

myWURspace: 'plan it properly'

It's not easy to let go of having a desk of your own, as research has shown. The need for privacy and social bonding is often underestimated. So the message is: make sure you plan it properly.

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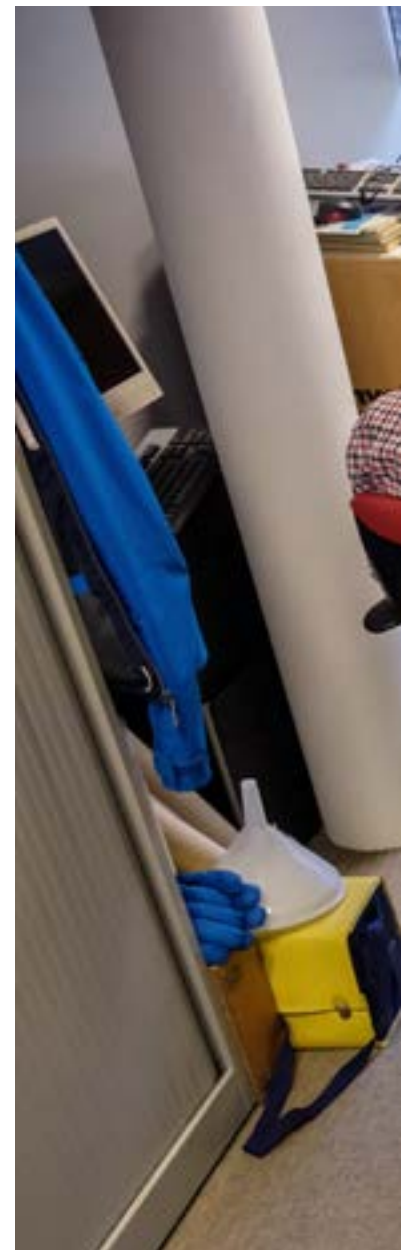
'Goodbye personal desk' read the *Resource* headline above a story last month about the planned introduction of myWURspace. It was met with a flurry of indignant reactions on the website and the intranet. Threaten someone's work space and there's always trouble. Opinions abound, some of them based on experience elsewhere. But what can science tell us about myWURspace?

Nothing, of course: myWURspace is a made-up term. But a lot has been written about activity-based working (ABW for short). One of the experts in the Netherlands is Jan Gerard Hoendervanger of Hanze University of Applied

Sciences in Groningen, who will graduate with a PhD this year for his study on this topic, *The Psychology of the Hot Desk*. He puts his finger on a couple of sore points regarding myWURspace.

IMPRACTICAL

Concepts such as myWURspace are intended to facilitate people's work better by offering employees the right kind of workspace for each activity. That means moving around according to the kind of work you need to do – within the building or maybe even between buildings. But do employees actually do that? Not according to a large-scale study conducted by Hoendervanger in 2016. He asked more than 3000 employees at research institutes and companies about their experience. A telling detail: although the responses were anonymized, you can tell that Facilities & Ser-



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Venue: Impulse, Wageningen campus

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A new concept for the layout of our offices aims at solving the space shortage on campus and promoting cooperation. But myWURspace also spells the end of a desk of your own. Are staff keen on the idea? And does the open office really invite cooperation? Come to the *Resource* debate at which experts will air their views and there will be plenty of time for dialogue.

