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Conflict, Resistance and the Symbolic Meaning of Space – Activity Based Work and Possibilities to Express Work-related Identities in Everyday Working Life**

Abstract

The article focuses on a current trend in office design: Activity Based Work (ABW). This is an office solution that instead of providing employees with designated places, it provides them with a variety of spaces in the office that offer different functionalities. A case study is presented of the ongoing effort of a multinational technology company in the software industry to implement ABW at a local site in Sweden. Based on an analysis of the individual and focus group interviews of company employees, the article argues that the non-territorial foundation of ABW is seen as a threat to the work-related identity among certain groups within the company. The findings presented comprise specific insights into how the material aspects of organizational life interact with social identity construction.

Keywords: identity threat, office design, work-related identitity, Activity Based Work (JEL: D23, J81, O15)

Introduction

As working life and the design of workplaces change, so do the individuals' possibilities to connect to and confirm their work-related identities. The increased use of digital technology has fundamentally affected the conditions that frame the ways in which working life can be organized. The digitalization of working life has challenged the traditional boundaries of work and enabled it to be spatially and temporally "disconnected" (cf. Ottosson, 2019; Towers et al., 2006). At the same time, digitalization has made it possible to have flexible working spaces at the office. While extant research has explored the effects of office redesign on job performance (Seddigh et al., 2015), employee satisfaction (Leder et al., 2016), and patterns of interaction (Sundstrom and Sundstrom, 1986), few have studied its effects on how employees enact work-related identities (Kirk & Wall, 2011). Consequently, the aim of this paper is to explore the impact new trends in office design have on the employees' possibilities to express their work-related identities in everyday working

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life; and in doing so, contribute to a more general understanding of why conflicts and resistance can emerge within organizations when the physical preconditions of work are altered.

Workplace, Workspace and Identity

For many people, work is central to their being. It not only provides the necessities of life, but also helps to confirm who we are in society, and is thus central in the construction and shaping of identity (Pratt et al., 2006). Work-related identity then can be defined as "aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work [...] or membership in work-related groups, organizations, occupations, or professions" (Dutton et al., 2010, p. 266). Work-related identity answers questions such as "Who am I in this context?" and "What is my position in relation to others?" It also addresses issues concerning status, such as, "What is my worth?" Thus, work-related identity is not only central for the individuals' sense of meaning and motivation in relation to work, but also for group and intergroup relations as well as organizational collaborations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Consequently, if the potential to enact and confirm work-related identity in everyday life is circumvented, it can not only lead to conflicts and resistance to organizational change, but also have a negative impact on self-esteem, satisfaction, and creativity (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). In this context, a person can have many work-related identities at the same time. For example, he or she may be a "leader", "team member", "friend", "colleague", "nurse" or "Volvo worker". From these examples, it is obvious that a person's sense of self at work can be related to personal attributes, team membership, profession, or the organization itself to various degrees. Work-related identity is in many senses a matter of relating to, and enacting certain more or less established social roles. For example, the socially expected and accepted behavior of a nurse is commonly known and guided by social norms. Consequently, conforming to role specific norms and behavior is central in the process of developing a work-related identity. In the dramaturgical language of Goffman (1990[1959]), establishing a work-related identity is very much a matter of learning to perform and interpret pre-established roles.

This in turn often is dependent on a *physical setting* and certain *props* to support the performance. Or as Barley puts it:

> A script's enactment is supported by, and may often require, a specific stage (a restaurant in the evening), a set of props (tables, plates, candles, a corkscrew), supporting actors (bartenders, bus boys) and sometimes an audience (other diners). When an encounter's dramaturgical elements change, scripts may change and when scripts change, by definition, the interaction order has changed (Barley, 2015, p. 35).

Barley (2015) underlines the importance of the physical setting and props for supporting and sustaining the performance of work-related roles. He also alludes to the fact that when these change, identity tends to change as well. Along similar lines, Goffman (1990, p. 32-33) views the physical environment as providing a setting for role performance that includes, "the furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items that supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it." Thus, the workplace in general, and in this case, the office, is viewed as a place that contributes to individuals' conceptualizations of self, and where work-related identities are signaled and affirmed through various gestures and behaviors. The office layout then become central in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going – the story of who we are at work. Whether that's a story of an "Ambitious worker", a "Software engineer" or a "Nurse" (Giddens, 1991).

