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The European Journal of Workplace Innovation (EJWI) is an open-access, net-based, peer reviewed and English-language journal. The Journal invites research-based empirical, theoretical or synoptic articles focusing on innovation and workplace development.

The aim of the journal is:
- To develop insights into workplace innovation
- Provide case studies from Europe as well as comparative studies from other continents
- Develop and present new theories in the field of workplace innovation
- To increase international publication within the field
- To become an important publication channel for workplace innovation researches as well as the international research community.

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Editorial

Richard Ennals

The growing field of "Workplace Innovation" now links many previously separate themes, at several levels (workplace, meso, national, European, international, global). It provides a rich context in which previously separate debates can be linked.

We can identify several consistent themes in the European Journal of Workplace Innovation since 2015. There has been an emphasis on cases based in the workplace, and on "learning from differences". Since the first issue of the journal, several research traditions have been accommodated in a pluralist European culture of EJWI.

Today we see interest in Workplace Innovation beyond Europe: in both industrialised and developing countries. It offers a fresh conceptual framework for economic and social development, expressed in organisational terms. This does not mean imposing a new orthodoxy, but embracing variety, which is captured, for example, in Peter Totterdill's account of "Closing the Gap: The Fifth Element and Workplace Innovation" (in EJWI 1.1 2015)

In EJWI 7.2 2022, papers consider a broad range of topics.

Khoon Seang Kang (Singapore) addresses "Digital Technology in a crisis: Role and importance of Workplace Innovation (WPI) in relation to digital company strategies".

The global Covid pandemic has been economically and organisationally disruptive, revealing vulnerability to crisis. This paper concentrates on responses in the financial sector in Singapore, in the context of concerns for Workplace Innovation. It is based on an analysis of 200 newspaper stories April – August 2021, together with 950 journals, with a focus on the adoption of digital technologies. Are financial services companies establishing robust business plans to improve their long-term viability and resilience? A number of cases are explored. Employee engagement was shown to be important. Workplace Innovation was part of a short-term strategic approach, and there was diffusion of new techniques.

Simone Rom and Kai Roland Green (Germany), use Action Research in "Exploring Workplace Innovation in diverse and low-skill settings: reflections on using Critical Utopian Action Research".

Unusually, this paper deals with low skilled and ethnically diverse workers and considers the strengths and weaknesses of the use of Action Research, using the Nordic approach of Critical Utopian Action Research in a short exploration of a Future Creating Workshop. The focus is

on Empowerment and Participation, in a context of Social Innovation and Workplace Innovation. The case study company is in the German textile industry, where tensions are explored, together with the importance of language skills and an emancipatory approach. Engaging the workforce revealed some unexpected priorities. The paper has implications for Small and Medium sized Enterprises internationally, and for workplaces with diverse employees.

Oskar Pakos, Tobias T Eismann, Martin Meinel and Kai-Ingo Voight (Germany) focus on creative workplaces, in ""More than meets the eye": Unveiling the potential of creative workplaces in modern organisations".

The work environment is seen as influencing creative behaviour. Designing, planning and implementing changes at the level of individual employees is complex. 20 experts were interviewed, and their answers were compared to findings in the literature. There had been limited awareness of the organisational impact of changes, and how creativity enhancement could be an explicit goal. "New Work" involves moving flexibly between team-based and individual work, as well as concentrated work and relaxation. Often employers focus on costs and productivity. Employee satisfaction should be maintained. The literature on Physical Work Environment was reviewed. Taking corporate values into account had a culture-reinforcing effect. Employee well-being could be improved. Employee reactions were only partly anticipated. It was recommended that organisations should make creativity and innovation a strategic priority, develop a suitable workplace strategy, consider physical and social processes, and think beyond the physical design, providing separate spaces for privacy and communication.

Kristin Lebesby, Hanne Finnestrand and Ola Edvin Vie have brought together several strands of international research in "Co-Creating New Dancefloors through a Parallel Organisation: Organisational Development through Union-Management Cooperation in the Public Sector."

The paper moves on from metaphors of "boxing and dancing", to explore the role of a parallel organisation, alongside the operational organisation. This allows the clearing away of some bureaucratic barriers and strengthens the role of trade unions in the public sector. The project was based on Action Research for organisational development and builds on work by researchers such as Huzzard and Oeij. It echoes the approach taken by Gustavsen to development organisations. There is more dialogue and less emphasis on number crunching.

The paper brings together Norwegian work in the Industrial Democracy tradition, with a focus on communication, collaboration and the development and implementation of new technology. The Action Research project plays a vital role, with reliance on a level of trust. Future work should explore greater involvement of ordinary employees in parallel organisations.

Paul Preenen reviewed “Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges” (eds. Kenneth Abrahamsson and Richard Ennals; Peter Lang, Berlin 2022).

This publishing project illustrates how collaboration can be developed, and the enabling role of EJWI. A core of Swedish research was complemented by contributions from other European traditions (Norwegian, Dutch, British and EU collaborations). With a foundation of Swedish research presented in “Work Life 2000: Quality in Work” (Yearbooks ed. Ennals; Springer, London 1999, 2000, 2001), there was a Vinnova project: “Swedish Working Life Research and Sustainable Work”, which led to EJWI special issue 6.1-2 March 2021, and then the book.

In the globalised economy, we need to consider the world beyond Europe. The debate in EJWI should now be broadened. Papers are now being submitted from around the world. We should move beyond a Euro-centric view of knowledge, science and technology.

For example, Amazon is the world’s largest technology company, with a dominant global presence, and it has been engaged in struggle with the San and Khoi indigenous peoples in South Africa, as Amazon seek to build their new African headquarters on an environmentally vulnerable floodplain, on land with a strong heritage significance, based on resistance to foreign invaders. The impact on business and society in Africa will be considerable.

Pre-colonial approaches to knowledge were different, with deep links between people and nature in their local environments. As we now seek to decolonise accounts of knowledge production and dissemination, we encounter major issues which are now, for example, being decided in the South African Supreme Court of Appeal. There are profound implications for First Nations around the world as they interact with global companies.

EJWI was founded in 2015, to work with the European Network for Workplace Innovation (EUWIN) in the context of European Commission programmes and policies. We share common assumptions and experiences. Many countries work together in the EU, NATO and the new European Political Community. We are accustomed to pooling sovereignty, drawing on common traditions, and working in the contexts of globalisation and economic instability.

The EJWI 7.1 Editorial considered the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This EJWI 7.2 Editorial is written in the context of continuing War in Europe. What will be the impact on the "Workplace Innovation movement"? EUWIN and EJWI have been part of an optimistic view of Europe, at the end of the era of post-Cold War dialogue. We can now see concerns such as a defensive focus on cybersecurity, the energy crisis, and the cost of living. There are risks of a return of top-down management, weakening of employee driven innovation, and a challenge to benign European assumptions behind Human Centred Systems.

Future historians may suggest that we have reached the end of “the age of innocence”. We had complemented “Competitive Advantage” with “Collaborative Advantage”. We have

focused on the role of the workplace. Learning lessons from the Covid pandemic, we gained experience of remote working: a new paradigm, including exploration of "Healthy Working Centres".

A journal such as EJWI can be seen as an active international network. Working with EUWIN, and with new collaborative projects in Europe and beyond, we can plan next steps, and engage with global agendas. We anticipate a strong and sustainable future for the journal, with contributions from beyond Europe.

Digital technology in a crisis: Role and importance of Workplace Innovation (WPI) in relation to digital company strategies

Dr Khoon Seang Kang

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 epidemic forced Singapore to implement a smart lockdown in April 2020. As a result, many businesses were forced to rapidly expedite their shift to digital technologies. Despite many businesses' valiant efforts and great accomplishments, the epidemic has revealed the various ways in which these businesses are susceptible to a crisis. Digital technology has proven to be one of the most essential options for many businesses seeking to grow. This entails making the transition from active experimenting to active scaling up. Regardless of the immense obstacles that many businesses are facing today, they have now recognized that this is the moment to focus and act on new principles and strategies in order to adapt to the changing situation.

This article tries to explore how far Financial Services Institutes, or FSI, in Singapore are tackling workplace innovation and digital technology in order to come up with a more resilient business plan. To answer this paper's research topic, a qualitative content analysis was performed. The analysis of the content is based on a collection of 200 newspaper stories regarding corporations and their strategic decision-making process that was researched between April and August 2021.

To ensure continuity and resiliency of these businesses in Singapore, they need to adopt digital technologies and workplace innovations methods in the formulation of these companies' strategies. Future research should look into if companies that adopted digital technologies have a lower negative impact, or if they recovered faster when the corona epidemic has passed.

Keywords: Digital technology, workplace innovation, digital and cloud maturity, COVID-19, Corona epidemic, strategies, business resilience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic situation, there has been a negative impact on almost all businesses. As the global epidemic was starting, firms were forced to respond and adjust quickly to this unprecedented shift in their customer and business behavior. Many firms were forced to fully rewire to allow their workers to work at home and to mostly assist consumers through digital channels or portals (Chauhan & Shah 2020). Corporate operations, supply chains, customer services, and worker cooperation all needed to be further digitized as part of this new transformation wave. In order to control the spread of the virus and to control the negative impact of the pandemic, the businesses were forced to rapidly expedite their shift to the digital technologies, which also shows the various ways in which the businesses are susceptible to a crisis situation.

The COVID-19 crisis in 2020 had basically exacerbated the environmental instability and the uncertainties which were already present in the business environment. Therefore, in order to deal with such a situation, the organizations need to consider how continuous, resilient as well as long-term sustainability should or are to be addressed in the company plans (Ku et al. 2020; Fenner & Cernev 2021). For the managers and leaders of a company, it is important to understand the link between digital and innovative technologies and the business strategy development, which in turn can help them to handle resilience-oriented difficulties while formulating and implementing their business plans.

The innovative technologies, which include the Internet of Things, cloud computing, and digital technologies, do increase the scope and volume of tracing and tracking systems, as well as the development of supply chain financing software and information pipeline systems. However, research shows that those companies that do invest in digital technology will only reap the benefits if and only if workplace innovation is centered on their investment process and the process of strategic development (Li et al. 2020; Serbulova et al. 2020). In terms of workplace innovation, there are four essential features that are geared toward strategic formulation that might lead to a robust organization that includes flexible or adaptable structures, systems cohesion or synergy, human capital, and procedures.

In order to obtain additional insight into establishing business strategies that are robust and resilient, quality empirical researches are needed urgently. This is because there is no empirical study done on the motivations for excluding or incorporating workplace innovation from company plans that are targeted at establishing resilient business strategies (Bell, Brown & Weiss 2018). These are the observations that serve as the foundation for this paper and its main goals as well, while focusing on the case study of the Financial Services Institutes in Singapore. Therefore, this research study will focus on the creation of organizational collaboration and

competence-based resilience methods that will address the implication of the corona epidemic to a business through a realistic case study.

2. RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research study is to explore how far the Financial Services Institutes, or the FSI in Singapore are creating or adjusting their business strategies based on digital technology to become more robust in contexts marked by high uncertainty levels and disruptions. This is important because during the difficult time of the Covid-19 pandemic situation, both, workplace innovation and digital technology have been found out to be significant to come up with a business plan that is more resilient.
Therefore, this research study has this objective:

Research Objective: To learn how far companies establish robust business plans for workplace innovation to improve their long-term viability and resilience.

With the help of these research objectives, this paper looks into how the decisions about digital technologies are made in connection to strengthening and enhancing robust business strategies. And in doing so, the research also focuses on how the trade-offs between short-term, efficiency and profitability-oriented, and long-term, sustainability and continuity-oriented, business objectives are factored into those decisions. Therefore, the results of this research study would help the managers and leaders of the businesses to gain more insight about the concept of workplace innovation which in turn can be used for the implementation of the practical steps to improve workplace creativity in the business plans. On the whole, the results of the study can also be used in the form of a reference for organizations to enhance the digital strategy with the focus on improving customer experience and integration.

