

Task-location optimization in the Hybrid workspace: the role of reflection

Our research shows that the perceived productivity increases when people work at different work locations. Employees tend to optimize the fit between the work location characteristics and the tasks they have to employ. An important implication of our research is that modern workplaces should become more hybrid (multiple work locations), which allows employees to choose between different work locations to fit their tasks. This article also describes the role of employees' reflection on work locations. We conclude that the more people reflect on the work location, the more they optimize the fit between task and location, the higher the perceived productivity.

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Many Dutch private and public organizations are introducing 'new ways of working-programs'. The main reasons for adopting these programs are to make organizations more flexible, to increase employee satisfaction, to respond to employee's need for more empowerment and healthy work-life balance. Other reasons are: reducing the organization's real estate costs, avoiding traffic jams, and increasing employee productivity.

New ways of working programs contain interventions and a variety of new work practices, ranging from telework, open plan offices, activity based working, new forms of collaboration to advanced and integrated technological work environments. All these practices have different effects on different dimensions of work and organization (Van Baalen, 2011). New ways of working is not only a set of new work practices but also a new organizational philosophy that contradicts traditional, bureaucratic work organizations. Most new ways of working programs share a common, underlying work philosophy which holds that people can work 'any time, any place' (ATAP).

We will have a closer look at this ATAP-philosophy, especially at the 'any place' (AP) component. The underlying assumption of the AP-philosophy is that work can be conceived as a series of context-free activities and can be carried out at any place: *place does not matter anymore*. In this paper we argue and show that place still matters and that reflection on location choice is key in becoming more productive. This finding is based on our research regarding the *re-spatialization effect*. This effect refers to the impact of working at different work locations on work performance. Before we discuss the results we briefly discuss the role of place in work settings and the hybridization of workplaces.

We conclude with a brief discussion, conclusions and suggestions for further research on re-spatialization effects.

Does place matter?

The concept of 'place' has been subject to grand speculation and detailed investigation in different streams of research. In his seminal study on the emerging network society, Castells (1996) calls for a reconceptualization of place. According to Castells, places have become, due to the process of globalization and to the rise of new information technologies, disembodied from their cultural, historical, and geographical meaning, and reintegrated into image collages, inducing 'spaces of flow'. In similar vein, Giddens (1990) refers to a transformation from *place to space* where social (work) relations are 'lifted out' from local contexts of interaction. Information technologies remove social relations immediacies of context and are 'stretching' coordination and control of social systems over time and space. Place has lost its 'situatedness' in space (Giddens, 1990). As a variation on this common theme Cairncross proclaimed in her seminal book (1997) 'the death of distance': 'geography, borders, time zones - all are rapidly becoming irrelevant to the way we conduct our business and personal lives (...)'. However, research on telework and workplace design nuances these grand claims about the disappearing role of place. Kampschroer e.a. (2005) argue that the workplace should be conceived as a strategic asset to support business goals. Recent research found that less than 5% of US companies have aligned workplaces to their corporate strategies to improve corporate performance (see Kampschroer e.a., 2007). Price (2007) argues that workplaces are vehicles for creating flexible dynamic organizations. New (physical) workplaces can eliminate the waste/inventory of unnecessary space. Vischer (2007) proposes an environmental comfort model in order to make workplace design decisions to improve productivity. Reder and Schwab (1990) show how temporal and spatial patterning of behavior in the work environment are related to modes of cooperative behavior. In their review of research on collaborative knowledge environments Heerwagen e.a. (2004) emphasize the links between space and the individual and social aspects of collaborative work. Dul e.a. (2011) examined the impact of the physical work environment on the creativity of knowledge workers. Kampschroer e.a. (2007) discuss the impact of new workplaces on people and organizations.

We do not aim to discuss the literature on place and workplace design at length but just want to point at the big gap between the grand claims of social theorists and pundits of new ways of work-programs on the one hand and the detailed research on the impact of workplace design on work individual and organizational performance by workplace design specialists the other hand. Based on the workplace design literature we conclude that *place matters* but that companies don't see the workplace as a strategic asset (Kampschroer e.a., 2007), that managers still see place as 'peripheral to their core activities' (Vischer, 2007) and that the management literature has paid scant attention to the

physical work environment (Baldry, 1999; Dul e.a., 2011). The ATAP-philosophy of new ways of working-programs tends to continue this history of ignorance of place. We therefore believe that the ATAP-philosophy needs revision and more nuances. However, we also believe that that work place design research has confined its attention to just one place. We argue that more attention should be drawn to the spatial relocation of work, that is, to the fact that people are working at different locations and how they try to match their tasks with these different work locations.

