



People organise their own flow

Ruud Hartmans and Luc Kamperman

We all know stories about how some of the best ideas have come by accident – in the morning in the shower or during unintentional encounters with colleagues at the end of the day. We also know that some times we are more productive – for example if we can concentrate without visual and acoustical disturbance. In these situations we find ourselves in the right environment, in the right attitude, and with the right colleagues around us. We are in a state of flow.

Strategic accommodation and ‘flow’

Corporate real estate departments have traditionally focused on office location, return on investment and managing operational expenses for the organisation that requires accommodation. In addition, the work that goes on in the buildings must be supported efficiently. Work environments often used to be designed to suit the size of the organisational units that inhabited them, and modified when the work or structures changed. In the past twenty years, however, organisations have come to view their accommodation increasingly as a strategic issue, with the focus being on the work style. This focus goes beyond merely having a satisfactory indoor climate and appealing design. The emphasis lies much more on what people do inside and outside buildings: what activities take place there that produce distinctive results? And what workstyle best suits what the organisation wants to be and what it hopes to mean to its clients?

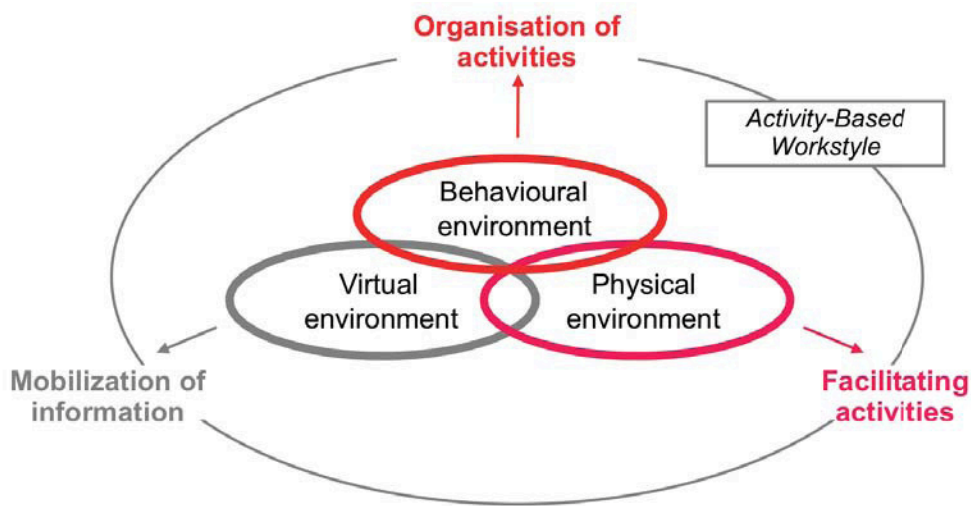
“Workstyle is a well-defined and accepted system that regulates how people deal with one another and resources”.

Veldhoen + Company is the founder of the activity-based work style approach in the Netherlands. 1994 saw the publication of *Kantoren bestaan niet meer* [The Demise of the Office], by Erik Veldhoen¹, signalling the start in the Netherlands of what is known today as ‘The New Way of Working (Het Nieuwe Werken)’, a designation that has many different meanings nowadays. A ‘workstyle’ results when we take an holistic approach to three coherent environments:

1. The virtual environment (IT supporting information and knowledge-sharing);
2. The physical environment (building and interior design);
3. The behavioural environment (organisational change, attitude and behaviour).

It is in the virtual and physical environments that we organise the tools that – provided they are used properly – empowers people to work more productive.

This article elaborates on the freedom for people to organise their work themselves, and explains the relationship between



accommodation and the subject of this magazine: flow.

Mental flow - by making freedom, trust and responsibility the basis of a workstyle, employees will have more latitude to build on their strengths – to get into a flow.

Virtual flow - IT solutions should contribute to the natural flow of information and knowledge, regardless of the time or the place.

Physical flow - the design of the work environment needs to support the different activities people perform. This results in a natural dynamism of people moving through the building.

The article concludes with a vision on the future relationship between strategic accommodation, workstyle and flow.

The authors have drawn on recent assignments carried out for major financial service providers in the Netherlands, Belgium and Australia.

Room for mental flow.

People work both on their own and with one another to achieve results. If we put their activities at the centre, we soon see how ridiculous it is to require people to do all of them seated at one and the same standard desk (with a few meeting rooms thrown in for groups). Studies measuring how much use people make of their desks in a traditional work environment show that on average, these workspaces are occupied between 35 and 60% of the total work time. Trends indicate that in future, people will become more inter-dependent as processes grow more complex. Increasingly, people will spend more time working with others than working on their own. And although they will continue to work together at the same time and in the same place, time and location-dependent collaboration will decrease in favour of remote collaboration at different points in time.

The activity-based work style approach entails putting the activity at the centre and giving employees the leeway to choose

when and where they perform that activity and make their own decisions, focused on the best result for their clients and colleagues. The question is: what is the strategic point of giving employees a certain measure of freedom? For major financial service providers, the point is:

- to encourage collaboration,
 - to empower entrepreneurship, and
 - to create scope for creativity,
- all in order to achieve a satisfactory final result for the client.