2.2 Research Questions

This study investigates the role and impact of digital technologies and workplace innovations in an organization's business strategies with the aim of improving resilience and, as a result, the continuity of the business in circumstances marked by high disruption and uncertainty levels. The main research questions of this study include the following:

Research Question 1: How are the Financial Services Institutes in Singapore altering or developing strategies that are based on workplace innovation so that they can become more robust in situations marked by a high degree of disruptions and uncertainties?

Research Question 2: Have organizations that have integrated digital transformations into their overall business strategy responded better to various changes which are caused by the corona epidemic situation?
Research Question 3: How and to what degree are organizations adjusting or creating strategies based on workplace innovation for them to be more flexible and resilient in circumstances marked by high disruption and uncertainty levels?

2.3 Data Sources and Methods

This study employs qualitative content analysis, which includes document analysis and thorough deductive categorization (elements, concepts, and dimensions) approaches. For this research study, the analysis of the content was based on a collection of 200 newspaper stories regarding corporations and their strategic decision making process during the time period between March to December of the year 2020. The reason why this time period was chosen is that these were the initial months when the corona epidemic forced businesses to change their strategy fairly immediately.

The study has a focus on the business approaches from a variety of industries, providing a holistic and comprehensive perspective based on their approach to organizational business strategy, during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, the Financial Services Institutes that were featured in public media including news websites and newspapers, as during the above mentioned period that elaborates on the renewal of the strategy for doing business during the epidemic were taken under investigation.

In addition to the data from 200 newspaprs, the data from 950 journals in the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) database was also obtained, analyzed, and evaluated. The database keeps information on businesses as well as their corporate strategy decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many quotations from employees, managers, and entrepreneurs are included in the data, revealing how they dealt with the dilemma as a company and to what degree their strategic decisions were made through workplace innovation.

2.4 Research Propositions

Based on the information obtained from the database, the concepts and the six propositions were examined, which included the following:

1. Due to enhanced employee engagement and cooperation, as well as seeking both exploitation and exploration, ambidextrous organizations may have a good impact on resilient company strategies."

2. Exploiting workplace innovation prospects is influenced by short-term vs. long-term strategy priorities.

3. Companies are more likely to focus on market and product strategies as a means of maximizing profits rather than investing in workplace innovation, therefore, the influence of workplace innovation is undervalued."

4. External situational stress, including the COVID-19 crisis, raises awareness of smart organizing, which can help a company become more resilient and proactive."

5. COVID-19 uncertainty indicates that organizations are more motivated for product-market enhancement and strategy orientation than for smart organizing."

6. Customer's expectations of financial institution services have grown dramatically as these institutions push toward digitization, which has been hastened by the Corona epidemic.

The propositions had two purposes: they reflected on current ideas and they tested the research topic through cub-claims. For this study, every proposition and concept was evaluated using the content analysis approach. For the analysis of the data, the dataset was analyzed by comparing as well as encoding transcripts using a logical code tree that includes various characteristics like product-market enhancement, smart organizing, and strategy orientation. Additionally, an encoding software (RapidMiner) was utilized to investigate reproducibility and reliability and also to aid in the inventive coding process.

3. RESULTS OF THE QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The results of this research study helped to analyse the relationship between resilient strategies (which include elements such as finding new opportunities and markets, improving services and products, productivity, digital technologies, external cooperation, and knowledge absorption capability) and workplace innovation (which include elements such as job security, sickness absence, mental environment, changeable working hours, working from home, health management, physical environment, and networking employees).

3.1 Strategic Orientation

For the dimension of strategic orientation, the aspects which were employed included: networking employees, knowledge absorption capability, and external collaboration.

3.1.1 Employee Networking

During the Covid-19 pandemic, organizations were responding by refocusing their techniques on fostering workers' creativity and learning capacity by providing training options so that they can improve their employees' competence as well as knowledge, which boosts the company's flexibility, resilience, and agility. Some workers were also relocated and the managers improved the working circumstances, contract terms, and balance to work-life. The managers made use of the approach of Employees-first because in partnership with and among workers, the company can provide focused guidance. Worker participation in strategy formulation is strengthened, which can also have a favorable influence on the performance of the employees and also increase resilience to the pandemic (Nelson 2021; Jarrahi et al. 2020).

Companies like Starbucks and McDonalds used adaptation and local response as they realized that they are heavily influenced by the human component. The decisions were based on the local considerations during the Covid-19 pandemic, which shows that the organizations were taking alternative approaches to strategy formulation. These organizations were more resilient throughout the preliminary months of the Corona Pandemic, thanks in part to their strategic flexibility.

However, some companies like American Today and MS Mode, periodically refocused their strategic approach to protect cash flow, turnover, and margin. Remedies included curtailing investments programs, layoffs, temporarily suspending workers, furloughing staff, and postponing payments. This shows that in the periods of uncertainties, while some businesses made use of the approach of Employee-first, other businesses reacted more quickly and made decisions focused on giving temporary support to workers, short term, and employing the "cash-is-key" methods in order to survive the pandemic.

3.1.2 Knowledge Absorption Capability

Organizations which shifted business orientation and strategy to the new "digital way of working" before COVID-19 disruption and uncertainty, became more robust as a result of the pandemic (Murashkin & Tryvainen 2020). Several organizations' strategic orientations centered primarily on self-organizing teams which are given the authority of making bottom-up judgments which improve capability and engagement. Companies have also utilized a hybrid strategy that combines deliberate strategy planning and spontaneous methods that are focused on progressive programs and activities that are meant to improve robustness. Several companies also make use of a 5 – year roadmap or a blueprint, combined with their goal, vision, and objectives, as well as bottom-up progressive techniques that are meant to tap into their employees' contributions and resources.

Several companies also concentrated on numerous scenario planning during their strategy formulation which focus on the need to devise contingency measures for unforeseen circumstances. Such companies which had a contingency plan were prepared to handle the repercussions of the pandemic as well as undertake a swift renewal of course (Nayal et al. 2021). These findings reveal a link between emergence strategy and deliberateness formulation, as well as durable business plans.

3.1.3 External Collaboration

As a consequence of the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 situation, organizations are shifting their approach toward co-creation and joint innovation, onshoring, and platform development, to boost robustness and long-term viability. Management was dealing with major operational issues in their supply, that is, in their logistics, raw materials, and parts, which were harming their clients' delivery reliability. Therefore, to balance robustness and global value chain resiliency, the strategy formulation process now includes, onshoring, reconsidering business unit physical positioning, developing buffers in the organizational design, as well as examining the full value supply chain for any potential hazards.

During the height of this pandemic, the bottom-up activities and suggestions received increased attention. To avoid the disaster in the short-term, decision-making and real and immediate steps are essential. Ability to solve challenges, inventiveness, loyalty, skill, knowledge, and employees' knowledge have quickly become apparent. This could result in the emergence of new career opportunities if companies choose to engage their workers more freely and focus on employee job refinement.

3.2 Product Market Enhancement

The following features were employed for the dimension of product-market enhancement: services and product improvement, digital technologies, discovering new clients and markets, and productivity.

3.2.1 Services and Product Improvement

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many businesses came up with new services or products (which is known as exploration), or improve existing services or products (which is known as exploitation). For exploration, the businesses improved their services and products by educating their personnel and the supply chain to be more adaptable, like expanding production lines, using new technology and new machinery, etc. Additionally, the strategy for product development and enhancement around digitization has been boosted by social distancing and lockdown measures that were enforced all around the globe. As a result, the pandemic accelerated the online strategy and created a platform where workers were forced to adopt digitization.

Businesses like DoorDash and the Henkel Singapore Limited that concentrated most of their activities on digitization had the potential of making new items and designs which shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated innovations upon exploitation and exploration in various methods for product development. For companies to become resilient, so that they can continue providing their services and products to their customers in both long and short terms, they need to be flexible and adaptable to product development. This should also be based on the market demands.

3.2.2 Digital Technologies

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, robotization development has increased. Most e-commerce and supermarket chains that were using robotic technologies had a significant improvement in their productivity and resiliency. Several e-commerce businesses are also establishing e-fulfillment facilities which deploy robotic technologies to achieve their objectives. Nevertheless, companies that are investing in robotics-related technologies, like Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, applications, sensors, and 3D printing, are affecting employment negatively. However, findings suggest that businesses that are investing in these technologies may swiftly enhance production scalability and efficiency, as well as increase employment opportunities.

A company called MSV has developed the "indoor positioning technology," which helps production workers work productively and securely by maintaining a proper safety distance. This type of technology fails to diminish job levels, rather, it improves the workspace in a robust and sustainable manner, allowing for continuing output during times of pandemic. An additional

component of using digital technology and automation is the transition to higher-value tasks and professions that require more skills and knowledge, which helps to better services and products' performance and plans. Therefore, the decision of investing in digital technology is derived from a wide range of strategic objectives, such as: increase labor productivity, shift to highly valued jobs, and acquire market share by strengthening the companies' market power etc.

3.2.3 Discovering New Clients and Markets

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the consumer behavior has also shifted to the internet world as more people are relying on the internet to make their purchases. In times of the pandemic, organizations see changing behavior as a chance of converting their dwindling physical demand to web sales channels. And companies that are concentrating on process flexibility and diversification strategies in respect to digital technology believed that customer demand rose or stayed constant. As a result, companies that pursue diversification methods are more robust and adaptable.

Furthermore, during pandemic, enterprises made short-term transfers from low-demand products like ice cream, to high-demand products like the sanitizer and disinfectant (Island Creamery, 134). In addition to concentrating on various market development technique, companies could focus on a diverse and large consumer portfolio in conjunction with adaptability in various processes of work, like a new product line for a new market.

3.2.4 Productivity

During the pandemic lockdowns, organizations like Ford could maintain production by shifting workflow topographically, and by using digital facilitating system and digital work activities for the workers who could work online (Ford, 555). Despite all lockdown efforts, this is an indication of a company that is maintaining continuity in important business operations, which include technology development. During a period of uncertainty, a connection between product-market enhancement and applied digital technology initiatives is likely to occur: digital technologies can assist organizational resilience, and raise productivity. However, higher production during the preliminary stages of the pandemic does not always imply more job opportunities as companies decide to stop employing new workers in order to save money and also concentrate on operational optimization and efficiency.

In order to gain a better insight into consumer behaviour and demands, companies focused on Big Data technology, particularly during disruption times which help to understand what to provide to the clients and how to organize the internal structure to ensure that those services and items are produced, purchased, sold, and shipped. In times of pandemic, an emphasis on cash flow necessitates a comprehensive low stock strategy that does not jeopardize service

levels among other elements. Companies can achieve this objective with the use of data technology. Nevertheless, many businesses increased their stockpiles to establish buffers against supply chain disruptions, which can also help to increase resilience during the pandemic.

3.3. Workplace Innovation

Workplace innovation can be described as the extent to which businesses seek out new ideas in order to improve the engagement of their employees by improving their working conditions, fostering a culture of competent environmental change response, and increasing productivity (Oeij et al., 2019). Research shows that all over the world, many companies are developing workplace innovation programs (Pot, 2011; Oeij, Rus & Pot, 2017). These innovations can help the managers to develop better strategies and methods of work (Kopp et al., 2019) which can help to improve the performance of the company (Dhondt, Oeij and Preenen, 2015).

For the dimension of workplace innovation in this paper, the elements which were employed included: job security, sickness absence, mental condition, changeable working hours, working from home, health management, and physical environment.

3.3.1 Job Security

The pandemic prompted unclear strategic changes in terms of job security. Some organizations made strategic decisions about internal restructuring, which include layoffs and reorganizations, or the diametrically opposed, recruitment and corporate investments. Therefore, job security has been a source of consternation, with a fixation on job satisfaction and retention mandated by various government regulations and deliberation with labour unions, even though many businesses have begun cut back on spending by downsizing their workforce, which is caused by internal realignment or bankruptcies.

For the companies that were already in financial trouble, the pandemic has hastened strategic decisions as they trimmed their personnel to improve operations and minimize expenses. Due to realignment, elderly or low-skilled employees and those on temporary or flexible contracts suffer greatly. However, many businesses pursued employment preservation and expansion through agreements with unions and governments, as well as an emphasis on attracting highly skilled staff.