Millward et al. (2007) argue that the trend to dislocate employees physically through either telework or hot desking can both threaten team identification (cf. Thacher & Zhu, 2006) and result in reduced identification with the organization. This in turn can lead to a reduced organizational commitment (Golden, 2009). Along similar lines, Baldry and Barnes (2012) claim that new ways of arranging an office layout can threaten professional identities. Elsbach alludes to this and argues that physical markers in the workplace are important for maintaining work-related identity categorizations (Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 2010; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007). The office setting – whether it consists of cubicles, cell offices, open offices or a mixture of settings – presents a stage where the role of a "dedicated worker" or an "excellent teacher" is enacted with artifacts, symbols, texts, and gestures. From this perspective, the built workplace should be seen as the stage on which the drama of everyday working life unfolds.

Given the links between the physical environment and work-related identity, highly relevant but unexplored questions can be posed such as: What happens when organizations redesign the workplace into open offices or activity based environments? What are the effects on employees' experiences of their work-related identities as their work environment changes?

To explore this, we present a case study of a multinational engineering company in the software industry in its ongoing effort to implement the non-territorial office design, Activity Based Work (ABW), at a local site in Sweden. Various forms of conflict and resistance arose in the process of implementation. The article argues that certain groups in the company see the non-territorial foundation of ABW as a threat to their work-related identities. This since the ability to personalize one's surroundings (i.e., to display permanent physical identity markers) and to express status through the personal office (in an environment where the manager is expected to work alongside subordinates) is limited in this kind of office design (cf. Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011). The micro-issues of identity enactment presented in the case study offer a good entry point to contribute to and further our understanding of the linkage between work-related identities and office design. In line with Susan Halford (2004), we assume that a change of office solution "offers a window onto the 'taken for granted', revealing assumptions and conventions as they are challenged by alternatives."

A Short History of Activity Based Work

Traditionally, two main types of office arrangements are described in the organizational literature: enclosed cell offices and open plan offices (Davis et al., 2011). In either case, the design implies that each employee holds a fixed place within the office that can be personalized to different degrees. However, the trend in contemporary office design is that employees no longer will have their own desks (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; Bodin Danielsson, 2010; Davis et al., 2011; van Meel, 2011). Instead, new evolving forms of office design aim to provide different spaces that offer different functionalities. This mix of environments involves areas for focused work (e.g., reading rooms), collaborative work (e.g., team spaces and meeting rooms) and more informal social interaction (e.g., café area). Depending on the work at hand, the employee is expected to (more or less autonomously) choose an area that suits the requirements of the task in terms of concentration or cooperation. Thus, different categories of workers, with different competences will not be seated together but will be integrated with other groups (Davis et al., 2011).

As mentioned, this article focuses on a specific form of evolving office design, Activity Based Work (ABW). According to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2011), arranging the office this way has its roots in the early 1980s under the epithet "CoCon-office" (COmmunication and CONcentration), a name and concept that simply describe the notion that different tasks require different settings. In *the Origins of New Ways of Working,* Jurian van Meel (2011) dates the start of this development even earlier and refers to IBM's work on the "non-territorial office" in the early 1970s. Here, designated and personal workstations were replaced by common and shared spaces designed for different, specific activities. The reason behind this was explained as:

> The project's aim was to "improve and increase the sharing of problems and experience" within the group. The basic premise was that "people will not remain at the same work station, but will position themselves wherever they can work most effectively at a given time" (Allen & Gerstberger, 1971). By moving around, employees might more frequently see and meet each other, which consequently might result in better communication (van Meel, 2011, p 358).

In Sweden, where the present study takes place, the Enator Company started the movement toward ABW during the mid-1980s under the name "Flex-office". Bodin Danielsson (2010) explains that a distinguishing feature in this way of arranging the office was that the employees hold no individual workstation since they where expected to work from outside the office to some extent. In order to cut costs, flex-offices where dimensioned for only 60-70% of the workforce. All personal working material was stored in personal cupboards at the office (Bodin Danielsson, 2010).

As made obvious by the examples, cuts in costs for office space and the ambition of a more collaborative climate seem to have been the main drivers in the development. Other factors, put forward by Davis et al. (2011), are more group-based, nomadic and remote working styles that result in low occupant space density at offices and an underutilization of designated seating spaces. However, Heerwagen et al. (2004) argue that an overemphasis on collaboration threatens to interfere with the ability of individuals to complete their work. So, voices have been raised against this concept. However, few specifically highlight the relation between work-related identity and the physical setting of work.

Enactment of Work-related Identity and the Physical Setting

As mentioned earlier, the enactment of work-related identity cannot be performed without a stage and the right props. Work-related identity can be signaled and affirmed in various ways in an office. Large offices or corner offices are a classic symbol of high-ranking officials, while certain equipment such as extra-large screens may signal, "I'm an engineer" (Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011). This, of course, varies according to context and over time. According to Davis (1984) and Ornstein (2013), contextual variables and environmental influences on behavior are poorly understood areas.

