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POLICIES FOR SHARING WORKSPACES IN ACTIVITY-BASED FLEX OFFICES

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SUMMATIVE STATEMENT
Policies for maintaining non-territoriality (desk-sharing and clean desk policies) and for maintaining zones with different sound levels vary between activity-based flex offices. Five policies were identified as crucial for making the activity-based office concept work. In cases without explicitly expressed policies employees reported uncertainties and interpretations of how to act in the office.

PROBLEM STATEMENT
Today many companies implement non-territorial activity-based flex offices (A-FOs) with different satisfaction outcomes (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; de Been & Beijer, 2014; van Koetsveld & Kamperman, 2011). The A-FO concept is intended to provide a variety of workplaces for various activities (Brunia et al., 2016) and is usually dimensioned for 70 % of the workforce (Danielsson & Bodin, 2008). The A-FO also aims at stimulating interaction (de Been & Beijer, 2014) and new ways of working (van der Voordt, 2004) where the employee determine where, when and how to carry out work activities (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011). Individual interaction is, according to Porras and Robertsson (1992), the most difficult aspect to change in an organisation. Moreover, changing the ways of working and behaviour is difficult to maintain (van Koetsveld & Kamperman, 2011).To achieve this change and to ensure the rotation of employees in A-FOs, a desk-sharing or hot-desking policy is applied (Knight & Haslam, 2010). In offices that follow a desk-sharing policy, workstations are taken on a 'first-come-first-served basis' and users are required to follow a clean-desk policy i.e. leave the workstations clean after use (ibid.). However policies can range from written to unwritten ones (van Koetveld & Kamperman, 2011) and the duration of using a workstation and the frequency of changing workstations, are not elaborated on in previous studies. In addition, case studies present A-FOs with spaces designated for different types of work such as concentrated work and interactive work. Speech policies vary between these types of spaces. There is a lack of studies comparing speech policies in different A-FOs.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE/QUESTION
The focus of this paper is the use of different desk-sharing and speech policies in activity-based flex offices. The aim is to identify and compare explicit and implicit policies.

METHODOLOGY
105 semi-structured interviews were conducted at four case organisations (table 1) that had relocated to A-FOs: two cases with explicitly written and two cases with implicit and unwritten policies. In addition, written policies were collected from the process managers at each case organisation. All employees at respective organisation were invited to interviews and could sign up for participation. The interviews were held at least two months after relocation at the respective organisations' premises and lasted on average 30 minutes. All interviews addressed background information, work tasks, office use, and strengths and weaknesses regarding work conditions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed

verbatim. A thematic content analysis of the transcripts was conducted jointly by the authors and facilitated by a qualitative data management tool (NVIVO).

Table 1: Type of organisations, number of employees, employee mean age, gender distribution and number of interviewees at respective case.

	Company 1 (C1)	Company 2 (C2)	Company 3 (C3)	Company 4 (C4)
Type of organisation	Knowledge and training provider	ICT service and support providers	Insurance company	Science park
Total employees in the A-FO	40	49	79 (+20 consultants)	13 (+30 external stakeholders)
Number of interviewees	24	43	26	12
Age, mean (min-max)	50 (37-65)	38 (23-61)	43 (31-60)	47 (27-65)
Gender Female/Male	20/4	5/38	10/16	7/5

RESULTS
The identified policies that addressed desk-sharing were: (i) to remove belongings, (ii) to use the same desk in consecutive days and (iii) to use scarce zones. Furthermore, speech and interruption policies were identified: (iv) to be quiet in designated zones, (v) not to talk on the phone in designated zones, and (vi) not to interrupt coworkers in designated zones. The policies had varying clarity and varying levels of restrictions/constraints in the different cases e.g. desk use duration.

Desk-sharing policies
Desk-sharing policies, or clean desk/hot desking policies, were used at the cases for maintaining non-territoriality. The policies regarded duration of attending the same workstation in an open area or in a scarce zone in consecutive days, or duration of unattended use of a workstation.

To remove belongings
To remove belongings addressed clearing the workstations when finished and the duration in which the desks were allowed to be claimed but unattended. This was the only common rule across the four cases. At the knowledge providing company (C1), the employees were explicitly required to remove their belongings by the end of the day. However, at the ICT support company (C2) the duration of unattended use was limited to two hours. Their written rule statements explained that 'We want our workstations to be as available as possible. Therefore it is suitable to remove your belongings from the workstation when you plan to be absent more than 2 hours so that your colleague can use it'. The interviewees at the insurance company (C3) reported various restrictions on the duration of unattended use (between 30 minutes and 3 hours), thus implicit and ambiguous policies were present: 'There is no rule regarding the duration of absence from a desk before I should clean it up so that someone else can use it' (I8-C3). At the science park (C4), the employees were allowed to book the workstations for duration of two days.

