware of the change in the balance between work and life. For employees who live close to the office, the balance is easier to monitor. They leave their laptop at work. The tablet is often brought home to keep some control on their work, or still for sending that single email. For those who live far away, the balance is most blurred. A benefit as well as a disadvantage is the accessibility with their laptop or tablet on the train, but also at home. The benefit outweighs the latter.

The findings above clearly show that each employee prefers a different way of working, and thus gives a different interpretation to NWoW.

“Some freedom, a sense of autonomy; that you are able to determine your own workplace. It makes me feel fine. It also provides me with a kind of confidence that the organization has in her employees. You attain the facilities to perform well. And you are able to adapt it to your own way of working. I think it’s a very nice feeling, I’m in control.” (Tess, first round)

Non-managerial employees who have to travel a lot, are experiencing NWoW in a very different way than those who always work on the same spot. The office is used as a space to bridge time between appointments and to receive input from other employees in their work. They often work on locations other than the main office, which increases people’s tendency toward sharing information and documents via the virtual network. For them, this way of working is seen as a benefit. The combination of consultations and meetings in the office and sharing documents virtually, keeps them involved with their colleagues. In addition, working flexible is also providing the employees with the possibility to shift things around in their private life. You are not limited to certain times.

“When I know I have to work in, say, Leeuwarden, I can simply go without making arrangements with my team members because I can log in the system there. When I work at home, I can’t reach the network drive so I have to make arrangements with my colleagues.” (Paul, first round)

Every employee gives his or her own interpretation to the way they want to work. Important is the added value that it brings employees personally. This can apply to both life and work.

Sense giving processes on management level

Although the focus of the study was on the sense making processes of non-managerial employees, the sense giving of managers and their involvement in implementing NWoW in the organization is important as well.

Firstly, the familiarity of the concept NWoW is for many non-managerial employees not clear. Although descriptions contain elements of the whole concept, all respondents describe it differently. NWoW may be working time and place independent or may be in combination with the opportunity to work anywhere you want. NWoW may also be as only being facilitated by techniques such as a tablet or as a solution to save money. A few shortly mention in what way they collaborate with colleagues and the mode of directing.

“Well, I would say that NWoW is a cultural change so that you can say: ‘I don’t need to sit at the same desk every day to do my work’, so time and place independent. You use a lot of these kinds of instruments [pointing at tablet] to do your work and also to make appointments with your colleagues. I think that is the idea.” (Tino, first round)

Furthermore, respondents indicate that NWoW has not been introduced as such, but only a couple of elements have been introduced. This has been confirmed by the document analysis: a vision has been launched, however departments itself had to implement it.

Secondly, employees want more support and enrichments from management. There is for example a lack of communication. Employees find it hard to cope with new items and would like to have explanations.

“You get a lot thrown over the fence; just figure it out! But again, this is a matter of learning.” (Fleur, first round)

Employees would like to be facilitated in for example seminars and manuals, in which attention has been paid to how these innovations can be used. Although there are opportunities for training, employees want support from management in advance instead of going after this support themselves. Furthermore, management also has to set a proper example for employees, which isn’t the case at this moment.

Perceptions of Management Fashion

The employees of the case study perceive NWoW as a management fashion, as a temporal solution. The non-managerial employees interpret NWoW two-sided. Initially, they experience it as a phenomenon that is continuous. The external environment will never stop changing, stimulating organizations to be adaptive to changes all the time. However, on the other side they interpret it also as a phenomenon that is a temporarily solution for this particular moment in time in which organizations are forced to be responsive to the changing external environment. After a while, another trend or hype will take over.

“There is a lot of attention for at this moment. So it is a trend and maybe even a hype. There are also a lot of movements going on. [...] Since it is a hype, everyone is very involved to it. At a certain moment it will become normal en it will be considered as the normal work package.” (Fleur, first round)

Within these interpretations of NWoW, non-managerial employees also indicate some elements as permanent, such as the accessibility to documents by means of virtual collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS: SEARCHING FOR YOUR OWN WAY OF WORKING

The study indicates that the expressions and experiences of non-managerial employees in relation to NWoW were based on cultural characteristics of non-managerial employees and the absence of sense giving of managerial level employees. Non-managerial employees have different interpretations of NWoW, which implicates that employees are sometimes not sufficiently aware of the content of NWoW, are not involved in the process of implementation, have no knowledge on the process and have the feeling that the concept is not introduced as such.

However, the main thing that is derived from expressions and experiences of non-managerial employees is that employees are searching for their own way of working; the way of working that suits them best. Some of them are succeeding, some are still struggling in this process. NWoW is perceived differently by all non-managerial employees. A first explanation is the type of work situation employees are in. The findings show that employees, who live at a distance, prefer and adopt a different way of working than those who always work at the office and have little or no need to travel. Additionally, through individual characteristics such as the strong need for structure in and control of their work, and following rules and procedures, employees are preserved in the way they are dealing with innovations. The non-managerial employees have to get used to these sometimes unexpected changes.