Elsbach states that the office setting should be seen as an important arena where individuals express belonging as well as personal and social distinctiveness. This process is described, in terms of workplace identity, as an "[…] individual's central and enduring status and distinctiveness categorizations in the workplace", a definition that refers not only to the process of self-categorization, but also to how individuals signal their identity in specific workplaces (Elsbach, 2004, p. 100). This self-categorization process can in turn be divided into "personal identity categorization" and "social identity categorization". The former signifies one's distinctiveness and rank compared to other in-group members such as "I am a dedicated worker" and "I am the leader" (Elsbach, 2004). In connection with this, Davis (1984) discusses symbolic cues in the physical setting as guidelines to the individual's interpretation of the social setting. Consequently, apart from being a place to carry out work, the office serves as an arena in which the role of a "dedicated worker" is enacted. Worth noting is that in situations where there is uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding what constitutes an adequate effort, symbolic actions become vital to reduce confusion and increase predictability (Bolman & Deal 2013; Rosengren 2019).

In relation to the physical setting, a person's workspace conveys important "status cues". Many offices are designed to correspond to and communicate the status of employees through, for example, size and placement of offices in relation to position within the organizational hierarchy (cf. Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011). In line with this, Baldry and Barnes (2012) argue that hierarchy often is signaled by the amount of personal space allocated to a specific person within the organization.

In addition to, or rather as a component of a positive personal identity, humans universally desire to belong to and derive identity from group membership (Tajfel

& Turner, 2004). Social identity describes a person's distinctive and status-oriented affiliations: "I" becomes a "we", for example, in a statement such as, "I am a woman" or "I am an engineer" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Thather & Zhu, 2006). This need can be served by inclusion in in-groups that distinguish themselves positively from relevant out-groups. In Davis' terms (1984), this process of social distinction is described as "professional images cues." In this view, identity becomes an argument used to make sense of oneself in relation to others, a set of discursive practices (MacLure, 1993).

Professional Identities in the Software Industry

Since the case study presented in this article is conducted at a company in the software industry, it is relevant to look a bit closer at the professional identity of the software worker. This profession grew with the rise of ICT and is often paralleled with traditional engineering work, which is why people in this group are often referred to as software engineers. In this sense, technological skills related to software production are central to the profession (Harlow, 2007). Software workers are sometimes seen as the epitome of the knowledge industry and of knowledge work, in the sense that their work is distinguished by skill discretion, high levels of autonomy and creative freedom (Scarborough, 1999). On the other hand, there is a discussion that this profession is currently undergoing a process of deskilling and that the work they do is being conducted more in the fashion of Taylorized production. According to Barret (2001), de-skilling is more comparable to service sector employment, which emphasizes interpersonal skills and customer service. In other words, far from all software workers are in fact engineers. According to Marks and Scholarios (2006), software workers should not be seen as a homogeneous group of professionals, but rather ranging from high-skilled workers with significant autonomy to low-skilled employees who work in support or testing roles. In line with this, software workers have a wide variety of educational backgrounds and earnings. However, different educational history and entry routes into organizations do not seem to affect the professional identity of being a "software worker" or "software engineer".

One reason why different groups of employees want to uphold a strong professional identity of software workers is self-interest.

> The software workers in this study, regardless of qualifications or skill level, were clearly connecting their external image with the benefits of a strong professional identity. Association with a highly regarded occupation is likely to make these employees feel positive about themselves, irrespective of the reality of their day-to-day work (Marks & Scholarios, p. 31).

The process of upholding and enforcing a strong professional identity can be referred to as "impression management". This involves the use of different symbols, language and artifacts to create a sense of identity within the group, but also to exclude others from entering the community and thus upholding the sense of being an elite group. As described above, there are signs that software workers are under threat of de-skilling and being reduced to a service function within the organization, a circumstance under which it is even more necessary to uphold professional image cues.

Identity Threat

As stated, work-related identity addresses not only questions such as "Who am I in this context?" and "What is my position in relation to others?", but also questions concerning status (i.e., "What is my worth?"). A number of organizational challenges can be perceived as either threats in terms of value or threats to group distinctiveness (Ellemers et al., 2002). The dynamic nature of status relations in the workplace represents a source of threat to high status (or otherwise advantaged) groups (Tarjfel, 1982). This implies that favored positions constantly need to be guarded, and if necessary defended. Examples of efforts to maintain group distinctiveness can be to stress the homogeneity of the in-group, to differentiate between groups, to display relatively high levels of self-stereotyping, or to affirm the collective self in other ways.