The hybrid workspace

So far, most research has paid attention to the impact of *one* workplace location (either the office, or home, or virtual workplace) on productivity, employee satisfaction, work-life balance, creativity et cetera. Less attention has been paid to the fact that significant numbers of people work at different locations within the same job. An interesting exception is Halford's (2005) empirical study on the *hybrid workspace*. She notes that new information and communication technologies enable spatial reconfiguration of work across multiple locations which means that employees make use of different work locations to conduct their tasks. As a consequence employees are engaged in a continuous process of locating, dislocating, and relocating work. Halford shows that this spatial hybridity has important and serious implications for the employee, the work practices, organization and management. One interesting finding is that the introduction of the hybrid workspace resulted in a reclassification of work tasks by employees in two streams: an *office stream* and a *home stream*. Home stream tasks are characterized by on the one hand more routine (e.g. coding and document preparation) and on the other hand by completion of long self-evaluation documents that required a location with a minimum of distraction, while at the same time no or a minimum of managerial or peer-support was required. Office stream tasks, on the other hand, are characterized by complex, unfamiliar tasks which require intensive interactions within and between teams and with managers.

Halford's research shows that workspace hybridization allows employees to develop a *task-location optimization strategy*. If employees have the freedom to work at 'any place' they will ideally reflect on the fit between the task to be done and the characteristics of the place that enable them to carry out this task. People working at one location cannot optimize the task-location fit. Halford concludes that employees working in hybrid workspaces maintain different work practices which enable spatial management of workloads and meeting different task related challenges at different locations.

The re-spatialization effect

Halford points out that the hybridization of workspaces positively influences different aspects of work, like the work practices, the organization, and the management of work. In this paper we are interested in the impact of hybrid

Table 1. Splitting up respondents to number of work locations

Group	Criterion for splitting up groups	Re-spatialization
Group 1	>10% 1 location, <10% other locations	Low
Group 2	>10% 2 locations, <10% 3 locations	Moderate
Group 3	>10% 3 or more locations	High

drization of workspace on employee performance. We name this the *re-spatialization effect*. Re-spatialization is defined here as the extent to which people work at different locations (office, home, travel, client site, satellite office, neighborhood work centers). The more people work at different locations, the higher the extent of re-spatialization.

We analyzed the survey data of one company that has been collected by the Erasmus@Work research group in 2011. The company is one of the largest car lease companies (more than 500 employees) in the Netherlands and has recently adopted a new ways of working-program which allows its employees to work at different work locations. The data set (N = 304) contains information about the number locations people worked and about their perceived productivity. We decided to split up the respondents into three different groups to account for the extent to which the groups used re-spatialization. Employees who indicated to work more than 10% of their work time on one location but less than 10% on other locations were categorized in Group 1. Employees who indicated to work more than 10% of their

work time on two locations but less than 10% on a third location were categorized in Group 2. Employees who indicated to work more than 10% three or more locations were categorized in Group 3.

The distribution of the respondents over the three different groups is summarized in figure 1.

We analyzed the data by using an ANOVA (analysis of variance) to test whether the mean scores on perceived productivity between the three groups were significant (we used Likert-scales, ranging from 1-5). The results are summarized in table 2.

The results are interesting as they show that there is a slight, but significant increase of perceived productivity at the moment people start working at more than one location. The impact is stronger when the number of work locations increases. The results thus confirm Halford's qualitative research findings on spatial hybridity.

Table 2. Perceived productivity per group

Group	Means scores perceived productivity*
Group 1 - low re-spatialization	3,4
Group 2 - moderate re-spatialization	3,48
Group 3 - high re-spatialization	3,6