Giving employees more responsibility and freedom of choice makes their work more satisfactory and challenging, with the opportunity to get in a flow. In this sense, flow refers to a mental state in which a person is entirely absorbed in the activity he or she is performing. Someone achieves flow when all their concentration and energy are focused on the activity they are engaged in, when they feel entirely involved in that activity, and when they are successful in completing that activity.

The American theoretician and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi² is the most important proponent of this idea.

In his view, there are a number of factors that can contribute to mental flow. Wikipedia's entry on the subject says the following conditions help:

- clear goals (expectations and rules are discernible);
- a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it);
- direct and immediate feedback (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behaviour can be adjusted as needed);
- balance between ability level and challenge (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult);



Impetus 1: View
see/be seen



Impetus 2: Acoustic
hear/be heard



Impetus 3: Ambiance



- a sense of personal control over the situation or activity;
- the activity is intrinsically rewarding, so there is an effortlessness of action.

These factors can be put into place by giving employees the freedom to take decisions, organise their work and determine how, where and when they will do it.

Flow in the virtual world

People are connected with each other by technical systems and networks. Increasingly, the walls that used to separate employees from information and one another's knowledge will disappear. That means that it will be just as easy for employees to work with their colleagues at the office or on the other side of the globe as to work on their own. It also means secure, constant and uninterrupted access to information. Social encounters are increasingly shifting to the virtual environment as well. In future, employees will regard their computers not merely as tools for working, but also as a place for socialising (the rise of online communities). 'Intuitive' software and mobile tools will play key roles. Together, they will ensure a natural flow of information, knowledge and social contact.

Financial service providers are constantly learning how best to support the flow of information and knowledge in the virtual environment. They need to do this because people work around the Netherlands and abroad. For example, Employees have video conversations using webcams integrated into their notebook computers. Besides a digital information system

that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, they are increasingly make use of technologies like Wikis and blogs to share and expand their expertise.

Flow in buildings

Buildings that support an activity-based workstyle have different types of non-person-specific work zones and workspaces. Employees can decide for themselves which place or environment best suits the activity they are involved in and their current mood.

There are three factors that determine whether the physical work space can help an employee 'to get into a flow':

- What can I see from that workspace, and can others see me?
- What can I hear from that workspace, and can others hear me?
- Does the 'look and feel' of the environment influence how I feel? How is it affecting the way I perceive things?

In designing and consulting activity-related work environments, Veldoen + Company uses the 'VAA requirements' (View, Acoustics and Ambiance).

The trick is to create a work environment that offers a variety of VAA factors to mix and match. In this way, suitable workspaces can be found to support people's activities, both functionally and in terms of ambiance. Employees themselves choose the most suitable VAA combination, based on their activities.

Images

1 Possible communities within organisations

A design based on these requirements gives rise to work environments that alternate naturally between quiet and dynamic areas. In that respect, flow is in fact a trail of activities that take place.

Studies carried out by Veldhoen + Company show that approx. 35% of people working in an activityrelated office change workspace during the course of a day; 45% change every other day; 18% change 2-3 times a week; and 2% use the same workspace virtually all the time.

Do we organize the employees in buildings, or do they organize themselves?

If people have the freedom to select their own workspace, then the next question is whether if you have to organise them inside the building, or if you let them organise themselves? We have to choose between a rigorous arrangement – for example accommodation based on the formal organisational structure – or leaving it up to the individual.

In fact, there is no such thing as ‘the organisation’. People organise the work with one another in order to achieve results for the customer. They do that as a single group of individuals who feel connected with one another and have deliberately chosen to work together. That is what we call an ‘organisation’.

“Traditional accommodation facilities in particular the formal organisation”.

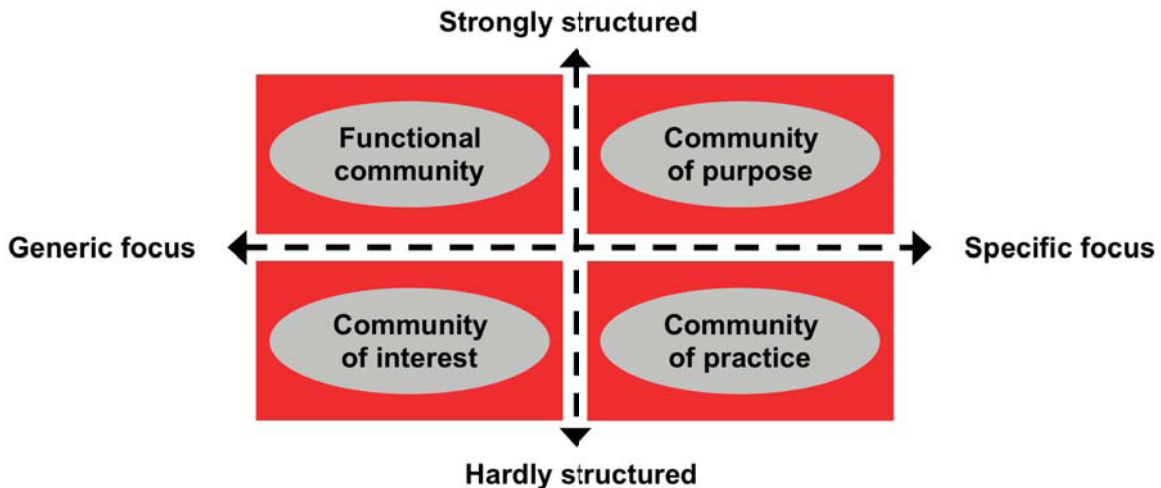
Gobillot3 differentiates between the formal and the informal organisation. The formal organisation consists of group structures. A division into job categories, departments and project units are all examples of the formal organisation. The