Elsbach (2003) argues that when the personalized office is replaced with a non-personalized setting, managers will find other ways to signal their status. Baldry and Barnes (2012), however, find evidence in their study of academia that those in top-level management find new ways to retain their right of personally-owned enclosed spaces even when their subordinates are expected to work in an open and shared environment. This double standard evoked considerable emotion and conflict among the personnel.

Consequently, identity threat in this context is seen as a perceived threat to individual value or to group distinctiveness and we ask how individuals and collectives within the confinements of an organization's new office design defend their work-related identities. How do individuals and professional groups uphold and reinforce their identity when the office setting changes; when former habits no longer are applicable; when work situations, actors, and tasks have changed? One possible answer may be that resistance against the architectural and managerial constructions of organizational space takes the form of personalization of the workspace, deliberate violations of the rules of how to use the work premises, and using them for unauthorized purposes (cf. Halford, 2004; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011).

This article argues that power and resistance, and how they play out in the workplace, need to be examined simultaneously. This is in line with Kornberger and Cleggs' (2004) claim that power relations embedded in the physical environment of workplaces need to be taken into account in the exploration of organizational behavior. Power is materialized in the workplace in the way symbolic power is enacted by organizations and management through the design of the office, and in the way the employees use the facilities.

Method

This article is based on a case study of a multinational engineering company in the software industry and its ongoing effort to implement ABW at a local site in Sweden. From the perspective of the study, the company in and of itself was not of importance. It was not selected based on how representative it was, but because of its specific circumstances that can clarify the phenomenon that constitutes the analysis framework. The company under study "itself is the subject that exemplifies the analytical frame, the object" (Thomas, 2011, p. 515). Since questions regarding social norms and workplace behavior are part of a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon, the case study design was considered suitable (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2009). In order to highlight the phenomenon as well as its context, the case study was comprised of in-depth individual interviews with representatives from top-level management (N=9) (Table 1), and four focus group interviews with representatives from different sections of the organization (N=23) (Table 2). In consultation with the company, the participating respondents were identified and selected to represent the different part of the organization. The selection was by no means optimal as the implementation of the study was dependent on the management's approval. Thus, there is a risk that more critical voices were not heard. The question of the material's internal representativeness was not "owned" by the research group but by the management. However, this aspect of the study's implementation was a prerequisite for the research group's access to the study subject.

Table 1. Participants in individual interviews by work division and gender (N=9)

Division	Men (N)	Women (N)
Site Manager	1	
Head of Development Europe	1	
Learning & Organizational Development	1	
Internal Communications		1
Apps & Services Development	1	
Management System & Audit Management		1
Workplace Solutions	3	

The methodology was of a qualitative nature. This means that in general, the respondents' thoughts and experiences directed the discussions. The in-depth interviews with top-level management were open-ended (Yin, 2009) and semi-structured, which allowed room for the respondents' own reflections. The interviews focused on experiences and expectations of the office layout with an emphasis on Activity Based Workplaces, particularly with questions regarding their role in the implementation process. The aim of these interviews was twofold: Firstly, to increase our understanding of the office concept; secondly, to help us formulate general themes for the focus group interviews. The interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours. They were recorded and transcribed in full.

Table 2. Participants in focus group interviews by work division and gender (n=23)

Division	Men (N)	Women (N)
Research & Development	10	3
Research & Development, Section Manager	1	1
HR	2	1
Management, Systems and Audits	1	
Marketing	1	
Management Assistant		2
Legal & Compliance		1

The focus group interviews can be compared to a structured group discussion where a moderator leads the conversation. The use of focus groups offers possibilities to gain a rich and deep understanding of how social norms are created, communicated, and reproduced (Stewart et al., 2007). The method has been proven productive, in particular from a participatory research perspective, since it helps to make unreflected assumptions visible (Piercy & Thomas, 1998). The open-response format of a group discussion often results in rich ideas that would be impossible to access through individual interviews or quantitative methods (Stewart et al., 2007). We chose to work with "composed groups" of employees from different departments, rather than "natural groups" whose members were already acquainted with one another. We did this because we knew in advance that there were open conflicts within the natural groups on the topic of ABW, a fact that would make an open and nuanced discussion difficult. In total, four focus-group interviews were conducted. Respondents were informed in advance about the aim and purpose of the study and that participation was optional. The focus group interviews lasted approximately three hours in which we discussed experiences and expectations concerning the office layout in relation to leadership, organizational culture, and employee involvement. The effects on employees' experiences of their roles in the company as their work environment changed was also discussed. The interviews where recorded and transcribed in full.