3.3.2 Sickness Absence

During the Covid-19 pandemic, companies faced a high rate of absenteeism and sick reports (Magenta, 55; SMRT, 79). Panic and fear of becoming ill was a significant reason for absence in the first few months. To counter absenteeism, some businesses choose to implement an

intervention strategy by combining health and safety adapting measures. Some companies also expanded the medical leave program to include all employees who are unable to work due to COVID-19 pandemic (Workday, 140).

3.3.3 Mental Condition

During the uncertain and difficult times, workers have a higher need to communicate and connect mutual difficulties. Organizations have frequently emphasized unrestricted communication as a way of motivating staff and creating creative arrangements that incorporate the mental and social components of the worker to build endurance. The study also show that workers are acknowledged and recognized, and that probable work-related anxiety will be identified, accompanied by a feasible action plan to ensure a productive and happy worker. Therefore, several firms have also increased their support for teamwork, autonomy, and shared responsibility. Companies like Carrefour emphasize the worker's roles in shared participation, responsibility, as well as open discussions as an important basis for increasing resilience and possibly fostering employee engagement during the uncertain times (Carrefour, 394).

In addition, policy developments in the form of instruments for working from home, make sure that employees perform effectively, and exciting stall ensures they are functioning well mentally. The coupling of mental resilience and ergonomic working demonstrates that companies like Grab and AIM4, strive to establish a sociable working environment with adaptability in order to ensure consistency and productivity (Anthony Tan, 300; AIM4, 812).

However, to achieve an effective digital migration a company also needs to emphasize the need of fostering staff engagement and privacy preservation (Solvay, 346). Some businesses, on the other hand, exploit workers by refusing to pay them or refusing to pay them if they fail to complete their tasks. Lacking a safe environment as well as the fear culture create an unsafe atmosphere which cause work tension and stress, negatively impacting workers' engagement and proactivity. Multiple corporation's new sophisticated monitoring tools assure that workers' mental environments and experiences of flexibility do not enhance, but rather increases tension and stress which violates privacy and imposes pressure.

3.3.4 Changeable Working Hours

The COVID-19 pandemic, which saw many people working from home for grounds of safety, workability, and sustainability; spurred flexibility and the creation of a variety of working hours. Companies like Fidelity, and Meyer Werft, gave improved safety and assistance to their staff (Fidelity, 816; Meyer Werft, 250). Several companies also offered their staff the opportunity to plan a day for themselves in order to boost their performance. This can lead to a work-life balance, employee resiliency, and in turn, productivity.

3.3.5 Working from Home

Owing to the prevalence of digital technologies, the most prominent adjustment that businesses made in the course of the COVID-19 issue were teleworking or working from home as the new mode of operation. Companies were able to continue operating resiliently and flexibly despite numerous lockdowns after using the new style of functioning such as cloud computing and other digitalized business procedures (VO-A, 265). Many corporate procedures were more effective as a result of teleworking.

Both employees and employers see the benefits of remote working and this could have lengthy implications for how enterprises organize their work following COVID-19, rather than simply returning to the normal style of working. The new mode of operating could lead to even a more adaptable balance between remote and office work. Additionally, this might have both short-term and long-term favorable impacts on work-life balance, secondary workplace conditions, and employee resilience.

3.3.6 Health Management

Due to the sheer COVID-19 situation, businesses have accepted the responsibility of safety protocols, employee training, and personnel health and safety. Companies like Twitter have modified their policies and created safety guidelines in order to stay functioning and also to promote the well-being of their workers and improve the general working conditions. Additionally, several companies have changed their personnel policies by enabling the employees to care for their kids at the workplace, give company-sponsored day-care centers, or give paid parental leaves. These policies have a great effect on workability.

However, as a result of the COVID-19 situation, certain incidents have serious effects on the safety and health of workers, as well as on how businesses enforce employee policies. Individuals who are at high-risk (diabetics and chronic leukemia) are urged to keep on working as normal. In such a situation, the companies have to involve a health and safety official.

3.3.7 Physical Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many workplaces to quickly make critical modifications for some or all their operations. Companies were forced to adapt to the situation by implementing social separation between mudguards, their normal routine, reliable ventilation, and also working schedules to help prevent the spread of the disease. Companies who failed to incorporate the requirements were not able to continue with their operational processes and business operations, resulting in a reduction in their workforce.

The pandemic has also had a good effect on various workplaces around the globe as workplace design improved which help employees in working ergonomically, securely, and transparently. Companies now understand that flexible and critical environments boost resilience and engagement among workers. Governments, unions, and employers are taking steps to reconstruct workplaces like the ministry of health has launched a 'code of best practices" which outlines the enhanced safety precautions to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus (ANFAC, 435). Companies that invest in their workspaces and are also focused on their employees' safety have high proactivity, resilience, and flexibility, and it also improve their preparedness to deal with future volatility.

3.4 Financial Institution Role in this Era of Uncertainty

The dynamics that were unveiled by the corona epidemic have a dramatic impact on both people as well as the organizations' working environments in the Financial Services Institutes or the FSI in Singapore (Campanella et al., 2020). Even though catastrophes are always dreaded, they also offer incredible chances to foster protracted endurance by clearly separating how society was from how it will be in the future. For example, the 1997 - 1998 Asia's Financial Crisis that sent several Southeast Asian nations into a serious recession, also helped these nations on the other hand to increase their reserves of foreign exchange as a cushion, and also permitted the floating of their exchange rates. This makes their fundamentals better than it was witnessed in the late 1990s (Park, 2016). For that same grounds, they fared better during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Similarly, the Corona epidemic has compelled businesses to use digitization as a critical preliminary response move for firms to establish continuity initiatives as well as to stabilize the operations in order to prosper and survive in the future. Companies have been increasing and reviewing their digitization plans in order to boost tolerance while also optimizing business operations by industry cooperation, collaborations, and also cocreation with partners who are digitally enabled to help them manage their journey through a transformation in an efficient manner (Gardner, 2020). The financial services industry has recently led in the digitization efforts since it has emerged to be a 'truly elite' industry due to its ability to swiftly integrate Massive Tech methodologies in order to give new solutions to key business concerns (Gandhi et al. 2016). Four main pillars of digital technology have emerged in the financial services industry which include: rethinking supply chains, assuring operational agility, embracing end-to-end digitization, and also turning to ecommerce.

3.4.1 Supply Chains and Trade Revolutionizing

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, supply chain issues like higher air cargo charges, longer transit times, and travel restrictions have lately arisen as a result of global supply chain and trade

tensions. As a result, many businesses have already begun to revamp their supply networks to diversify distribution and production, as well as to secure accessibility to supply chain finance during times of crisis. Many companies are also using digital solutions to handle supply chain and finance interruptions. The financial services industry, including banks and financial institutions in Singapore and all over the world, have cooperated with other industries to automate their whole payments procedure through their APIs, or the Application Programming Interfaces. This has eased supplier payments as well as accelerated the shipment of their products and also the provision of their services during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.4.2 Assuring Operational Agility

During the time of the pandemic, agility and dynamic capabilities are also necessary for navigating abrupt challenges that might be faced during the transformation. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, firms quickly learned that embracing flexible production practices as well as advancing digitization will allow them to become more robust. So companies used the policies to increase agility regardless of whether it was trying to repurpose its cart-part line of assembly in order to create ventilators, putting up supply chains that are hyper-local, or to swiftly expand digital fulfilment centres to physical small scale food and beverages marketplaces. This adaptability goes to the employees as well. The epidemic has prompted a shift in the notion of the workspace, resulting in the investment in remote working tools as well as digital technologies. And many of these modifications are permanent for the financial services industry and for the other industries as well.

3.4.3 Embracing end-to-end Digitization

During the uncertain and difficult times of a pandemic, digitization with the goal of promoting protracted resilience will continue to be a priority. Therefore, many firms are speeding end-to-end digitization through Artificial Intelligence (AI), incorporating data-focused decision making processes, investing in cybersecurity measures, removing bottlenecks, updating treasury and credit processes, as well as transitioning to cloud and also Software-as-a-Service. As a result, in the financial service industry, the paper-based procedures which are more difficult are digitized. However, through digital technology, companies can now transform their mode of operation in a way that raises transparency, minimizes settlement risks, and also lowers costs throughout the entire supply chain.

3.4.4 Turning to E-Commerce

Aside from the eye-catching spike in online purchasing, the Covid-19 crisis will be remembered to be the most watershed point in the comparably underdeveloped realm of Business-to-Business (B2B) payments and e-commerce. As more businesses are expected to catch up, the

increasing rate in e-commerce is expected to quadruple by 2024 in many countries around Asia-Pacific (Tan, 2020). By embracing digital technologies, many firms are transforming their operations with the help of all-encompassing or integrated partnerships. This can be seen on nexus which enables businesses to swiftly establish their customized financial services without the normal difficulty of being a provider in digital financial services, which opens up new income streams and also different use cases to make its consumers firmer to the company's ecosystem.

Overall, the pandemic has prompted organizations to focus on and also reconsider established business practices, and digital technology has proved to be among the most important element during this journey.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this research study, six propositions were developed based on research on workplace innovations and how they might help businesses to become more resilient and robust. The findings support proposition 1 which is: "*Due to enhanced employee engagement and cooperation, as well as seeking both exploitation and exploration, ambidextrous organizations may have a good impact on resilient company strategies.*" Ambidextrous businesses that are pursuing both exploitation and exploration in product enhancement and development have a favorable impact on resilient company strategies. Some companies employed both aspects to adapt to the severe COVID-19 pandemic by speeding up innovation as well as staying operations by enhancing old products in order to meet the current market requirements using the power of digital technologies. That conforms with the results of Wang et al. (2021) who claimed that ambidextrous organizations are more resilient.

The findings partially supported proposition 2, which is: *"Exploiting workplace innovation prospects is influenced by short-term vs. long-term strategy priorities."* During the initial time of the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies used a reinvigorated short-term plan, focusing on unpaid furloughing as well as downsizing in order to safeguard liquidity and cash flow, which can have a negative effect on the exploitation and exploration of workplace innovation. This is not possible to quantify if workplace innovation aids in overcoming the predicament of short-term versus long-term strategies, as demonstrated by Dahlke et al. (2021). Nevertheless, companies used workplace innovation in form of flexibility, new workplaces, and enhanced working conditions as a short-term strategic approach, as well as wanting to enhance this continuously in the long run.

Proposition 3 was not supported: *"Companies are more likely to focus on market and product strategies as a means of maximizing profits rather than investing in workplace innovation, therefore, the influence of workplace innovation is undervalued."* As consistent with Tamers et al. (2020), the results show that the pandemic heightened the urgency of workplace innovation, and many organizations did demonstrate that motivated employees and improved working conditions did generate higher productivity. The findings did indicate that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the implication of workplace innovation is becoming noticeable more in making corporate decisions. Moving on, Proposition 4 was supported: *"External situational stress, including the COVID-19 crisis, raises awareness of smart organizing, which can help a company become more resilient and proactive."* The findings indicated that the pandemic heightened the interest in smart organizing. As a result, businesses have implemented employee safety and health measures, open communication, flexible tasks, and working timeline, improved working conditions, as well as remote working.

Proposition 5 was not supported: "COVID-19 uncertainty indicates that organizations are more motivated for product-market enhancement and strategy orientation than for smart organizing."

The findings indicated that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses are more interested in improving and adapting their workplaces, as well as enhancing employee flexibility, whereas Cesaroni et al. (2020) contented that businesses are focusing more on business strategy, and sales. Contrary to this, many other businesses used short-term techniques that include layoffs and internal restructuring, to continue improving liquidity. This hampered the development of smart organizing. Moving on, Proposition 6 was supported: "Customer's expectations of financial institution services have grown dramatically as these institutions push toward digitization, which has been hastened by the Corona epidemic." For the financial service institutions, customers' aspirations have risen as digital technologies have advanced centered on digital banking and innovation. Many financial institutions have been implementing digital services and are also employing a mobile-first perspective like contactless banking, centralize datasets, and personalization data strategy etc.