*the differences are significant at the level of $p < .05$

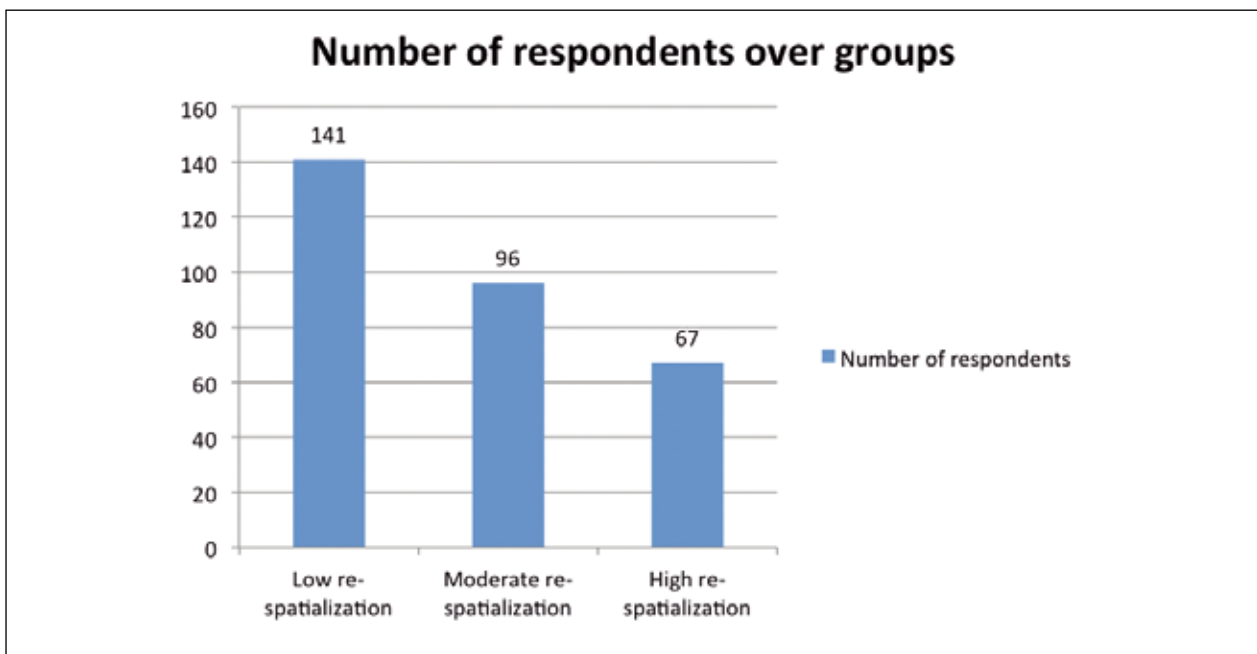


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents over the three different groups

Respatialization and location reflection

In order to explain the slight productivity increase we explored the impact of location reflection on re-spatialization and productivity. Location reflection refers to the extent to which employees try to match the work location to the tasks they have to perform. This theoretical construct has been developed by the Erasmus@Work research group and is integrated in the multidimensional new worlds of work-survey. We raised questions like 'I consider carefully which work location fits best the task I have to perform?' and 'when I think that a work location does not fit the task I have to perform, I will choose another work location'.

The underlying assumption here is that different work locations enable employees to perform different tasks of their work and that those employees reflect upon optimizing the fit between task and location. In the literature this is called activity-based working.

We conducted a statistical (regression) analysis on the dataset of the car lease company and found that reflection on the location has a direct and an indirect positive influence on perceived productivity. It means concretely that the more people reflect on the location (in the relation to the tasks to be performed), the higher the perceived productivity. This is another interesting result as it suggests that when people become more aware of the shortcomings and advantages of their workplace they tend to be more productive.

Conclusion: place matters and we become more aware of it!

The main conclusion is that 'place matters' and that people are more productive if they are more aware of this. The ATAP-philosophy, propagated in many new ways of working-programs, clearly misunderstands the importance of place. People do work at different places, but are only more productive if they make conscious decisions about which tasks they do at which place. This is fundamentally different from ATAP which suggests that any work activity can be employed at any place. Based on our research we conclude that workplace flexibility is beneficial as long as people are able to optimize the fit between tasks and location. Advanced workplace technologies do not disembed or lift out social relations from local contexts of interactions. In contrast, they enable employees, by providing ubiquitous access to information in different modes (text, images, sound) to make a more proficient use of the work location.

Moreover, and interestingly, reflection on location does not emerge as a consequence of the hybridization of the workspace but antecedes hybridization. It suggests that people tend to be reflective and as a consequence consider different workplaces to optimize the task-location fit.

This also means that our findings call for a reconceptualization of the workplace as is suggested by Halford. We expect that hybrid workspaces will become the dominant spatial configuration of knowledge work. This implies that more attention should be paid to the dynamics and impact on different aspects of work of being engaged in different workspaces.

In this paper we only able to show that re-spatialization influences perceived productivity and that reflection plays an important role in it. We did not discuss how this process takes place and which factors are considered while people reflect on the location in relation to tasks. We believe that hybridization and re-spatialization of workspaces will influence all aspects of work at different levels varying from employee satisfaction, work-life balance, organizational commitment, empowerment, self-organization to team- and organizational performance. An important limitation of our research is that we were not able to measure the objective employee productivity. Objective and intersubjective constructs and indicators of productivity are needed to validate our findings in the research that is presented in this paper.

To learn more about the re-spatialization effect new research is needed on how people make decisions upon work locations, which criteria they consider when they make those decisions, and how the nature of their work (e.g. interdependence, complexity) influences their decisions. From a managerial point of view we need to know more about how to facilitate task-location optimization strategies of employees.

We believe that hybrid workspaces will become a dominant spatial configuration of work which provides new and interesting venues for research and practice.

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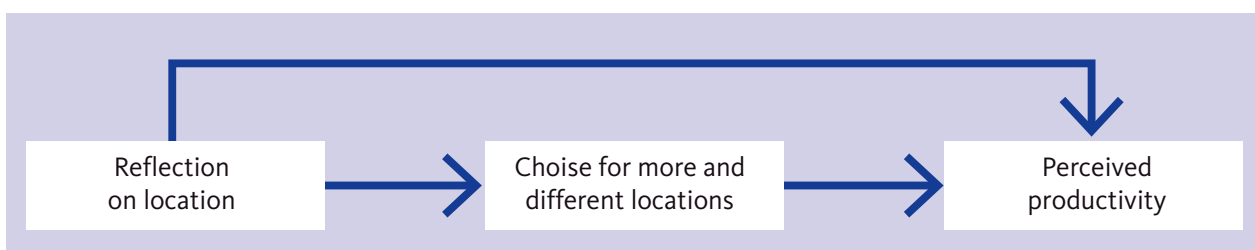


Figure 2. Direct and indirect effects on productivity

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