Both authors participated in the interview and focus group studies. In order to prevent them from influencing the results, they tried to limit their roles as much as possible. No theoretical or analytical concepts were used in the interaction with the respondents. The aim was to encourage them to describe their experiences in their own words. One example was the use of the term ABW itself. Although the respondents were familiar with it, based in part on the company's information, we tried to use expressions such as "the company's new office solution". Instead of using the term “power”, we encouraged them to talk about how they once experienced a situation. However, the researchers were obviously present and there is a risk of bias.

Analysis of the Interview Data

Our approach to the material is based on the assumption that the statements made by respondents are of a high degree of concern for the individual, and that they want to convey something central about themselves and their work (i.e., a central theme). The statements can thus be assumed to contain a certain amount of significance for the construction of the respondents’ identity (Kirk & Wall, 2011; MacLure, 1993). As Ritchie and Spencer (1994) state, the purpose of a qualitative analysis is to detect, theorize, and explain emergent themes in the material. We began the analysis by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts. This part of the analysis process was about listening to the respondents’ voices and being intuitive and open. In the process of reading the interviews, we tried to detect statements that recurred in other interviews. This was done in order to create an initial outline.

The Implementation Processes of the subsequent analysis was to find and add together meaningful statements to narratives, a meaningful whole, which linked individual and professional identities to the spatial design of the workplace. What was the narrative that would give individual statements meaning? What did the respondents convey in their stories? What were the underlying narrative points and how they were justified? The texts progressed from being expressions of individual experiences to becoming expressions of common and shared experiences (Kirk and Wall, 2011; Panayiotou and Kafiris, 2011).

Results

The implementation processes

A discussion emerged in 2011 about rearranging the site office according to ABW. A year later, the decision was made to implement the concept. The decision was partly because the company wanted to reduce office costs by downsizing the site. Two buildings were to be merged into one and a reduction of nearly 30 percent of the total staff (650 persons) was being implemented. Hence, a more efficient use of office space and the ensuing cost savings were key arguments in favor of ABW. Internal studies also revealed a low level of desk space use. ABW was seen as a way to make better use of the office space in this context. According to representatives from Workplace Solutions (WS) – the department in the organization in charge of facilities management – there was an explicit objective to improve and increase intergroup collaboration, apart from the cost perspective. It is not clear from the interviews, but the initiative to implement ABW seems to have emanated from WS.

Even though top-level management sanctioned it, it was obvious that the initiative did not receive full support. During the implementation process, WS described how initially there was significant anxiety among the personnel and apprehension about losing their designated seating. One concern was the loss of their ability to personalize their surroundings with personal belongings. Feelings of outraged among the employees were noted. According to WS, “People were fighting tooth and nail to keep their places,” and many of them were successful in “winning” a designated desk. One focus group reported that conflicts about how the office space was to be used had led to outright fistfights. People did not behave as ABW intended (i.e., they did not move around dependent on the task at hand); instead, they laid claim to seating at the beginning of the day by leaving their coats or other personal belongings there. The employees shared the experience, which the following conversation illustrates:

> Moderator: On an ordinary morning, do you go and sit at the same place as the day before?
>
> Female: A great many do so.
>
> […]
>
> Male 1: Yes, take a seat at the same [place], or close to the person you usually talk with a lot.
>
> Male 2: It becomes territorial. You have to watch out so you don’t sit on the wrong chair.
>
> Female: There was a little trouble in the beginning, a fight on the sixth floor.
>
> Female: You mark your territory by placing your coffee cup there. You discreetly mark the location with a coffee cup, a jacket on the chair […]
>
> Male 1: By a towel […] as one does at the pool […]. (Focus group)

Some of the staff quickly developed different individual strategies to deal with the effects of the new office design. The new ABW principle meant “clean desk” and you could no longer leave your working material lying around. In addition to marking your territory with your personal belongings, many staff members suddenly developed problems with their backs and asked for special desk chairs. This in turn forced the company to create a “parking lot” for personalized chairs. The story of the parking lot was told in a playful manner. Besides telling us it was a joke, the narrator’s intention was probably to show how ridiculous the company had been in the way it implemented the process. It was also possible to interpret the respondents’ statements as solutions to practical problems (how the work should be performed), in addition to being acts of resistance (how they break the rules).

One focus group reported that in hindsight, they felt cheated and that those who were responsible had concealed central arguments when the concept was first presented.