To use the same workstation in consecutive days
To use the same workstation in consecutive days addressed the duration of using the same work desk. This policy was not explicitly documented in any of the cases. The interviewees in cases 1,3, and 4 reported uncertainties about policies regarding repeatedly using the same desk. For example, one of the interviewees at the insurance company (C3) mentioned: 'There are people sitting at the same desk all the time. Everyone has a different opinion on this matter' (I4-C3). However, the interviewees at the ICT support company (C2)

reported that it was allowed to use the same work desk in consecutive days: 'Nobody is forcing you to move. In fact, you are allowed to use the same desk everyday if you want, as long as it is not occupied' (I16-C2).

To use the scarce zones

To use the scarce zones addressed duration of using the back-up rooms or quiet rooms dimensioned for 1-2 persons. To use back-up rooms was allowed and enabled through a booking system in all cases except the insurance company (C3) where the purpose and use duration of back-up rooms were not clearly defined and communicated. The duration of using the scarce zones was limited to one day at the ICT support providers (C2), and two days at the science park (C4), imposed by their booking system. However, it was allowed to book the scarce zones in consecutive days. At the knowledge providers (C1) and insurance company (C3) no duration was specified and as a result ambiguities were reported: 'There are no outspoken rules, but it is perhaps needed' (I22-C3).

Speech policies

Speech policies indicate presence of specific spaces with various speech levels and address whether or not interacting with colleagues and speaking on the phone were allowed. In quiet zones with a strictly quiet speech policy (only provided in C1), interactions with colleagues or answering phone calls were forbidden. The semi-quiet zones (provided in C1 and C2) varied depending on policies regarding to speak on the phone and interruption policies. There were zones in all cases where interacting with colleagues was encouraged. In C3 and C4, the interviewees reported on zones that lacked clear speech policies.

To interact with colleagues in different zones

This policy indicates presence of specific spaces with or without restrictions on interacting with colleagues. The knowledge providers (C1) and ICT support providers (C2) had designated zones with different speech policies, such as quiet and semi-quiet zones, and specific zones where interacting with colleagues was explicitly encouraged. Moreover, the interviewees in C1 and C2 reported on designated non-interruptive zones where specifically initiating conversations was forbidden: 'Here, it is not ok to interrupt each other. You can sit here and be sure that you get to work undisturbed' (I35-C2).

The insurance company (C3) and the science park (C4) had similar speech levels across all zones and lacked designated quiet zones. The interviewees in C3 discussed ambiguities regarding the different speech levels, and whether speaking was allowed in different zones: 'in the beginning, we received different information about these rooms [...] that these were supposed to be some kind of quiet room' (I2-C3). In C4, interviewees reported ambiguities for all zones and expressed a need for speech policies and quiet zones: 'I don't know if this is the quiet zone, or if this is the interactive zone and if you have to leave if you want a quiet work environment. On what level is it okay to talk and such' (I7 C4)'.

To speak on the phone in different zones

This policy indicates presence of specific spaces with or without restrictions on having phone calls. According to the interviewees at the knowledge providers (C1), phone conversations were not allowed in the strictly quiet zone. At the ICT support providers (explicitly) and the insurance company (implicitly) phone conversations were allowed in all zones, according to the interviewees. At the science park (C4) the interviewees mentioned ambiguities regarding whether it was allowed or not: 'I don't know if one is supposed to leave when receiving phone calls' (i7-C4). In summary, no zones in C2-4 were strictly quiet. As a result, the interviewees expressed a need for speech policies and quiet zones: 'we have to [...] create policies so that this workplace can function properly' (I3-C4).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to identify and compare explicit and implicit policies in activity-based flex offices. In total 5 central policies were identified in the four case organisations:

1. To remove belongings
2. To use the same workstations in consecutive days
3. To use scarce zones in consecutive days
4. Allocation of zones where interaction with and/or interruption of colleagues was allowed/forbidden.
5. Allocation of zones where speaking on the phone was allowed/forbidden.

Implicit and explicit policies in A-FOs

The explicit and written policies were (1) to remove belongings after a specified duration e.g. by the end of the day or after a maximum of two hours of unattended use, (2) using the scarce zones with a specified duration, and (3) allocation of zones where speaking on the phone, and interacting with and interruption of colleagues were forbidden or allowed. The implicit policies were (1) to remove belongings where no duration was specified for duration of unattended use, (2) using the same workstations and/or scarce zones in consecutive days with unclear limitations on duration, (3) unclear or undefined speech policies for the different zones.

What are the implications of desk-sharing policies?

To remove belongings at the end of the day was an explicit policy in all cases. As the A-FO concept builds on sharing workstations (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; 2015), the policy of removing belongings at the end of the day seems fundamental for making the A-FO work. Nevertheless, the policies regarding the duration of unattended use of workstations varied among the cases. In cases with implicit time restrictions, employees' interpretation and application of the policy varied. Interpretations of a policy may run the risk of having employees disregarding the policy and having varying expectations of colleagues' actions. In two of the cases, duration of unattended use was not limited. Thus, to clean the desk every time employees leave the workstation for longer than a few hours, was not expected in all cases, which is inconsistent with de Been and Beijer's (2014) description of A-FO policies. However, applying time restriction policies may be more critical and necessary in A-FOs with high workstation occupancy ratio. Thus, office capacity may be an influencing factor on choice of policies.