Overall, the results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed caused many business tactics to shift. During the preliminary period, all organizations revised short-term plans and restructure in terms of workplace flexibility and strategy. Organizations have been under pressure to make changes in smart organizing, strategic orientation, and product-market enhancement, which make a business resilient and robust through technological innovation (Miao et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic also highlights the importance of workplace innovation in terms of staff engagement, motivation, and improving their working environment, by focusing on health, safety, and flexibility to continue being resilient even in uncertain times and in the future. During Covid-19 pandemic, organizations quickly realized that internal realignment and remote working gives the ability to continue to operate even though there are restrictive policies and social lockdowns. Companies relied on teleworking, thanks in part to the already readily available digital technologies, which further improved employees' productivity.

Many companies also deployed exploitation and exploration techniques in their strategies by using digital technologies. Companies that included such workplace innovation while formulating their business strategy were likely to become resilient and robust even during the COVID-19 pandemic. With this, a number of workplace innovation techniques have emerged with companies nurturing and implementing self-organizing teams, changeable working schedules, responsibility sharing, and open communication, which increase employee engagement and productivity. Nevertheless, there is no common ground on which is the best approach when it comes to workplace innovation that every company must adopt. As indicated by this study, a diffusion of techniques resulted in better working conditions and productivity. On the whole, the study show the importance of incorporating workplace innovation in business plan to become resilient and robust even in the face of the COVID-19 disruption and uncertainty.

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About the Author

Dr. Kang (Khoon Seang Richard) is a highly experienced software engineering management professional with over 20 years of experience working with global customers and organizations in Asia and North America, across industries including Intel-Altera, Barclays, Goldman Sachs, and Amazon. He has been driven to help organizations achieve sustainable growth and success by bringing his expertise in technology, people, and business strategy. Dr. Kang (Khoon Seang Richard) was inspired to earn his doctorate in Business Administration from Collegium Humanum by his observation of how some organizations were able to thrive during the pandemic. His research focused on the impact of technology on business strategy and the keys to successful digital transformations, emphasizing the importance of sustainable technology leadership and a people-focused approach. Dr. Kang (Khoon Seang Richard) also holds a Master of Science degree from the National University of Singapore.

Exploring Workplace Innovation in diverse and low-skilled settings: reflections on using Critical Utopian Action Research

Simone Rom and Kai Roland Green

Abstract

What are the strengths and weaknesses of applying Action Research to Workplace Innovation in low-skilled sectors? This article reflects on an Action Research project conducted in April 2021 with participant employees from an ethnically diverse and purportedly "low-skilled" workforce of a German medium-sized company. Using the novel Nordic research method called Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), which emphasises utopianism, emancipation and democratic engagement (Egmose et al., 2020), the participant group was found to discuss perspectives and obstacles for workplace development. In the analysis and reflections, we present the methodological outcomes of the project and explore the nuances of implementing this specific method through the tensions between individual and group identity within "Workplace Innovation". After a short theoretical review to contextualise Workplace Innovation within discussions of diverse and low-skilled workforces, the article offers detailed descriptions of the CUAR process undertaken. Following analysis of the difficulties encountered applying CUAR to Workplace Innovations in this context, the article concludes by addressing the importance of adapting the procedure and exercises of (Critical Utopian) Action Research to small-sized research projects. It further illustrates the method's potential to promote a socially-driven and participatory approach to Workplace Innovation, whilst emphasising the need for more research projects in this area to be conducted for (and with) workforces considered both "low-skilled" and ethnically diverse.

Keywords: Workplace Innovation, Social Innovation, identity, Action Research, Germany

Introduction

Workplace Innovation has been little explored in the area of so-called "lower-skilled" jobs. This reflects the fact that the concept of Workplace Innovation is often synthesised into the management-based approach of Social Innovation, an arena concerning social value creation within organisations (Parés Franzi et al., 2017). In the political economy of the 2000s, such Social Innovation became more normatively oriented towards policy (Schubert, 2021), and was positioned as a response to two interrelating societal issues: unemployment of those marginalised by the labour market, and the need for high-skilled jobs to drive long-term growth. With these more policy-led interests in higher-skilled workplaces, however, the task of exploring and generating Workplace Innovations through research in more low-skilled sectors becomes challenging, at the level of both theory and method.

The ability of researchers to contribute to this area requires research methodologies that reflect the values they hope to stimulate in worker-led innovations. Methodologies which specifically seek to manifest these qualities do so by focusing on empowerment and the participation of diverse research subjects in working towards social change (Altrichter et al., 2002; MacDonald, 2012). Action Research forms a broad base of methods applied to the Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation domains (Tasker et al., 2012). More narrowly, new variants of such methods are being developed which combine critical theory (Karim, 2001) and "future research", applying social imagination and utopian idea generation to overlooked groups (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Detailed experiences of such novel methods, however, are few and far between. The price of this ambiguity is that it leaves the question unanswered whether the typical complementarity between Social Innovation and Action Research can hold when the aim is specifically *Workplace* Innovation and when the subject pool demonstrates high levels of diversity in low-skilled professions.

This article describes reflections on an Action Research project conducted in April 2021 with participant employees from an ethnically diverse and purportedly 'low-skilled' workforce of a German medium-sized company. Using the novel Nordic research method called Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR), which emphasises emancipation and democratic engagement (Egmose et al., 2020), the group of participants discussed perspectives and obstacles for workplace development. In the analysis and reflections, we present the methodological outcomes of the project and explore the nuances of implementing this specific method through the tensions between individual and group identity within "Workplace Innovation". After a short theoretical review to contextualise Workplace innovation within discussions of diverse and low-skilled workforces, the article offers detailed descriptions of the CUAR process undertaken. Following analysis of the difficulties encountered in applying CUAR to Workplace Innovations in this context, the article concludes by addressing the importance of adapting the procedure and exercises of (Critical Utopian) Action Research to small-sized research projects. It further illustrates the method's potential to promote a socially-driven and participatory approach to Workplace Innovation, whilst emphasising the need for more research projects in this area to be conducted for-and-with workforces considered both 'low-skilled' and ethnically diverse.

The research questions that the paper seeks to answer are:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of applying Action Research to Workplace Innovation in low-skilled sectors?
- How do social conceptions of identity in Workplace Innovation influence employees' ideas for workplace change?

Theoretical Background

In this section, we situate the concept of Workplace Innovation within broader streams of Social Innovation research, including by coordinating themes from the German and EU-level innovation discourse. From within these policy and research contexts, we derive a group-oriented perspective on low-skilled workers' identities which impacts the aims of worker-led innovations differently from the more individual-oriented (default) position.

Interest in Workplace Innovation is rarely directed at the ecosystem of so-called "low-skill" work. Low-skilled contexts can even be actively excluded by excitement over innovation (Mathieu & Boethius, 2021 p. 181). This is somewhat surprising considering that, in theory, the emergence of the modern "Social Innovation" discourse in the early 2000s was attuned to marginalisation of different kinds. Citizen-led solutions to social issues, in an era of declining welfare state funding, were an explicit policy exploration at the EU level; in theory, there is no reason why the associated features of bottom-up, collective and cross-sectorial strategies to improve societal outcomes (Howaldt et al., 2021, p. 5) would not apply to low-skilled work areas. In practice, however, at least three key barriers to the creation of a low-skilled/innovation discourse can be identified. Firstly, policy directives encouraging new forms of Social Innovation to increase employment appear to reflect the broader political economy context of prioritising higher-skilled roles because they form higher growth sectors (van Klaveren, 2004, p.16). Whilst such EU policies acknowledge that low-skilled jobs are gradually decreasing, and "lifelong learning benefits mostly the more educated" (European Commission, 2010), this attitude effectively treats low-skilled roles as operating in a liminal state, de-emphasizing the importance of worker-generated innovations while such roles exist.

Secondly, the association of low-skilled sectors with ethnic diversity emboldens the perceived challenges of managing "innovation" in such a workforce. Taking the case study's country of Germany as an example, in the last 70 years, Germany has experienced several migration flows which have resulted in a considerable workforce of those in low-skilled jobs from migrant backgrounds. After the end of the Second World War, Germany actively promoted labour migration because the reconstruction of the German economy needed a high number of human resources (Brodmerkel, 2017). Since 2015, many refugees from the Middle East looked for a new home in Germany, and by 2019, about 1.56 million people had joined the 11.23 million people living in Germany with foreign passports (Statista Research Department, 2020). Those with a migrant background were generally found to have lower qualifications

than Germans without a migrant background. In 2015, around 13% of this part of the population did not graduate from school, and 38% did not possess a professional qualification (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016, as cited in Brodmerkel, 2017). Concerning the low-skilled workforce in Germany, its percentage of the whole workforce has reduced over the last 30 years and reached around 10% in 2016 (Eichhorst et al., 2019, p. 23) but remains an essential part of Germany's workforce.

Thirdly, the emphasis on higher-skilled jobs runs in parallel with increasing national and EU-level directives for "technology-centred vision[s]" of Workplace Innovation, intended to increase competitiveness in an increasingly automated stage of "Industry 4.0" (Kopp et al., 2016). As Kopp et al. argue, however, the hope for automated work sectors (particularly emphasised in the German context) has recurred at several points since the 1950s. Even when this was closest to reality, its priorities were not the profoundly social and relational sides to innovation management. Much of the discourse of "upskilling" in the research area follows a technological trajectory, even though the increasing professionalisation of roles offers a broader concept of social and technological innovation as interwoven, in contrast to "a one-sided technology-oriented perspective" (Kopp et al., 2016, p. 17). A perspective on Workplace Innovation "as an inherently social process" (Totterdill, 2015, p. 16), therefore, supports the ability of researchers to focus on the low-skilled context. This contrasts with a more rosy or airbrushed perspective on the future of low-skilled work by purely focusing on automation or on the higher growth potential of technological change for higher-skilled work.

Group-oriented identity of low-skilled workers

Across these three "barriers", we now explore a conceptual frame for understanding how the identity of low-skilled workers is approached in Workplace Innovation. Within the organisational focus of Workplace Innovations, changes in broader organisational culture are oftentimes theorised as behavioural adaptations: in other words, changes to individual action. Such organisations also support self-management by the employees based on learning, trust and equality through their structures (Oeij et al., 2018). Furthermore, these Workplace Innovations can be launched bottom-up by the employees or top-down from the leadership (Howaldt et al., 2016). When Workplace Innovation is specifically conceptualised for "'low skilled workers", research suggests that the focus is often on "training", despite low take-up by low-skilled workers. In the language of our discussion, this strategy to "innovate" the relationship between worker and employee focuses on the individual worker's competency. Wotschack conceptualises the needs of low-skilled workers to develop a "voice" as facilitated through continuous training. This stems from a recognition that changes in political economy, including "labour shortages or technological or organisational change" incentivise organisations to "invest in training of low skilled workers (despite the outlined barriers and independent from mechanisms of 'voice')" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 248). Whilst Wotschack includes "voice" alongside technology and various forms of innovation, it also has the tendency to become more narrowly defined as the capacity for low-skilled workers "to express and claim their training interests" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 258).

This focus on "individualism" can be identified as the dominant means of understanding the identity of low-skilled workers and to perceive their needs and capacities for innovation in individual terms. As described, this runs from the specific focus on conformity of the worker to the role through behavioural change, through to an expanded concept of workers claiming their "voice" to support greater autonomy in the labour market.

In contrast to this individualised understanding, focusing on the development of individual competencies, addressing the topic from within social innovation reclaims the role of group identities in seeking progressive outcomes. Grounded in collective identities that are not as straightforward as workplace roles, such identities may work without explicit engagement from organisational structures. Another way to frame this is to ask whether the emphasis placed on innovation is sociological or institutional: i.e. in workplaces as interpersonal environments of human culture, or on workplaces as primarily professionalised centres of individual labour. Research on collective bargaining, for example, finds a discourse of innovation present in the capacity of workers to diversify the terms of working contracts, conditions and relationships. Such a collective ability "to craft innovative agreements" is seen to require a "broadening of the bargaining agenda to [include] issues that have not necessarily been considered subjects for negotiation but that need to be part of a solution" (Hayter et al., 2011, p. 241).