> I think it emerged later that they saved money by doing this. Of course, that was something one could pretty much figure out in advance, that they saved the cost of [office area equivalent to] one building. […] They should have said that from the beginning: “We need to save money. We need to move to one building. We will try to find a solution that gives everyone room so that you all have a place here.” Then we would have accepted it. (Focus group)

It was common knowledge that the organization was financially bleeding and that the cost for the facilities was too high. However, the employees reported that the cost issue was not clearly stated; rather, the reasons they were given for the change in office layout only had to do with improvements in creativity and communication. This resulted in some of the employees feeling that they were being taken for fools. After a while it was clear to us that the resentment towards ABW was stronger among certain groups of workers within the company.

Professional Image Cues and the Software Workers

The workplace was made up of two different groups: software engineers (SEs), and, in the word of the SEs, "the rest". The SEs composed 40 percent of the total workforce. The group members distinguished themselves from the rest in that they: (1) describe themselves to a large extent in terms of being "the core" of the company; (2) felt that their specific needs were not being recognized in this process initiated by HR and WS; and (3) expressed discontent and deviant behavior in various ways. This was obvious in that the managers, and most of the other software engineers, were in favor of designated seating. In other words, the SEs in the focus groups were the ones who raised and loudly voiced their concerns against the concept.

The software engineers gave several examples in the interviews of their ambition to create an environment that expressed both personal and professional identities. They wanted to blur the line between work and leisure; to make the workplace "feel like home" in order to embrace a professional culture where they both lived at work and had fun there. Implicitly, it was referred to as a combination of the "Google office" and the student culture at the schools of engineering they attended. An SE who was a head software developer captured these aspects in a discussion about a tennis court and refrigerator for private use – both installed without permission from the company.

> My organization, for example, set up a tennis court. When we created this space two years ago […], we set up a mini-tennis court beside one of the coffee areas, and it was tremendously enjoyed by all the employees, but not appreciated by WS and Security because they thought the tennis balls would hit a sprinkler or whatever it was. Our team was the first to put soft drinks and food in the fridge so we could stay and work in the evening, and then get something to eat. Personally, I think that all this is about making it feel like home. Getting it to be a comfortable and pleasant place to be at. Instead of clocking in and clocking out at a specific time, you should be able to have a good time at work too. (Individual interview)

As previously mentioned, a central share of the resistance came from the software engineers who perceived themselves as being at the "core" of production, that they experienced was not reflected in the design of the office. One SE made this clear during the focus group interviews when he talked about his group and their activities in terms of: "This is what pays the bills" or "How we make a living." At the same time, the SEs experienced that they did not receive the attention or understanding they deserved from other groups. "Software is a very special [activity].

They haven't understood how we work; what the demand specs really are like." (Focus group SE).

The software engineers claimed that they needed spaces for physical activity and relaxing and possibilities to eat around the clock, without having to go to the restaurant on the building's ground floor. Apart from their own desktop, they considered that playing games and sports was an important condition for them to carry out their professional activities. At the same time, they had an image of "the others" in the organization as being stiff and rigid.

The image among the software engineers of "we" versus "them" was quite clear. In this construction of identity, the tennis court became central in several ways. It was an expression of the engineering culture, and as a dramaturgical element, it became a node in a story of rule-breaking resistance.

> I nagged a lot in the discussion about the "intelligent workplace", what we wanted, and I begged for some kind of physical activity in this activity based work. I nagged about the tennis court that we had set up on several occasions and each time, I was told by ISS [Internal Safety and Security] to dismantle it. But in my opinion, when trying to promote the concept of activity based work you should have something that allows physical activity and not just work. […] I set up the tennis court again just a month ago, but it was taken down, again. […] This time there was a lot of talk about the sprinkler system and whatever they could come up with. […] It's a poor excuse, it is a poor excuse. (Focus group)

Among the SEs who participated in the study, it was clear that they saw themselves as representing a collective, demonstrated by the fact that they had collected statements from their fellow colleagues regarding their experiences of ABW. They expressed a feeling of being under attack from people that did not understand and did not seem to care. They told stories of underestimating the need for focused work, as well as stories of how the collaborative part of their work was overestimated. Some of this is captured in the following discussion from of one of the focus groups:

> Male 2: And these spontaneous meetings. The 20-30 who are in hearing distance get mad if others are talking in the area. And then there are the rules about talking – you are not supposed to talk.
>
> Female 2: Rules, signs in the ceiling as well as e-mail guidelines regarding "good tone of voice".
>
> […]
>
> Female 2: Throughout the entire project, things like sofas were considered to be workplaces. I said early on that you couldn't be expected to sit for a whole day on a rickety sofa with a laptop in your lap. Possibly, it can work for managers who have half an hour or so between meetings. The idea is good, absolutely, that one can sit and work between meetings. (Focus group)

In this view, work is mainly seen as individual and focused. It is also about efficiency; about getting the greatest amount of code per hour. In this respect, work is framed as "production", which in their own words sets the software engineers apart from other groups. The software engineers did not mind working together and having a common working space, but they wanted to design the room themselves.