What the employees perceive as most positive related to NWoW, is that they have all the responsibility and the sense of freedom in their own work. In addition, employees who always work in the office find the tablet a tool to work more efficiently. Employees, who also work outside the office, experience flexible working hours and flexible workplaces as pleasant, since they can combine their work and private life better. What employees

experience the least positive is the use of some technical provision. For employees who also work at home it is a 'lack of the second shoe' that is perceived less; working at home is allowed, however the possibility to access the network drive at the office is not there yet.

To what extent employees accept NWoW and apply to their work is a question that comes up. Employees state that they experience NWoW as a management fashion in which they consider it as a temporary phenomenon. However, they also indicate that NWoW has also components that will be permanent and are an indispensable part in any organization. Few of the employees are succeeding more than others in adjusting to NWoW. Those employees seem to have a more flexible and innovative mindset and are able to deal with changes more easily.

DISCUSSION & PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Since non-managerial employees are assumed as key to success, it is important for managers to know what is going on with their employees. Not only related to content, but also on a personal level, such as preferred ways of working. The employees repeat that they perceive a new way of working as a learning process that in the longer run might succeed. In addition, the employees indicate that the organization is rigid, and has bureaucratic characteristics. At the moment NWoW was first introduced not all supporting facilities were developed yet and, maybe more important, the vision on NWoW of the umbrella organization was not clearly defined. This forces both employees and organization to get accustomed to innovations before they are able to optimize and apply them into their day-to-day work practices.

In this process of acceptance and institutionalization, habituation has to be taken into account. In this, employees expect support from managers on opportunities and the use of changes and innovations. Non-managerial employees indicate with emphasis, that in order to accept and apply a new way of working, they need time to adjust, and that new ways of working should be determined by their own preferences; the way that works for them.

Two prominent conclusions are drawn from the findings. The first is that employees find a way of working that matched their individual preferences in work and life, and in which they are able to perform at their best. This is not necessarily the way of working the organization prefers. The second is that employees perceive NWoW as a management fashion, since they view it as a temporary phenomenon in time. This influences the interaction and match between organizational policy and daily experiences of non-managerial employees. It also may influence the process of acceptance and institutionalization of NWoW.

What do these findings mean for organizational change in general? And for the organization itself? NWoW is not just an organizational change, but should be placed in a broader context. This paper gives a description of the meaning employees give to NWoW and the way it contributes to better and more productive working of individuals, from the perspective of those individuals. Upcoming questions are: Can you create NWoW, is it feasible or is it a process of trial and error? Is there a 'language' that makes it easier to match the sense giving of managerial employees and the sense making of non-managerial employees? And is work actually done better with NWoW or not? Does NWoW contribute to the organizational goals?

This study has contributed to the fact that there are now more insights in the way employees deal with changes, and how they express and experience in their work. Some changes were already implemented for a couple of years and have been structured into the way employees do their work. Other changes and innovations have entered the organization just recently. Employees are still struggling with these and searching for a way that suits them best. In addition, the changes are just recently combined to an overall vision launched by the umbrella organization. These interpretations are perceived through sense making processes. Sense making is an ongoing process, making it possible that, in a while, employees will experience NWoW differently.

Furthermore, little attention has been paid to organizations with a bureaucratic and hierarchical character. This study provides more insights in how such an organization copes with a rapidly changing environment. It also highlights the importance of cultural characteristics of an organization and its employees when it concerns an organizational change. In addition, it shows that managers could have influence on the process when they are more involved. They give sense to a vision or strategic change through which employees are able to get more support and information about the purposes and impact, so the chance of success might be greater.

Grounded from this research is the perception of conveying NWoW as a management fashion. This perception emerged from the data and set NWoW in a different light. The question that occurs is whether NWoW – seen as a temporal phenomenon – is now being experienced by employees differently rather than being perceived as a permanent phenomenon.

CONCLUDING REMARKS, LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to capture the embodied experiences of non-managerial employees in qualitative research and to establish the trustworthiness, it is important as a researcher to be aware of possible threats in description, interpretation and theory (Maxwell, 1996). And according to Robson (2011, p. 159), 'there is no foolproof way of guaranteeing validity'. By using data triangulation and theory triangulation, and by being transparent about the data analysis and the interpretation, we tried to be accurate and thorough. However, this does not mean that there are no alternative explanations than the theory used in this study. And, as an characteristic of every (case) study, new questions arise from the findings.

Questions that rise up are for example: Has it changed over time? Are employees – and therefore also the organization – learning and adjusting more easily to the changing environment? Therefore it can be useful to investigate how the expressions and experiences have been changing over time.

It is also interesting to see how other bureaucratic organizations deal with these NWoW, or how it relates to organizations that are more modular and network oriented. Do employees always need a certain amount of structure to cope with the freedom that NWoW implicates or is that a typical characteristic of the bureaucratic culture of this case study? By focusing on the cultural characteristics of both managers and employee and on the sense giving processes of managers, it will provide more insights into the whole process.

Despite the fact that employees indicate that NWoW does indeed contain elements that are permanent in nature, future research is necessary to the idea that a management fashion has effect on the degree of acceptance and institutionalization of an organizational change.

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