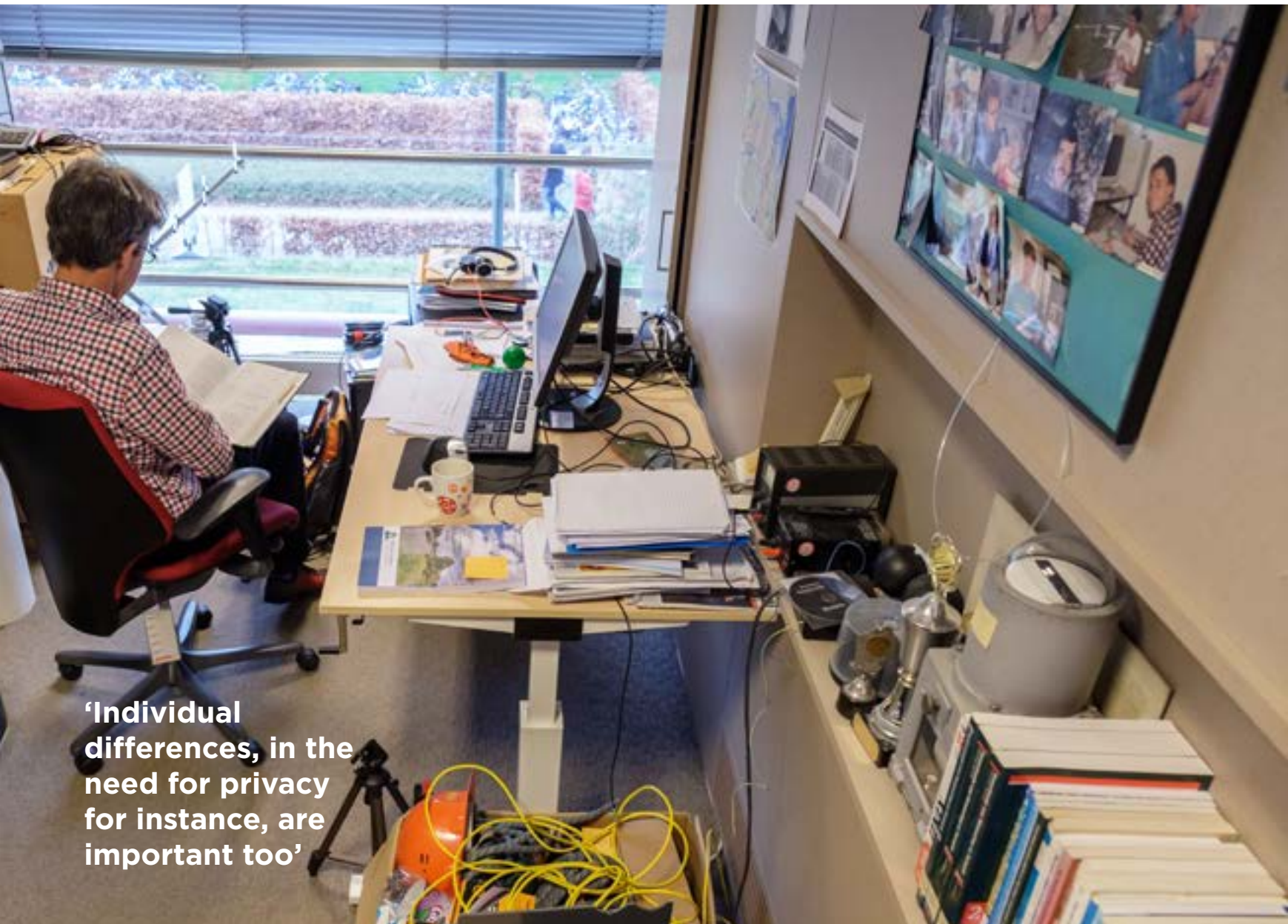
The debate on Monday may not go ahead because of the coronavirus. Keep an eye on our website resource.wur.nl for the final go/no-go decision.

'People develop habits that are hard to break'

vices at WUR (in the building Actio) took part. The results spoke volumes. Most of the respondents rarely move around. Half of them never do so, or at most once a week just because someone else is sitting in 'their place'. Only four per cent moved around several times a day. The main reasons given for not moving

were: 'then I have to move all my stuff', 'then I'm too far away from my unit', and 'then I have to adjust the furniture all over again.'

So the impracticality of it and their sense of belong to a group stop people changing places. Nor was the level of satisfaction with the concept anything to write home about. Forty per cent of the respondents gave the system five points or less on a scale of 10. At school, that's a fail, concludes Hoendervanger. 'In practice it seems that people switch locations for different kinds of work far less than was assumed by the designers of the concept. As an example, people do concentrated work in the open areas



‘Individual differences, in the need for privacy for instance, are important too’

▲ An office in Lumen. Individual differences, such as in the need for privacy, should play more of a role in the design of the activity-based workplace, says researcher Jan Gerard Hoendervanger.

which are not meant for that.’ This came out of a study in a large research organization last year. Almost all the work requiring great concentration was done in open areas instead of designated concentration spaces.

PATTERNS

According to Hoendervanger, there are several reasons why employees don’t adapt to the concept as intended. ‘It probably has a lot to do with the number of available concentration spots. Studies show that employees generally spend half their time doing concentrated work. But I don’t know any workplaces where half of

the work stations are suitable for that. In the institution this study is about, only 12 per cent of the work stations are behind closed doors and private. And when there are such spaces, they do not automatically get used for concentrated work. Apparently, people don’t easily switch work locations. Why not? People don’t often stop to think about what they are doing and the best place to do it. People develop habits and patterns that are hard to break.’ And then there are also social and cultural barriers that make it difficult to switch places, as Hoendervanger’s studies show. ‘Contact with colleagues can be a reason not to switch places.

The fun people have together and the sense of belonging. Or indeed, the fear of being left out. The thought: what will the others think if I cut myself off?’

Herman Kok, who teaches Facility Management at WUR, recognizes what Hoendervanger comes across in his research. Besides his teaching, he is director of Shign, a company that works on healthy and productive workplaces. ‘Bringing diversity into work environments is a good idea in itself,’ he thinks, ‘but you do have to guide people. Just dropping in a concept leads to frustration. When you introduce the activity-based workplace, behavioural



▲ Office space at Wageningen Economic Research in Atlas. A permanent base does fit into an activity-based workplace, but then in an open space, says WUR lecturer Herman Kok.

change is important too. You must get people on board. Otherwise you'll find they don't move around, and everyone just stays where they are.'