> The flexible part, doesn't suit the development teams all that well, but I think it's a good idea for the rest […] Rather, what is important is for teams to be able to create their own rooms. Not "rooms", but areas, so to speak. And, preferably, to let the teams be able to create them for themselves. To design them, or decorate them... (Individual interview).

As mentioned earlier, the company investigated is an engineering company and the SEs are present in both production and management positions. Thus, it is possible to discuss the group of SEs as part of both vertical and horizontal status positions.

Status Cues

The three top-level managers who were interviewed explicitly distanced themselves in various ways from both the concept in general and the implementation in particular. They clearly indicated that they did not believe in the concept and emphasized that they were not involved in the decision making. Their approach was also reflected in their everyday work experiences. They did not live by the concept and they had traditional dedicated cell offices. By virtue of their positions in the organization, they also had access to and control of other facilities. "I'm super privileged. There is a small conference room you can't access unless you ask my secretary" (Individual interview).

While booking the individual interviews, it became obvious that an institution that belonged to a traditional office era had survived the winds of change. The interviews with the managers could only be booked through their secretaries. Some managers had personal secretaries, while others had to share. Although the actual intent of the secretarial institution is to provide the managers with services and greater maneuverability to focus on their work tasks, additional symbolic meaning can also be extracted. A traditional interpretation would be, of course, to read a person's level of status according to their access to a secretary (Murpree, 1987). In this case, it is reasonable to presume that this kind of symbolic function becomes more important.

The fact that certain facilities within the organization were guarded by gatekeepers meant that the managers distanced themselves from the rest of the staff both symbolically and practically, while simultaneously making their presence more visible. In part, this can be explained by a company tradition that when you reach a certain level in the company, you are "awarded" an office. It thereby becomes a strict marker of hierarchy. According to WS, this is a tradition that "does not exactly work in favor of this concept [ABW]". In many ways, it works against the whole essence of ABW. Organizational status and professional image seem to overlap when it comes to the employees' perceptions of having their own place of work, or even their own room.

In summary, we clearly see that the organization is influenced by its view of how work is assessed and evaluated, and how hierarchy and status are expressed. We also see that employees in higher ranks in the organization's hierarchy are rewarded with their "own" and larger offices. Finally, we see that the organization is (or has been) populated by a profession that considers the (personal) desk and being seated beside others from the same collective to be markers of professionalism and an expression of professional identity, whereas other groups in the company did not feel as strongly against being integrated with other collectives. It thus becomes obvious that the ABW focus on non-territorial solutions challenged several key power and influenced structures in this particular organization. When these structures came under threat, other strategies developed to manifest identity in a new context: from continuing to demand unique access to certain spaces by creating new borders for non-admittance, to confrontation seeking and collective group action.

Discussion – Identity Enactment and the Changing World of Work

Gary Thomas (2011) states that a case study subject is not selected based on its empirical representativeness, but because of its ability to highlight a theoretically defined study object – in our case the temporal and spatial aspects of work-related identities. In this article work-related identitity is defined as aspects of identity and self-definition that are tied to participation in the activities of work. The article specifically focuses on a current trend in office design (ABW) in the software industry at a local site in Sweden. ABW is a non-territorial office solution where the employees were provided with different spaces that offer different functionalities instead of a being assigned designated places. Various forms of conflict and resistance arose in the process of implementing ABW. The article argues that the non-territorial foundation of ABW is seen as a identity threat to the work-related identity among different groups in the company. This subscribes to Barley's (2015) claim that the physical constitution of the workplace is important for maintaining work-related identity categorizations.

In the case presented, the change was met with loud resistance and conflicts among the employees. It became obvious early on in the process that reactions varied strongly between different groups in the company. In-depth interviews revealed that the top-level managers (most of whom also presented themselves as software engineers) distanced themselves from the ABW project and claimed that they had not been involved in the decision to implement it. A few of them did not work according to the ABW concept, but instead had managed to get their own designated spaces in the office. This line of behavior – top-level management finding new ways to retain the right to their own, personal enclosed spaces in a non-territorial office setting – follows the pattern described by Barnes (2007). The software engineers in the focus groups followed a similar pattern by loudly raising their concerns against ABW. They did not, however, have the means to secure private, enclosed spaces and thus expressed their resentment in other ways. Similar to the findings of Halford (2004) and Panayiotou, and Kafiris (2011), these employees deliberately violated the rules on how to use the work premises and also used them for unauthorized purposes.