Starting from the premise that low-skilled workplaces are more likely to manifest diversities (of language, culture and ethnicity), the place of group identities becomes vital to the relationship between work and innovation. This is important because different incentives and strategies might be required for specific groups to contribute to innovation, or (as in the above example) to widen the terms of collective bargaining to include other common subjects of concern to the specific group. This more collective view of Workplace Innovation is most clearly embedded within the domain of Social Innovation, and the related outcomes, processes and practises of social value creation (Moulaert & MacCullum, 2019). Whilst social innovation is applied to many different societal settings, Workplace Innovation has a more direct connection to organisational life, as well as to the success criteria applied to professional settings, in the sense of workplace culture, organisational strategies and structure (Howaldt et al., 2016). Typical outputs include better job designs and smoother teamwork (Oeij et al., 2018) or workplace design through, for example, employee meeting places for formal or informal discussions (Totterdill et al., 2012). Whilst there is an emphasis on top-down management intentionality, a strong line of thinking continues to emphasise that any changes can only be "*strategically induced* and participatory adopted changes [...] that lead to simultaneously improved organisational performance and improved quality of working life" (Eeckelaert et al., 2012, our emphasis). These elements intersect with the broader German and EU-wide discourse of Social Innovation, stimulated particularly by the work of research clusters around the European School of Social Innovation, who put questions of workplace change and technology in dialogue with social and political themes of citizen science and "workplace democracy" (Howaldt et al., 2021, p. 7).

Shaking-up the terms of employer-employee relations here intersects with the familiar Social Innovation mantra of novel solutions to difficult problems. Leadbeater's mantra on the need for socially entrepreneurial action to match "'underused resources" with "unmet" needs (1997) is thus given new life by worker-driven definitions of their professional context. Workers can co-define which of their resources are "underutilised" and enter into negotiations regarding whose "needs" are fulfilled by innovating around them. Identifying that the autonomous development of workers may be a more significant focus for innovation than work structures themselves (what we have described as the "sociological" approach, above) aligns Workplace Innovation more with democratic streams of social innovation. Relying heavily on research from the civil sector, this democratic stream nevertheless regards Social Innovation as "a tool for politicising the very spaces, which neoliberals have sought to depoliticise" (Montgomery, 2016, p. 19), an approach which encourages a dynamic definition of workplaces as contested spaces of power within which worker empowerment is crucial.

Methodology

Case description

The case company is a German service provider to the textile industry, which has existed since the 1930s and has a portfolio of 240 business customers such as social institutions, foster homes, hospitals, airlines, and pharmaceutical, food and catering businesses. The staff includes more than 300 employees with more than 30 nationalities between them. At the time of the research study (February 2021), Germans comprised the majority of the staff composition (39%), followed by Italians (19%), Croatians (8,7%) and Turks (7%) (Researcher fieldnotes, 2021). The rest of the staff had different European, African and Asian nationalities. The employees are grouped in small teams to work on different tasks at the specific workstations, working on different, large machines in a central hall, with one workstation after the other for cleaning, drying and folding the different kinds of clothes and textiles.

The work process at the company is itself highly industrialised and machine-based, with staff only responsible for small and simple tasks and without the need to be highly specialised. This low level of necessary qualifications contributes to the classification of the workplace as one primarily for a low-skilled and ethnically diverse workforce. Such classifications, of course, reflect much more on the intended roles than the broader capacities of those who occupy them. As one worker estimates: "80 per cent of the employees in general are not here because they are interested in working in a laundry, but because they have to." This worker's initial desire was to work in bridal fashion, but they adapted to the broad-based skill requirement of the workplace for pragmatic reasons: "I am honest. I came here and I had no work and I needed something quickly. I came here but still, I have to look, now I am here. My fault because I didn't learn anything. I have to put up with this work because I have nothing else" (Participant 2).

As this combination of ethnic diversity and low-skilled roles demonstrates, the capacity for workers to experience major problems in the smooth collaboration of the staff is high. The discourse of "in-groups" and "out-groups" has been used in organisational contexts to understand the ways that staff cluster around common identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, as cited in Joshi & Jackson, 2003, p. 280), as well as the collective perspectives that are generated by these common languages and reference points. Our bridal fashion worker's intimation that a high percentage of employees are not interested in the specifics of their work opens a vacuum for the opinions and feelings of staff-clusters to influence the company's running, and (crucially for this enquiry) the capacity to envision change. It is this combination of needs - how workers form collective impressions of their work together, and raise innovative change as a response to common issues - that motivates this research enquiry to explore an Action Research method.

Action Research in a participatory methodology

This research was concerned with analysing employees' ideas for workplace development through the lens of Workplace Innovation. On these grounds, Action Research was chosen as a research method emphasising participation and exchange between the participants and the researcher (Whyte, 1991, as cited in Eden & Huxham, 1996, p. 77). In this section, we give a brief background to Action Research in this context, then provide a more detailed account of the specific methods followed in the project.

Action Research is normally utilised within participatory methodologies. In the workplace context, this broader way of doing research is characterised by collaboration, dialogue and the designing of change-agendas to "free" participants from restrictive procedures and regimes (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). Participants can be included in Action Research in many ways, but in a crucial sense they must be supported to define problems associated with their experiences, and be supported to make changes in response. The development of the modern theory of Action Research in the 1930s and 1940s (Masters, 1995) reflected an increasing awareness that the marginalisation of groups could easily occur when their experiences were treated as isolated rather than collective (Adelman, 1993, p. 7), a situation often repeated by the hierarchical nature of the firm.

The orientation of Action Research towards participation and empowerment (Altrichter et al., 2002, pp. 127-128) are the most applicable to the interests in worker-generated innovation. Whilst research fields exploring alternative job-creation with expanded criteria of inclusion do attempt to bring participants into the research process, areas like that of social entrepreneurship have utilised Action Research rather less than might be expected (Tasker et al., 2012). Active participation is even more key because of the tendency of Workplace Innovation schemes to be seen as "technology oriented" and intended to "centralis[e] employee knowledge and experience" (Totterdill & Hague, 2004, p. 57). The impulses clearly

allow greater oversight in workplaces and (charitably) greater capacity to spread best-practices across a larger organisation. Yet, they also can treat innovation as a process which is not embedded in workers' wider experience. Action Research in this context places greater emphasis on a more public and open model of knowledge sharing, in which workers can explore "collective action grounded in dialogue, innovation, reflexivity and learning" (Fricke & Totterdill, 2004, p. 2): with "innovation" imbibing these other qualities which surround it.

Critical Utopian Action Research

Many who support Action Research for its emancipatory potential have been critical of "innovation" as a paradigm which works against such potential. Innovation here is seen as tied to the exploitative tendencies of neoliberal working conditions and, on this view, more radical change linked to "imagination" and "utopianism" is suppressed by innovation. The connection between innovation and a "productivist growth regime" has implications for creating a "break between people's life experiences and aspirations" and the working life they pursue to survive in societies which prioritise growth (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016). It is out of these broader critiques of the complicity of workplaces in neoliberal conditions that Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR) emerged, as a subdivision of Action Research, intended to "creat[e] critical awareness about the necessity of change and pointing towards possibilities of democratic knowledge creation" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 2). The method makes potent the capacity of action-oriented methods to be directed at research not "on" but "*for* and *with* people who define issues of pressing concern" (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 241). The theoretical and practical framework of CUAR is built by critical theory (Karim, 2001) and future research, including social imagination and utopian idea generation (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 2).

Utopianism is a key dimension of the approach and has a concrete stage in workshops, because participants are encouraged to create strong narratives about their visions (Egmose, Gleerup and Nielsen, 2020, p. 240). According to Wright:

> "[u]topia is thus both a nowhere place and a good place. It is the fantasy of a perfect world that fully embodies our moral ideals [...] The idea of real utopias embraces this tension between dreams and practice: *utopia* implies developing visions of alternatives to dominant institutions" (Wright 2013, p. 3, emphasis in original),

Therefore, the participants are invited to fantasise and create ideal situations that can be alternatives for present conditions. In our exploration of low-skilled workplaces, we see CUAR as particularly attentive to differences between groups (on the basis of, for example, ethnicity) to be a catalyst for thinking about better practices (Wright, 2013, p. 4). Additionally, a focus on "utopianism" is particularly apt for discussions of innovation: for utopian ideas to be realised, it is vital to create desirable, sustainable and achievable alternatives. Whilst this can manifest as interest in the sustainability aspect of what is generated (Wright, 2013, p. 8), "innovation" is primarily an investigation of the new and novel.

Thus, despite the more explicit engagement with the critical theory principles of "emancipation" in CUAR, part of our inquiry into Workplace Innovation is to explore the contested role of "workplaces" as spaces for innovation that are based on certain assumptions of identity formation, which go on to underlie CUAR as Action Research. CUAR is invested with high optimism around the chances of improvement for real problems, which are considered high because diverse experiences and opinions are exchanged among those dealing with the issues that the participants aim to solve (Wheeler et al., 2020, p. 47).

The method seeks to improve the circumstances and practises of both the researcher and the participants of an organisation or community; the development of the participants' competencies leading, through Action Research, toward social change (MacDonald, 2012). The emancipatory roots of Action Research are emphasised by researchers who highlight the influence of sociological concepts such as "life context", wherein "learning is connected to identity for the entire person: and not only to roles in systems or organisations" (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2006). However, such highly individuated (almost phenomenological) accounts of worker identity say little about tensions with the collective dimensions of identity (language-use, ethnicity, nationality and skill-level). We return to these issues in the analysis.

Method: the Future Creating Workshop

The primary researcher initiated a Future Creating Workshop (FCW) with participants of a German mid-size company in April 2021. The initial mandate was to discuss opportunities for workplace development based on the current challenges of the staff's daily collaboration. Such workshops aim to allow the participants to create ideas and ways to implement these ideas (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 237). An FCW consists of three parts, which are the following: (1) the critical phase to exchange critique about existing practises; (2) the utopian phase to develop ideas to solve the problems; and (3) the realisation phase to develop plans to implement the developed ideas (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 4). The workshop occurred on one morning at the case organisation and lasted three and a half hours. Eight employees built the group of participants and differed in nationality, gender, age, and job tenure. Having differences in job tenure increases the possibility of sharing and comparing experiences and events which happened a long time ago with more recent ones in order to allow an analysis of their development over the time in the company.

P#	Nationality	Gender	Age	Job tenure (yr)	Job status
1	Portugal	M	29	8	team leader
2	Italy	F	31	11	team leader
3	Germany-Russia	F	42	15	team leader
4	France	F	57	8	machine worker
5	Portugal	M	29	6	machine worker
6	Croatia	M	26	3	machine worker
7	Syria	M	33	2	machine worker
8	Croatia	F	32	3	machine worker

Figure 1: Composition of the group of participants of the workshop

Apart from these characteristics, the group was also a mixture of three team leaders and five workers, allowing different levels of front-line experience to be present, seeking a diversity of approaches to, for example, problem solving. Furthermore, the participants all possessed a good level of verbal German language skills, as this was deemed necessary for the workshop to fully function with clear understanding and elaboration of ideas by all participants. Needless to say, this criterion does not permit employees with missing German language skills to participate, even though they might be in greater need of inclusion and workplace development. The researchers, being outsiders to the organisation, designated the company's operation manager to select the range of participants, intended to achieve a diverse composition of job tenures.

Ethical integrity is fundamental to Action Research, particularly the practises of informed consent, information given to participants in advance of the workshop, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity, and the researcher's role and dynamics with the participants (Löfman et al., 2004). In this study, the participants were informed about the workshop's content and had the opportunity to step out of the project before and during the workshop. All participants signed an informed consent including their rights and the researcher's responsibilities before the workshop started. They were also treated anonymously for research publications and company reports. Asking about personal experiences around topics such as diversity, inclusion, and collaboration could be seen as potentially provocative, or harmful. Thus, participants were never pressured to answer. In accordance with the democratic intentions of CUAR, the researcher sometimes felt it necessary to ask several follow-up questions to get more information from the group. Despite this, the group largely demonstrated ownership over the workshop, largely deciding its direction and focus. For

example, stages of the process that included ranking ideas attempted to facilitate this ownership for the group.