PRIVACY

But Hoendervanger thinks the most important factor in the successful implementation of concepts such as myWURspace may be catering for people's need for privacy. Whether the workplace suits their work depends a lot on individual needs for privacy. And that 'fit' determines levels of work satisfaction and performance, showed a doctoral study published

last year. People are more satisfied and perform better when they can do difficult work in concentration spaces in private rooms. And that applies especially to people to whom privacy is very important. Hoendervanger: 'In this context, privacy means the need to be able to withdraw, not to be visible and not to be exposed to other people's noise. That need varies a lot from person to person.'

Closed concentration spaces can be part of ABW concepts like myWURspace, says Hoendervanger. 'People too often assume that this kind of work environment has to be completely open, but concentrated work requires a

'An attractive design can have a positive effect on enjoyment of work'

closed space. If you know your staff need a lot of privacy, you shouldn't make those workspaces open. There is nothing against working from a kind of "home base", which you do share with colleagues – areas that you assign to



‘Open areas are fine as long as everyone keeps their mouth shut’

teams. And for some activities you then use other workspaces. My experience is that there is not so much resistance to this kind of sharing. The focus in activity-based workplaces often lies mainly on the various activities that people do in the course of a day. But that is too narrow a field of vision. Individual differences, in the need for privacy and social bonding for instance, are important too. “Activity-based” should actually be “needs-based”: personal needs are decisive.’

ATTRACTIVE

‘The big disadvantage of open spaces is noise,’

WECR TIPS FOR ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING

Staff at Wageningen Economic Research (WEcR) in The Hague and Wageningen no longer have their own desks. Business Unit Manager and project leader Olaf Hietbrink explains how he went about operation ‘myWURspace’.

‘The concept was thought up in The Hague,’ says Hietbrink. ‘We had to leave the building on the Alexanderveld, where everyone was in offices and the design of the building meant we hardly saw each other. We wanted a workplace in which it was easier to cooperate and share knowledge – a requirement for research these days. The directors tasked a project group of staff with finding the best way of doing that.’

HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT IT?

‘We first decided on the goals which the office space had to help us achieve, partly based on an assessment of the satisfaction and wishes regarding the old setup. Then we visited a couple of organizations with innovative flexible workplaces, and we listed basic principles. Firstly, you need to divide the workplace into zones. You need spaces for meetings and consultations, spaces where talking is allowed, and silent areas. Based on the work that needs to be done, you look for a balance between those three types of workspace. So it is tailor-made. Secondly, management joins in too. Everyone, including the managers, has to look for a place to work in the morning. Thirdly, you need to draw up some rules. People are not allowed to claim a silent room for themselves all day every

day. In silent zones you are expected to be quiet, just like in the library. And if you are going to be away from your desk for longer than two hours, you should leave it empty.’

AND ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE?

‘The staff were involved in the process all along. We discussed the goals and principles with the staff and then we hired designers. Staff got plenty of opportunity to study the initial designs and propose adjustments. That involvement is crucial, because they’ve got to work there! Then various adjustments were made, such as the location of different rooms, the positioning of sound insulation and coffee machines, colours and style.’

HOW IS IT WORKING OUT?

‘You notice that a lot of people soon have a favourite place. That’s not a problem. But you don’t have the right to a place of your own. Some people don’t like that. And sometimes it turns out there is a problem with the planning. In The Hague there was a meeting room next to a silent area, for example. That disturbed people and so it was changed. Beforehand, people dreaded the clean desk policy, but I don’t hear any complaints about it now. We did make sure that digitalization meant everyone had a laptop, a mobile phone, and facilities for meetings, archives, and so on. In The Hague, we have held a new survey. Staff think that the new setup has made it easier to collaborate and to share knowledge.’

confirms Kok. ‘Open spaces are fine as long as everyone keeps their mouth shut. Otherwise it doesn’t work. Disturbances, acoustic discomfort and lack of privacy are the big downsides of open spaces. You can do something about that with a good design, though. We see in our study that a tasteful and attractive interior design has a positive effect on productivity and people’s enjoyment of their work.’

He also emphasizes that activity-based working must be functional above all. ‘Openness is important but not all-important,’ thinks Kok. ‘Collaboration is linked to degrees of distance and separation. If you see each other, collaboration is easier. Colleagues who are less than 20 metres away from each other talk to each other the most. In four out of five cases, daily face-to-face contact is restricted to colleagues on the same floor and in the same area. That has serious consequences for collaboration and knowledge exchange. And individual pro-

ductivity is purely a matter of privacy, of being able to concentrate. So look especially at what fits the work and the person. Why shouldn’t someone who is in the office every day, doing the same work, have their own permanent place? There is nothing wrong with that. A permanent base fits in the ABW concept too. But then in an open environment, with options for withdrawing around it.’

‘Concepts such as myWURspace are based on the assumption that you do different things in one day,’ adds Hoendervanger. ‘If that is the case, those different workspaces have added value. But if it’s not the case, give an employee their own place that is appropriate for that one kind of work they do. The concept is good, but it needs to fit the work, the people and the organization. It’s essential to analyse that thoroughly before you start. And above all, make sure you have enough concentration spots. Scarcity only creates dissatisfaction.’ **📌**