Most cases expressed uncertainties about policies concerning using the same desk in consecutive days, and employees expressed uncertainties about how to act in a correct way. Repeated use of the same workstation may lead to nesting and an implicit assignment of workstation. Not having assigned workstations is a key ingredient of the A-FO (de Been et al., 2015) and distinguishes the A-FO from the open-plan office. Expected values of desk-sharing are e.g. improved communication (de Croon et al., 2005), and increased teamwork quality (Hoegl & Proserpio, 2004). These benefits may be inhibited by nesting. Not having assigned workstations also means that the employees have autonomy to choose between a variety of workplaces, depending on personal preferences and task at hand (de Been & Beijer, 2014). This autonomy is put forward as an advantage of the A-FO concept. If nesting occurs in the office, the variety of workplaces and autonomy may decrease. However, according to Vos and van der Voordt (2002) if people get the chance, they choose the same workstation repeatedly and nesting tendencies in A-FOs have been found by de Been et al., (2015), and by Brunia & Hertjes-Gosselink (2009). Reasons for nesting could be e.g. the lack of territorial privacy (van der Voordt, 2004), time loss (Wolfeld, 2010), difficulties with finding a suitable workplace (Brunnberg, 2000), problems with adjusting the workplace, and finding colleagues (van der Voordt, 2004). The policy of using the same desk in consecutive days is therefore important to address. It should also be noted that imposing limitations on using the same desk in consecutive days may conflict with employees' work needs as they may perform the same task in consecutive days. Therefore when specifying desk-sharing

policies all employees' tasks need to be considered. With clearly stated policies employees may feel more secure in their choice of actions.

What are the implications of speech policies?

The results showed a large variation in terms of allocation of spaces with different speech policies. Two of the cases provided a variety of workspaces with explicit limitations on interacting with/interrupting colleagues or speaking on the phone. The other two cases, however, did not provide explicit speech policies for the different workspaces leading to no variations in terms of speech levels in the A-FO. Lacking a variety spaces with different speech policies may have negative implications for individuals' work conditions in an A-FO setting. In A-FOs where the majority of workspaces have no quiet speech policy, the users are not provided with the possibility to control their exposure to disturbances and interruptions. This compromises one of the main benefits of A-FOs described by Wohlers and Hertel, (2016) i.e. the ability to choose between different activity-related workspaces. In studies comparing different office types, employees report higher levels of job satisfaction in cellular offices and A-FOs in comparison with open-plan offices (e.g. Danielsson & Bodin, 2008). Lacking allocated spaces for concentration in an A-FO can lead to lower job satisfaction as the work setting will resemble an open-plan office with desk-sharing policies. It is however important to highlight that provision of quiet spaces per se may not lead to having quiet workspaces, especially if the layout and configuration of the workspaces does not allow sufficient soundproofing. According to a study by Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2011), users are likely to make misfitting choices of workstations, e.g. having meetings in workspaces allocated for concentration. Having spaces with clear and sufficiently varied speech policies should therefore be complemented with efforts to encourage employees to comply with the policies and maintain the different speech levels. Therefore, further research should address whether speech policies are complied with in A-FOs, and if the intended zoning is achieved and maintained.

Methodological considerations

Having four cases enabled comparison between policies of organisations with different size, location and organisation type. Thus, shared results may imply a certain degree of generalizability. The extensive number of interviews (105) gave an in-depth understanding of how the offices were used, and of strengths and weaknesses regarding the policies and work conditions. Moreover the joint analysis by the authors gave further reliability to the results.

Focus of this paper was on identifying and comparing policies in the four cases. Thus deliberations on the planning process, work tasks, office layout and office use were excluded. However, the relation between these factors and policies, and compliance with policies may be of interest for further studies.

Besides the five policies, other policies were also identified such as visitor policies and eating in office. However these policies were excluded as they were applicable to other work environments and not central to A-FO concept.

CONCLUSIONS

Five policies were identified in the four organisations. Three of the policies addressed desk-sharing; (1) to remove belongings, (2) to use the same workstations in consecutive days and (3) to use scarce zones in consecutive days, and two addressed allocation of zones with different speech policies; (4) where to interact with and/or interrupt colleagues, and (5) where to speak on the phone. The five identified policies were central to all four organisations. In the cases where no explicit policies were stated, ambiguities, uncertainties and interpretations of policies emerged, and a need for clearly defined policies was expressed. The results imply that the five identified policies may be few in number, but they

are crucial in A-FOs for (i) making the non-territorial office concept work, and (ii) providing a variety of environments with different speech levels.

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