informal organisation consists of social structures that emerge when people themselves wish to be connected with one another. They may feel that way because they share certain knowledge/ expertise, but also because they have interests in common. Such things are not identified and described in advance; they are generated through spontaneous encounters. According to Gobillot, strong organisations recognise both structures and are able to link them. A nice parallel for self-organising groups within organisations are the structures that arise on the Internet in the form of social communities.

Traditional office accommodation supports the formal organisation. Departments and projects are assigned fixed workspaces and areas. Employees who have the freedom to choose a workspace together with a work environment that offers a variety of workspaces clears the way for self-organising communities. This process can be managed to some extent by assigning a home area: an anchor point where people start their working day, includes their filling cabinets, pigeonholes and lockers. It’s questionable if that is really necessary in the future?

Employees, who have the freedom to work where they want, feel a need to be connected with their colleagues – a need for social cohesion. After working ‘out of sight’ for a few days (at home or in another part of the office building) and having only virtual contact with others, employees will feel the need to see their colleagues ‘in the flesh’ again, not only because they desire social contact, but also to share their knowledge and insights with others. This is an important reason to continue assigning parts of buildings to specific groups of employees. Other reasons could be:

- dependence on such facilities as pigeonholes, lockers and filing cabinets. Advances in digitisation will reduce this dependence;



- dependence on specific IT hardware. Dependence on such hardware will decrease as we make growing use of mobile tools;
- confidentiality. By setting aside areas exclusively for a particular group of employees, we can guarantee that sensitive information remains 'behind closed doors'.

If we wish to construct buildings and work environments that will permanently support how we organise our work the challenge is to find the right balance between the design of the work environment and the continuously changing workstyle.

The trick is to offer a variety of different environments and facilities in the buildings that will continue to support the organisation's activities both now and in the future. Then it is possible to absorb changes in the organisation's structure and work style by using the work environment differently without having to alter the environment itself. Letting groups of employees select where they work and not assigning them to specific areas up front can help create leeway for changes in strategy and for 'getting into the flow' with one another.

Looking ahead

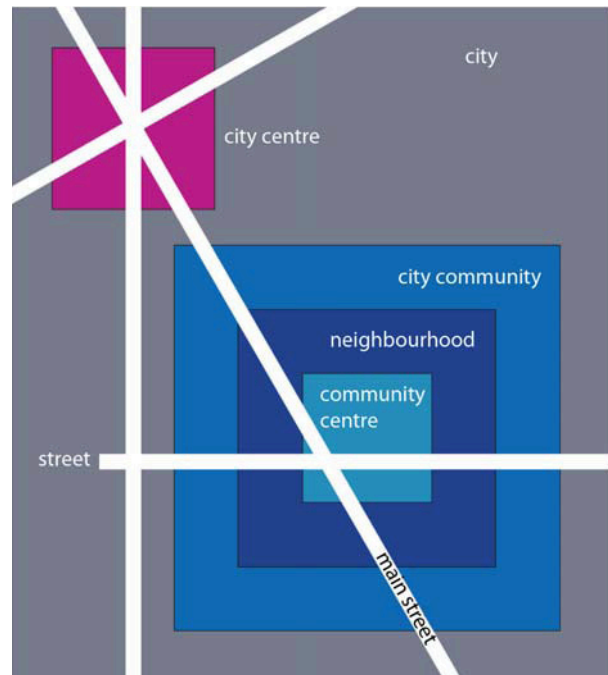
In this article, we have looked at the topic of 'flow' in relation to strategic accommodation from a variety of perspectives. We believe that we will become even less dependent on physical facilities. Office buildings will increasingly become an extension of the overall living environment, with people themselves deciding where to meet and where to carry out their individual activities. This trend will make it possible to consider, in even greater detail, how we collaborate with one another in buildings. Social cohesion will be an important factor in deciding whether or not to go to the office.

Looking ahead, we will choose a spot in the building depending on who we want to be with (which community). Our decreasing dependence on the physical facilities and the growing mobility of information will mean fewer people being assigned to fixed spots in the building. In other words, greater flow in the virtual environment will lead to greater flow in the physical environment – with the ultimate goal being the mental flow of the employees.



References

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- 3 Gobillot, E. (2006). The Connected Leader, creating agile organisations for people, performance and profit.



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