At the beginning of each workshop "phase", the objectives of the phase were explained. The first phase, the critique phase, aimed to determine the participants' emotions about the staff's daily collaboration. In line with the project's initial orientation around diversity management, the group discussed how they felt when thinking about the staff's daily collaboration in the light of its ethnic diversity. The participants chose different words that best described their emotions and explained their choice to achieve this. During the first brainstorming session, the group collected problems caused by the staff's diversity first separately in two groups and then in the round afterwards. The ideas were ranked to identify the group's most important problems. Engagement being the main principle of Action Research and CUAR, the workshop used exercises which allowed all participants to interact and exchange information in order that they could co-create their ideas. Brainstorming is an often used and known exercise to achieve idea generation as sharing ideas leads to additional associations in each participant (Paulus & Yang, 2000, p. 77). The method used in the second and third phase was similar to brainstorming.

The method for the utopian and realisation phase was called 'World Café' and is characterised by cross-pollination of ideas (different rounds of information exchange), possibility-thinking and collaborative learning. Due to its emphasis on creating actionable knowledge, World Cafés are considered a convenient exercise for Action Research (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, as cited in Fouché & Light, 2016, p. 29). In the utopian phase, the group reflected upon the question about what the staff's ideal collaboration looks like. Two smaller groups first thought about their ideas separately before switching their flip charts with the other group (cross-pollination) and discussing all ideas together in the big group. At the end of the exercise, the group ranked their ideas and the two highest-ranked ideas were further developed in the third phase, one after the other. The realisation phase was dedicated to the development of ways to implement the collected ideas.

The workshop ended with a feedback section. The participants evaluated a number of aspects of the workshop, such as the researcher's performance, the content, the exercises, and the group interaction by putting stickers on each aspect. The flip chart for the stickers being a bullseye, the stickers' position showed the participants' opinions from good to bad (the exercise is called bullseye technique).

Data management and data analysis

The full diversity of materials developed during the CUAR workshop were included in the data analysis. The data included a central audio recording as well as group posters, summaries and the "rankings of ideas" sheet. A photo documentation of all the posters allowed an additional analysis of, and reflection about, the produced material. The audio recording was transcribed. The focus being on thematic content instead of a detailed conversation analysis, breaks, stuttering and grammatically incorrect sentences in the transcript were adapted to form a clearer understanding and translation into English.

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Such an approach, as Braun and Clarke's oft-cited paper unpacks, has its processual ambiguities, but is primarily used for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The method's focus on patterns was appropriate for identifying the participants' problems, ideas and wishes. To show the group's co-constructed idea generation during the Future Creation Workshop, the data analysis template for the coding process consisted of three different parts, one part for each phase of the workshop. The codes were reduced in two rounds, for each phase individually during the first round, and shortened, assembled and categorised independently of the phases in the second round. They emerged from the transcript itself. The process resulted in a list of interrelated topics, beginning with the feelings and problems over the group's wishes and ideas. Signs of hidden feelings, experiences and reflections also entered the analysis and the illustration of the process perspective.

Analysis

Having described the methodological underpinnings of the research, this section now moves to discuss how the recurring themes identified by an ethnically diverse group of employees of the case organisation reflects the theoretical framings of workplace innovation. The research and workshop aimed to investigate how this group imagined improving their daily experience of the workplace. The thematic analysis of the transcript and the other materials resulted in four main topics that recurred in each phase of the workshop. These were: (1) Group formation, (2) Missing German language skills, (3) Missing knowledge about colleagues, and (4) Negative attitude and behaviour. Figure 2 shows the interrelation between the themes of each topic throughout the workshop's three phases:

Figure 2: Result of the thematic analysis

The participants' issues and ideas can be put into context with the concepts and ideas of Workplace Innovation, especially in relation to the sociological emphasis of Social Innovation and Workplace Innovation.

Sensitising and training

The ideas of sensitising and training were raised in response to a perceived problem of group formation and a wish for splitting these groups in some way. During the workshop, participants raised the issue of a lack of mixing of people from different nationalities in different work shifts. Some groups consisted to a high degree of employees of the same nationality and only a few employees from other countries. In this context, the group wished for groups of employees from each nationality (Participant 2), suggested a more pluralised team composition in each role/workstation. This contrasted with the fact that groups or shifts were not routinely split, as management considered that they worked well at their stations; it was thus identified that training would be needed to prepare the employees to work at different stations.

As Hayter et al. (2011) identified within the research of collective bargaining, Workplace Innovation is seen as the capacity of workers to diversify the terms of working contracts, conditions and relationships. One part of Workplace Innovation is workplace design (Totterdill et al., 2012, pp. 247-248). In this case, adapting the shifts and the workstations to reflect worker diversity points to the hope of increasing organisational performance and employees' well-being (Oeij et al., 2018, p. 54). In the Social-Innovation-informed perspective introduced earlier, it was identified that workers (as a group identity) have the capacity to not only identify individual training needs (a question of boosting individual competency) but to collectively re-imagine both the "resources" they offer and the "unmet" social needs to which they might be directed. Intercultural training was even proposed to the group as a means to improve

intergroup relations and interactions (in the style of Ferdman) but, they were found to argue against training and argue for "respect" as a sufficient measure for dealing with other employees (Participant 2). As we derived from Wotschack, this calls for an attention to a broader notion of workers' "voice" than is typically found when this is interpreted as the autonomy to simply identify training needs.

Sensitising and courses/mentors

The second dominant problem emerging from the workshop was the lack of German language skill among some staff members. The "wish" identified was to improve such skills systemically and (in connected ideas of sensitising) through means of courses and mentoring. The background to this complaint is that the case company did not require their employees to learn German anymore. The disinterest in learning German is also shown by some employees' reactions when asked to speak German at work. The organisation already offered German language courses for free to some employees, but they did not attend them regularly. In the workshop, workers even suggested that the extension of the new employees' contracts should depend on their effort to learn German:

> "But then he might not be the right person to keep either. [...] That is then the next step. Either you learn this or you leave. For example, you could offer them a two-year probationary period, not a permanent contract. That means either you have learned something in these two years and we keep you. Or if you haven't learned anything, then we have to separate and then it's not right." (Participant 1)

According to the group, not improving at speaking German within a specific period of time should be considered a reason to end the employment contract.

Moreover, this attitude of the participants also illustrates that behavioural adaptation is one necessary key element that can also be promoted by self-management by the employees themselves through learning (Oeij et al., 2018). Even though, as mentioned above, the staff are interested in restarting the German language courses, they also praised the success of some employees of learning German at work with the help of employees, as in the following interaction.

> P2: My husband didn't know any German at all. He started working for us and in the beginning, he only worked with Italians.
> P4: Oh God.
> P2: That was very bad for him because he didn't hear anything, didn't notice anything. Then he started working with a Turkish man and the Turkish man understood that he had to teach him simple German and then things improved. [...]
> [...]

> P1: I learned most of it here at work because I worked with a good man who kept telling me "that's what they say". Nowadays that doesn't happen. You are Italian, then you go to the Italian group. You never learn the language then. [...]
> [...]
> P5: I learned most of it here at work. (Participant 7)

These reflections demonstrate the intermingling of social processes into ideas for transforming the workplace. The group not only advocated for greater language integration, but also discussed using "language mentors" who actively help colleagues to learn German. The group even developed the idea one step further by wishing for translators for each language working in the company and translating between different employees (Participant 4). In this manner, they imagined innovative solutions to their environment in terms of unifying figures to support communication: promoting language as an element of their working process over, for example, technological solutions to challenges in their environment.

The importance of language here has interesting implications for the role of individual "autonomy" in Action Research around Workplace Innovation. Action Research, after all, draws on the participation of autonomous individuals and, applied to Social Innovation, seeks to create as "innovations that are social both in their ends and their means" (BEPA, 2010, as cited in Moulaert & MacCullum, 2019, p. 31). This dynamic can be framed for Workplace Innovations as innovative improvements concerned with the employees' well-being at work (the "ends") happening through the employees' participation and empowerment (the "means") (Pot et al., 2012, p. 261). In a similar manner to the previous analysis, therefore, this provokes the concept of "voice" to be theorised in the Workplace Innovation context as a means of capturing the distinctiveness and authenticity of worker contributions. However, in contrast to the social/group dynamics of that section, workers' interest in mentorship and "translators" speaks to a more classic and individualist notion of "voice" as a synonym for autonomy.

Social activities

In the final, dominant problem identified, workers saw the lack of information about their colleagues as an issue, wishing for more socialisation and different forms of social activity.

According to practitioners and researchers of diversity management, intercultural training is the primary solution for improving an ethnically diverse workforce's collaboration (Ferdman, 1992, p. 358). However, when asking the case study group about introducing intercultural training, they argued against training and argued for "respect" as a sufficient measure for dealing with employees from another country (Participant 2). According to their discussion, social activities during or after work were more helpful for getting to know colleagues and their cultures and gaining the competence to deal with cultural differences than intercultural training. Such workshops are not feasible as the employees might feel forced to attend them

and as the motivation might be low to spend more time at the company. Consequently, daily interaction between the employees by asking questions about each other was deemed as a more promising way to get to know each other than workshops about the influence of cultural differences on the staff's collaboration.

Along with the mentioned sociological stream of Workplace Innovation, the autonomous development of the employees is said to be an essential piece of the staff's empowerment and the development of their collective bargaining. The participants clearly considered socialising vital to get to know their colleagues better and improve their relationship with them at work. They mentioned the idea of an entertainment room (Participant 2), the reintroduction of the annual trip for the staff (Participant 2) and the summer party. To get to know their colleagues better, an employee launched the initiative of playing football after work. Consequently, spending time in an informal way and comfortable surroundings is helpful. Such initiatives may be considered part of workplace innovations as they contribute to higher Quality of Working Life and more diverse relations among the staff (Totterdill et al., 2012, pp. 247-248).

Discussion

The first part of this discussion will focus on theoretical insights from the analysis. As the paper primarily has a methodological focus, the second part more extensively then discusses the methodological implications for CUAR in the Workplace Innovation context.

The complexity of generating innovative workplace ideas through "emancipatory" Action Research processes is demonstrated across the three examples of worker-driven diversification of team composition, the socialising themes of their ideas, and their strong emphasis on the application of German-language skills. In this case, a culturally diverse workforce who explored ideas for Workplace Innovation translated their desire for diversity beyond the Action-Research room. Whether the framing of the Action Research process therefore affected their articulation of diversity demonstrates some of the tensions found within the connection of Workplace Innovation to the democratic ideals of Social Innovation, described above. In the face of the opportunity for collectivity to boost workers' responsibility for innovations in their workplace, did this diverse workforce consider their workplaces as primarily sociable or professional spaces, with innovative changes designed to achieve either sets of ends? Such an ambiguity is reflected in the dual role of the German language in the above analysis. On the one hand, cultural diversity was seen as a great asset of the team atmosphere in which the workers felt themselves to thrive; yet, dominant perspectives on the requirement for German language skill appeared to place limits as to acceptably diverse 'voices' of the workplace. By externalising this tension, between an orienting principle of diversity and group-generated goals for improvement, the workshop improvement demonstrated diversities to Wotschack's focus on "mechanisms of "voice" (Wotschack, 2020, p. 246) in Workplace Innovation.

As previously mentioned, Action Research is a less regular method for analysing workplace innovation in relation to low-skilled roles, and CUAR even less so. In general, such workshops that depend highly on the participants' engagement and cooperation are open-ended, given that the result cannot be controlled by the researcher. After applying Action Research and a CUAR workshop for the first time in this context, the researchers felt that this research method resonated with the aims of an empowering and creative stimulus for social and innovative project ideas. As researchers, we liked the structure of the workshop, with its capacity to build a narrative over the three phases. Nevertheless, the research method being new, it is important to critically reflect upon the experiences made in relation to the promising principles of Action Research and CUAR as well as the contested success criteria for social science research in the Workplace Innovation domain. Therefore, this section is dedicated to a detailed reflection about the methodological outcomes of this Action Research project, starting with a reflection upon validity aspects.

