

Safeguarding social wellbeing in the foreseen future of hybrid working

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Safeguarding social wellbeing in the foreseen future of hybrid working

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Most organizations are still struggling with their future policy on hybrid working, meaning working partly at home and partly at an office (corporate or co-working). However, everybody seems to agree that the office is important for face-to-face interaction and social wellbeing. While many office employees like to continue working from home partly after the pandemic, we do not want to continue feeling the professional isolation that many have suffered from this past year. But what does this mean for future office design?

There's not much CRE-focused research on social wellbeing and how to support this. There are insights in how office design influences unplanned interaction, but social wellbeing is much more than that. Physical proximity and spontaneous interactions were only two of the 14 identified aspects that are part of social wellbeing at the (activity-based) office, according to a pre-Covid study that I was involved in (Colenberg et al., 2021). And both these aspects belonged to the same of three main components of social wellbeing, namely people's social needs. People's social needs at the office are more comprehensive than just interacting, for example, including aspects such as organizational cohesion and feeling part of a community. In addition, the two other main components of social wellbeing addressed employee behavior (e.g. territoriality, approaching others, polarization, addressing unwanted behavior) and the perceived support of the physical workplace itself (identity, privacy, and noise/crowdedness). Because that single study already showed that the flexible working component of the activity-based office might undermine social wellbeing, it is interesting to contemplate how we can take care of social wellbeing better in the even more flexible hybrid-working approach that many organizations are now aiming for.

First, I am a bit worried about how people will cope with the previously often unfulfilled needs of privacy and concentration at the office, plus the frustration with flexible desk use. When flexible working at the office is introduced, most people continue to use the same (group of) desk(s), while the few that switch regularly are significantly more satisfied with the new office (see Hoendervanger et al., 2016). So, we could wonder whether we can expect all employees to make the right choice in where to work (home or office) for which activities? From behavioral economics theories, we know that people do not always choose rationally nor maximize their own benefits. We want to have those spontaneous meetings (at least, most people do), but we also want to concentrate and be productive. The past year, most people when asked about their productivity were very positive and even more so than compared to working in the office. We generally seem to feel more productive when we are doing individual tasks like writing and reading, because they make us able to tick off certain tasks on our to-do list. Spontaneous inspiration by colleagues is generally not present on to-do lists. So, combined with the well known irritation with office noise in open plan offices, one could wonder whether those with a nice workplace at home will still visit the office sufficiently to maintain social wellbeing, both of themselves and (maybe even more) of their colleagues.

Which brings me to my second worry: the disparity between certain groups of employees. We know from studies during the pandemic, that especially younger employees do not have the opportunity to create quality workplaces at home. They live in smaller homes and are more likely to have roommates or small children at home that disturb them. Also, they are more eager to be in the office to 'sniff' organizational culture, benefit from mentoring opportunities and simply be visible to their more experienced colleagues. What is the value of being at the office for them, when older/more experienced staff is working from home (too much)? If I were a CRE practitioner, I would point that out to those in the board of my (client) organization that get so excited about the opportunity to dispose of some of those expensive office spaces. Maybe it will help save the necessary budget to continue to (or start!) to provide quality offices that attract home working employees back to the office.

I am not suggesting here that I expect most office employees to avoid the office from now on. Although several (Dutch) surveys show that in general about 20% would like to do so, most employees are eager to get back to the office. Some may have to overcome some fear of catching a disease, but most will embrace the opportunity to dive into social office life again. However, we do not know how the quality of that office life will be experienced when several teammates are working from home. And we do not really know what the future office should look like, to attract everybody back to it. Obviously those 20% that rather continue to work from home fulltime, have not appreciated the office they had. While this could be due to colleagues, a long commute, or other matters, past research has shown that it is likely that for many office noise and crowdedness are also part of the reason.

Ongoing research in my group suggests that most employees will choose to come to the office, if certain quality level workplaces are provided. This does not only mean offering a variety of communication spaces, but also providing sufficient spaces to concentrate between meetings. Because in case of this quality office, many of our respondents would choose to do some of their concentrative work at the office as well. Which in turn, could provide the necessary 'presence' at the office, to create a so much desired social community again and keep the organizational culture spreading across generations.

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