The case study findings include specific insights into how the material aspects of organizational life interact with the social; more specifically, how changes in office design (ABW) challenge power structures and status hierarchies, as well as the possibilities to express work-related identities among certain groups. From this perspective, the resistance to change is interpreted as a result of identity threat. In relation to this, the findings contribute to the fields of workplace identities and spatial design, fields that up to now have presented little insight into issues concerning power structures and resistance within organizations.

Several different ways to resist the changes and to uphold and reinforce work-related identity were observed as a reaction to the perceived threats generated by the changes in the office setting. We found support for Tarjfel (1982) and Ellemers et al.'s (2002) claims that if the social distinctiveness of a given favored group is threatened, it can trigger efforts to emphasize the homogeneity of the in-group and affirm the collective self in other ways. In this case, the software engineers very much acted as a collective within the organization. They responded to the identity threat by resisting non-designated seating, and in open debate, they constantly distanced themselves from other groups in the company. These results contradict those of Millward et al. (2007), which indicate that non-designated seating tends to favor organizational identity over team identification. Millward et al.'s argument is based on the presumption that organizational identity grows stronger when groups and individual characteristics are not particularly salient in the non-territorial office. However, our results show that threats to group distinction tend to spark even stronger team identification.

One explanation for the strong reaction of the software engineers can be that they lacked the means of distinguishing their group in other ways from other social groups (Goffman, 1990; Kanter, 1977; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011). Since the case study workplace consisted of several different groups or professions competing for the same resources, one could assume that there is a need to distinguish oneself (as an SE) from other groups in this context (Beech, 2008). Because the dynamic nature of status relations in the workplace is a source of threat to high status, or otherwise advantaged groups (Tarjfel, 1982), this implies that favored positions and groups constantly need to be on guard, and if necessary defend their position. Control of the space could thus be seen as a state of continuous positioning within the organization.

From a more general point of view, the article highlights how work-related identities are lived, challenged and expressed in everyday working life. The significant role that the office plays in affirming identity is important in relation to digitization and increased off-site working arrangements. The results support the findings of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Thatcher and Zhu (2006) that the possibilities to routinely and daily enact an identity is an essential dimension of identity work, and that it is through repeated enactment that identity is sustained. The findings underscore the need to consider workplace identities in processes of change when an organization undertakes a change in office layout.

This case study also sheds light over the reflexive and changing nature of work-related identities (Giddens, 1991). The potential outcomes of changes in office layout and routines not only threaten and challenge established identities, but can also contribute to the creation of new work-related identities. As mentioned, this study found that the ABW-implementation tended to spark an even higher degree of identification among the group of Software engineers. However this study is limited in it´s scope since it only explored reactions over a short period of time. A suggestion for future research is for a more longitudinal research design. Perhaps we will see that group specific work-related identities that traditionally were manifested through uniquely designed spaces in the office now become invisible, leading to the creation of more organization-specific identities. From this point of view – if the dominant trend in the future will be the non-designated office – one could expect a shift in the identity of the software worker away from focusing on technical expertise towards one consisting of customer service and client relations. We suggest that the challenges the software workers' collective perceived in this case were unintended. Taking this into consideration, though, there can certainly be other occasions when it is an explicit managerial strategy to break down pockets of worker discontent and resistance by disrupting existing work arrangements in the office and thereby altering the interaction dynamics in the organization, (Barnes 2007).

Although the group of employees examined in this study have been suitable for highlighting a specific problem, how the material aspects of organizational life interact with social identity construction, software engineers are not representative for the labor market as a whole. In a general sense, it is a quite resourceful group of employees who, seen in a historical perspective, often have acted individually rather than collectively. A proposal for further research is therefore to compare resourceful groups, like software engineers, with professions that traditionally have had a lower degree of control over their work.

Another contribution to the field of work-related identities is the need for in-depth and open-ended studies of identity constructions. It can no longer be assumed that a given workplace is made up of a given set of specific professional identities with a given way of enacting them. Rather, as working life continues to undergo swift and radical changes, employees' identities and identity constructions will also be an ever-ongoing process that meshes with new technologies and the overall changes in society.

If we hold true that the human need to express identity and belonging remains constant, we can expect that need to be maintained even in this context. As was obvious with the employees in this case study, they were looking for new ways to show belonging and distinctiveness, as well as for ways to defend their old habits.

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