Validity requirements in Action Research inevitably differ from those in other social science methods. External validity, such as replicability and generalisability, is not deemed a helpful quality criterion for Action Research (Burns, 2005, as cited in Tasker et al., 2012, p. 84). Within social entrepreneurship research, internal validity is rather more readily applied to action research projects. Whilst this domain's proximity to traditional "entrepreneurship" research might suggest more scalable or franchis-able forms of validity, scholars have continued to insist that action research in the area is regarded as context-specific and might only be transferred to other social settings to a certain degree (see, for example, Tasker et al., 2012, p. 84). As discussed in the analysis, for example, some workers took a rather hard-line approach to the need for German language training in roles, whose validity might only have been considered valid when put in dialogue with a wider selection of workers with different perspectives. In general, the dynamics of an "internal" validity typically benefit from further differentiation. At least five types of validity have been applied explicitly to Action Research: outcome validity, democratic validity, process validity, catalytic validity, and dialogical validity (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, p. 426).

These five types of validity stand for the following objectives: (1) outcome validity stands for the successful solution of the problem; (2) democratic validity represents the involvement and contribution of the individual participants to the problem solving; (3) process validity secures a process leading to continuous learning, improvement, and capabilities for collaboration; (4) catalytic validity refers to the empowerment of the participant to understand and change their circumstances within and after the research; and (5) dialogic validity stands for the researcher's activity of asking for feedback about the interpretation of the findings (Ozanne & Saatcioglu, 2008, pp. 426-427).

Every participant was equally invited to join the conversation, but some participants were more active in the discussion than others. It was difficult for the researchers to make the quieter participants open-up and contribute more, which would have demonstrated greater democratic validity. This also hints at a presumption, on the part of CUAR advocates, as to the

capacity of their intended participants to engage in a specific speaking register and discourse. It appears as a crucial validity dimension for CUAR that participants "can recognise academic analysis and engage in discussions" (Egmose et al., 2020, p. 421).

It was possible to witness an eye-opening moment when the participants realised that this workshop allowed them to express their struggles, talk to colleagues that they had never talked to before, experience colleagues with the same problems, and exchange ideas about possible solutions they support or have neglected. However, to the same extent as the participants' faces lit up, their smiles also disappeared when they understood that an implementation of all these new ideas might not happen, as it was to depend on the company's willingness to carry them out. When this reality hit the participants, a questioning of the meaningfulness and usage of the workshop seemed to start in their heads, which might have reduced their motivation. The implementation of the ideas by the company is not certain, neither for the research nor the participants, either before or after the Future Creating Workshop. Therefore, the accusation and critique of Action Research for leaving the participants disillusioned is justified and allowed, and leaves outcome validity as a quality criterion which is often difficult to achieve. It is also seen to lower the overall quality of the research, and highlights the difficulty of using participatory research methods such as Action Research in general. Consequently, negatively reviewed, it can be claimed that such an Action Research workshop only served for research purposes and did not have a positive lasting outcome for the participants. It can be questioned if the impulse for analysing current problems, openly discussing problematic issues with colleagues, and critically rethinking the circumstances (process validity and catalytic validity) is strong enough to overcome a possible disillusion caused by a missing recognition of their problems and implementation of their ideas by the company's management.

Outcome validity is a challenge to identify, given that the implementation of the workers' inputs is not knowable. A follow-up in the form of a new coming together with either one or all of the participants, or the company's management, has not happened. Hence, it is uncertain to the researchers if any changes have already happened or if the participants have actively asked the management for the implementation of their ideas if any changes had not happened yet. Hence, neither the implementation nor the participants' development can further be analysed in the long run as the research project ended earlier.

Moreover, the original concept for this Future Creating workshop was designed in a way that each phase happened on separate days with at least three or four days in between each phase to rethink the previous phase, analyse the data, and adapt the exercises for the new phase. Unfortunately, the company's management did not approve this concept as they could not release eight employees from duty for so many hours. Still, the researchers kept Action Research and the Future Creating Workshop as their method due to the participatory and utopian features which differentiates this method from other qualitative research methods. Therefore, given that the Action Research process only occurred over a single duration of three and a half hours, and not over a period of several weeks or even months as other

projects are, it is not known if there was anything approaching a lasting impact from the workshop. Some of the typically intended outcomes of Action Research (capacity building, empowerment or staff collaboration, considering Workplace Innovations independently from the workshop and the researchers) all appear challenged if the validity is seen as filtered through overly academic expectations for participant understanding.

In general, the validity criteria raised by Ozanne and Saatcioglu (2008) appear more difficult to apply to short-duration examples of Action Research, CUAR or Future Creating Workshops (possibly influenced by their contextual focus on "consumers" in contrast to limited project groups). Hence, it is nearly impossible to evaluate the validity and a project's success using these validity criteria.

Aside from the mentioned validity criteria, there are reasons to be sceptical about the utopian phase. Even though the identification of the participants' dreams and ideas is the main distinguishing feature of a Future Creating Workshop, there is little guarantee that a high number of broadly novel ideas will be generated, particularly as participants may have issues with expressing their ideas. Consequently, the expectation behind this second phase might be too high and idealistic. These are criticisms which can be levelled at critical theory-based work in general, but the division becomes more potent in relation to the broader theoretical background that we highlighted around low-skilled workplaces. Discourses and resources are innovation were found to be directed towards "upskilling" and influenced by the higher growth capacities of high-skilled sectors. The Nordic-inspired Critical Utopian Action Research can be seen as potentially elite in its discursive focus on "utopianism" and the pursuit of abstract values of "emancipation", at the behest of concrete solutions which are advocated for by workers in low-skilled jobs.

The FCW inventor's expectations are also unclear, making it difficult for the researcher to evaluate the participants' ideas and the workshop's success. When can an idea be considered utopian? If the ideas are too 'simple' or 'straightforward', should the researcher become active and suggest other ideas? However, a strong involvement of the researcher is not desired in order not to influence the idea generation by the group. Thus, the question arises of what the researcher can do better to facilitate the participants' idea generation process.

Emphasis on novelty in utopian idea generation also pushes against differing standards for democratic action and creative vision. Using exercises that require the participants to be very active and creative does not necessarily lead to success, particularly when not all participants are eager to contribute in such a way. Unequal willingness to participate in exercises might jeopardise the idea of a widely democratic idea generation, with every participant joining the discussion equally. Action research in workplace innovation appears to have previously managed these tensions by reaching for creative strategies where spectatorship is also considered direct part of idea creation, for example in the use of actors to generate interplay between "fiction and reality" in Utopian-like creation sessions (Banke et al., 2004, p. 275). Just as the researcher found it challenging to support idea creation by all of the participants,

(despite not all opinions being heard equally in the discussions) such strategies of more nuanced facilitation may still present challenges in the field.

Conclusion

We close this paper by drawing final conclusions about the methodological obstacles of using Critical Utopian Action Research in this case's context of a low-skilled and ethnically diverse workplace, as well as about Workplace Innovation and its connection to Social Innovation.

In terms of methodological conclusions, firstly, we assess that CUAR requires a more elaborated framework for researchers to apply it to small-scale projects, reflecting some central issues of scale in Action Research. Validity criteria and expectations for the outcome, the participants' contribution and the researcher's involvement, need to be stated clearly for a more precise evaluation and analysis of the method's outcomes and the research's success. So far, the evaluation of small-sized (Critical Utopian) Action Research projects appear rather too much based on the researcher's own interpretation of the events during the process. In this regard, especially for CUAR projects, the idea of utopianism needs to be explained in greater detail. Even though utopianism is the outstanding feature of CUAR, it simultaneously represents an ambiguity and potential weakness of the method. Moreover, the exercises used for FCW may benefit from being adapted to different types of participants. Role plays, games, and other exercises which depend on a high level of creativity or energy from the participants need to be rethought and adapted for less active participants, potentially drawing more on the politics of spectatorship. Since the researcher cannot anticipate in which way the participants will contribute to the exercises, the use of a pilot study gains importance. Consequently, methods for securing the research quality need to be developed to raise the acceptance and success of Action Research projects.

Secondly, this research has underscored the critical need to involve participants to achieve solutions that help them in the most appropriate way: one of the most important aspects of Social Innovation research. As Action Research is also built on the participation of the people in need, it is an appropriate research method for Social Innovation research projects. This workshop found out that the employees have different ideas and wishes than the organisation, for instance in terms of learning the German language. Designing an entertainment room, playing football after work, installing language mentors or organising more small or big social events are ideas for a more inclusive and smooth collaboration that might be new to the organisation's executives, and represent bottom-up introduced ideas. Hence, Action Research can be used to promote a socially-driven approach to workplace innovation and identify innovative ideas which go beyond organisational and technical improvements for strategic or structural changes to increase the organisation's performance and the employees' well-being at work.

Theoretically, the conceptualisation of a more group-oriented perspective on identity revealed certain organisational tensions in Workplace Innovation. Firstly, deriving from the

dual role of workplaces as social and professional spaces, many of the innovation ideas generated by participants sought to strengthen social relations in a manner which differed from management notions of the most "effective" team. Even whilst this increased collectivism might be understood by Social Innovation literature as a celebration of diversity and strengthened-bargaining-power for workers, the topic of German language learning demonstrated how workers might ironically demonstrate more conservative and exclusionary impulses, as they work-through the acceptable limits of integration in their workplace. As the methodological reflections make clear, small-scale Action Research projects which attempt to reflect diversity in their composition may run into these theoretical ambiguities, particularly when underpinning questions of validity leave the principles of workers' imagined innovations widely open.

Secondly, in the context of an emphasis on high-skilled workplaces and technological innovations, the ideas around language training generated by participants emphasised the ability of greater communicative competencies to develop respectful relations. Such "soft skills", as we might describe them, are familiar in the discourse of employee self-management (Oeij et al., 2018). Yet, our conceptual elaboration demonstrated these softer skills to be of lesser focus in the current discourses of workplace innovation, outside practises of "training" which are seen to directly benefit the current organisation. In dialogue with the methodological insights, this contribution prompts a greater need for researchers to support worker-participants in a more holistic expression of their identities through Action Research. This requires, for example, insulating the discourse of innovative "upskilling" (Kopp et al., 2016, p. 17) against an overly individualist focus which might only imagine workers getting better at the specific role they are occupying at any one time.

In a nutshell, this research has attempted to contribute to the fields of Social Innovation and Workplace Innovation by providing illustrations and critiques of an alternative approach like Critical Utopian Action Research. Such alternative methods go beyond positivist research schemes and attempt to place people in change of defining problems, and identifying wishes and ideas for improvement. Nevertheless, we deemed that the quality criteria for Action Research and CUAR must be further improved and especially adapted to small-sized research projects to strengthen the process and its results. As has been explored, both low-skilled and ethnically diverse workforces still represent an under-researched group in Workplace Innovation studies, to which the specific insights of the democratic stream of Social Innovation may be appropriately added for the benefit of these groups.

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“More than meets the eye”: Unveiling the full potential of creative workspaces in modern organisations

Oscar Pakos, Tobias T. Eismann, Martin Meinel, Kai-Ingo Voigt

Abstract

Providing adequate workspaces for employees is now considered crucial for organisational innovativeness in light of evidence that the work environment influences creative behaviour. It is unsurprising, then, that companies increasingly seek to implement modern workspace designs based on what is often referred to as New Work to support employee creativity. However, designing, planning, and implementing a modern and creative workspace is a highly complex undertaking. Existing studies report a multiplicity of interconnected organisational variables affected by such changes at the levels of the individual employee (e.g. creativity), the team (e.g. communication) and the organisation (e.g. culture). To explore whether and how organisational changemakers consider these variables when designing creative workspaces, we interviewed 20 experts from companies that have recently implemented creative workspace designs, asking them about the objectives and consequences of their new workspace designs. Upon comparing the interviewees’ answers to the findings reported in the existing literature, we found that their organisations were not fully aware of the organisational impact of such changes and failed to consider creativity enhancement as an explicit goal. Concluding that much of the potential of modern workspace design remains untapped, we propose avenues for further research.

Keywords creative workspace; creativity; physical work environment; objectives; consequences; innovation management; new work

Introduction

Startup firms around the world provide video games, indoor golf, table tennis and similar amenities to enhance employees' workplace experiences (Meyer, 1999). Such initiatives are increasingly adopted by established firms to improve employee responsiveness and productivity and to promote an innovation culture (Hackl et al., 2017). These changes are partly driven by megatrends, including an ageing society, that alter the employee age structure and traditional ideas about life and work as individuals pursue security, prosperity, balance and self-determination (Cole et al., 2014). Furthermore, a greater emphasis on the work–life balance (Haar, 2007; Russell et al., 2009) entails changes in corporate culture and greater individual control over work duration, place and time.

Digitisation and the increasing role of knowledge and creative work have also changed how employees work, and organisations have realised that the traditional physical work environment (PWE) may no longer support efficiency, effectiveness and innovation (Goodrich, 1986; Hoff & Öberg, 2015). The PWE must provide the necessary space and equipment to support entrepreneurial activities, as various design elements, such as furniture (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Dul et al., 2011), spatial arrangements (Sundstrom et al., 1980; Toker & Gray, 2008; Zalesny & Farace, 1987) and spatial density (May et al., 2005; Oldham et al., 1991), influence employee perceptions and use of the working environment (Kristensen, 2004).

In the broadest sense, all the changes described above can be summarised under the generic term Workplace Innovation (WPI) (Prus et al., 2017). In the literature, WPI is a multifaceted concept (Balkin et al., 2001; Rus et al., 2019; Oeij et al., 2021) and generally refers to the modernisation of the work environment at different levels, which leads to an overall improvement at the employee level and adds value to the organisation (Eeckelaert et al., 2012; Howaldt et al., 2012; Prus et al., 2017). WPI also includes the PWE, a powerful and strategic tool for supporting desired organisational changes (Schriefer, 2005; Oeij, 2015). In recent years, the term New Work has become increasingly popular to describe modifications in the PWE that encompass changes in culture (Barley et al., 2017), technology (Malone, 2004; Williams, 2008), productivity and efficiency (Berniker, 1994; Collins, 1998) and organisational behaviour (Berniker, 1994). Although it is among the most extensively studied topics in economics and the social sciences (Gerards et al., 2018; Senge, 1990; Williams, 2008), there is still no scholarly consensus on the exact definition and details of the concept of New Work (Stoepfgeshoff, 2018). In the media and employees' daily lives, the term is most often associated with creative workspaces and tends to be used in a highly general manner to describe current trends in PWE design (Gerards et al., 2018).

In the modern workplace, employees must be able to switch flexibly between team-based and individual work and between concentrated work and relaxation. To meet these requirements, organisations are increasingly redesigning the PWE to provide creative workspaces (Hoff & Öberg, 2015) characterised by a range of spatial types (e.g. personal, collaboration, presentation, maker and social/fun spaces), spatial qualities (e.g. knowledge processing, indicator of organisational culture, process enabler, social interaction and

stimulation) and flexibility (i.e. the time and effort required to change the space to undertake different activities) (De Paoli & Ropo, 2017; Meinel et al., 2017; Thoring et al., 2018). Creative spaces are thought to shape behaviours through symbolic and cultural artefacts (Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004) and subjective experiences of space (Ropo et al., 2015). Unlike the more conventional PWE, creative workspaces support employee innovation by conveying a sense of freedom and spatial flexibility (Ropo et al., 2015).

Google, Facebook and Apple have received extensive media attention as exemplars of PWE redesign, prompting many other companies to jump on this bandwagon to remain competitive and innovative (Thoring et al., 2018). However, according to Stegmeier (2008), attempts to implement creative workplace concepts often fail because of employee resistance, as management focuses on costs and productivity while employees experience loss and grief (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009). Moreover, little is currently known about companies' goals when pursuing these initiatives or the perceived effects after implementation (De Paoli & Ropo, 2017; Inalhan, 2009). Brennan et al. (2002), Moultrie et al. (2007) and Van der Voordt (2004b) are among the few studies of firms' strategic intentions and their consequences. For example, Brennan et al. (2002) examined the effects of relocating from a conventional work environment to a creative workspace in terms of employee satisfaction, perceived physical stressors, team member relations and perceived job performance.

In general, creative workspaces should facilitate flexible and dynamic work, independent of place and time, supporting creative and innovative activities without diminishing employee satisfaction or undermining job performance (Moultrie et al., 2007; Van der Voordt, 2004b). To date, however, there is no holistic framework for the optimal implementation of New Work principles, as studies of the effects of creative workspaces have tended to focus on isolated variables (Bjørnstad et al., 2016; Hoff & Öberg, 2015). For example, in their study of the effects of ventilation noise, air temperature and lighting on employee performance, Hygge and Knez (2001) reported that these variables can have varying effects on performance.

Given the cost, effort and time involved in implementing creative workspaces (Brennan et al., 2002; Carlopio & Gardner, 1992; Thoring et al., 2018), researchers have repeatedly called for further studies to clarify how workspaces designed according to New Work principles can be successfully implemented and managed (McElroy & Morrow, 2010; Moultrie et al., 2007; Thoring et al., 2018). In this article, we contend that firms are not fully aware of the effects (positive or negative) of implementing creative workspaces. To investigate companies' goals and the perceived effects of redesigning a conventional workspace according to New Work principles, we posed the following research questions:

1. What does the existing literature have to say about the consequences of introducing creative workspaces?
2. What organisational goals inform the introduction of creative workspaces?

3. What are the perceived effects of introducing creative workspaces during and after implementation?

To answer these questions, in the next section, we reviewed recent literature on workspace innovation. Then, we describe the design of our empirical study and provide an analysis of the interview data. Finally, we discuss our findings and identify directions for further research.

Theoretical background

The Physical Work Environment (PWE)

The office environment is a complex and dynamic system (Goodrich, 1986) and constitutes the second largest financial overhead (after human resources) for most organisations (McCoy, 2005). Defined as the combined forces and factors that impact employees at work, the office environment comprises two interdependent components: the social-organisational system and the physical system (Dul et al., 2011; Goodrich, 1986). According to Dul et al. (2011), the social-organisational system encompasses (1) organisational factors (e.g. culture and Human Resources), (2) team factors (e.g. group composition) and (3) job-level factors (e.g. autonomy and leadership). The physical system includes (1) the PWE, (2) design elements (e.g. building structure, views and daylight) and (3) modern technology to support communication, collaboration and effective decision-making.

The changing nature of work means that PWE provisions have been placed under increasing scrutiny, and a growing number of organisations are moving from conventional fixed workspaces to more open shared workplaces (Vos & Van der Voordt, 2001). These new creative workspace concepts can save space, reduce general and technical service costs, and encourage employees to use the new work environment more flexible (De Croon et al., 2005). With the increasing importance of knowledge work, creative workspaces are considered to promote new and innovative ideas, thus contributing to an organisation's productivity and success. Creativity drives innovation, and creative workspaces contribute to organisational innovativeness (Amabile et al., 1996). Therefore, contemporary PWE design addresses employees' physical and psychological needs as well as the organisation's functional needs (Dul & Ceylan, 2014). To that end, the creative workspace must incorporate (1) appropriate design elements (e.g. furniture, equipment, plants and aesthetic objects), (2) appropriate interior architecture (e.g. size, complexity, colours and materials) and layout (e.g. spaces for individual or team-based work) and (3) appropriate ambient conditions (e.g. light, sound, temperature and air quality) (Davis, 1984; Dul & Ceylan, 2011; Dul et al., 2011; Hoff & Öberg, 2015).

The increasing interest in creative workspaces has prompted a wide range of initiatives to stimulate creativity and innovation (Van der Lugt et al., 2007), which typically involve diverse workspaces that meet specific job demands and work styles. According to Brookes and

Kaplan (1972) and Vos and Van der Voordt (2001), these designs address the following three dimensions: location, layout and use. Furthermore, several researchers have noted that new workspaces are becoming more personal by addressing individual preferences and comfort while also supporting social, collaborative and team interactions (Lewis & Moultrie, 2005; Van der Lugt et al., 2007). Simultaneously, creative workspaces seek to encourage individual and team creativity (Amabile & Conti, 1999; McCoy, 2005). At the individual level, for example, creative workspace arrangements provide opportunities for concentrated work (Dul & Ceylan, 2014) and individual mental breaks (Lee, 2016), while team creativity is facilitated by facilitating formal and informal collaboration and communication (Hoff & Öberg, 2015), knowledge transfer (Toker & Gray, 2008) and relaxation in leisure areas (Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003).

Thus, organisations typically provide a mix of core functional spaces for individual and team activities as well as social hangout spaces. As most of these spaces can accommodate several functions, organisations can adjust their size (Alencar & Bruno-Faria, 1997; Hoff & Öberg, 2015; McCoy & Evans, 2002; Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003), layout (Hoff & Öberg, 2015; Martens, 2011; Steiner, 2005; Toker & Gray, 2008; Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003) and equipment (Ceylan et al., 2008). To ensure flexibility, organisations make deliberate use of intangible and tangible office elements (Meinel et al., 2017). Intangible elements include lighting and daylight (Bjørnstad et al., 2016; Dul & Ceylan, 2014), ventilation and temperature (Brennan et al., 2002; Hedge, 1982), colour (Ceylan et al., 2008) and acoustics (Hoff & Öberg, 2015), whereas tangible elements include plants and windows (Bjørnstad et al., 2016), furniture and technology (Brewer et al., 2007), decorative elements and materials (Byron & Laurence, 2015; Ceylan et al., 2008) and sliding doors and walls or movable partitions (Hoff & Öberg, 2015). These flexible settings support different work modes that can be tailored to individual requirements, balancing interaction and privacy (Rücker et al., 2022).

The impact of the creative workspace

Researchers have increasingly focused on how creative workspaces impact employee and organisational outcomes (Bryant, 2012; Davis et al., 2011; Zagenczyk et al., 2007). Recent studies have investigated workspace design parameters and their effects on organisational variables (Carlopio & Gardner, 1992). Although existing findings encompass physical and mental effects, social effects and performance effects, there is no systematic overview of all the different effects of various workspace designs.

Physical and Mental Effects

In general, physical and mental effects are influenced by the presence of certain physical factors (Carlopio & Gardner, 1992). The relevant physical and mental parameters of the creative workspace can be divided into four distinct subcategories: environmental perception, behaviour and reactions, well-being and attitudes to work.

Environmental perception. Several scholars have investigated employees' perceptions and subjective experiences of environmental factors, including temperature, illumination, ventilation and noise levels (Evans & Johnson, 2000). All these authors concluded that environmental factors affect employees' perceptions of the work environment and reported perceptual differences related to gender (Hedge, 1986), one's hierarchical level within the company (Zalesny & Farace, 1987) as well as location, view and task (Stone & Irvine, 1994).

Behaviour and reactions. This subcategory includes changes in employee behaviours and habits. For instance, Brewer et al. (2007) found that in work environments newly equipped with furnishings and technology, employees who are enthusiastic about technology spend more time in the office. Burke (1990) reported that equipment breakdowns or dissatisfaction related to temperature, lighting and/or noise levels were associated with increased smoking and consumption of coffee, alcohol and/or medication. Investigating the use of height-adjustable workstations and the option to work either standing or sitting, Neuhaus et al. (2014) noted that the possibility of working in both modes affected employees' satisfaction and reduced sitting time.

Well-being. This subcategory of physical factors includes employee feelings, emotions and moods (Byron & Laurence, 2015; Knight & Haslam, 2010; Shibata & Suzuki, 2004; Wells, 2000) and health (Bjørnstad et al., 2016). In general, the functional, inspirational and psychosocial support provided by creative workspaces has been found to enhance employee well-being and health, while less supportive workspaces are associated with poorer well-being and health (Bjørnstad et al., 2016; Burke, 1990; Hoff & Öberg, 2015). Tangible elements, such as personal objects (e.g. plants, pictures and photographs), can enhance or undermine employee feelings and moods by serving as reminders of values and goals, helping draw clear boundaries between private and business matters or creating a distraction (Byron & Laurence, 2015; Wells, 2000).

Office personalisation may also indirectly contribute to reduced stress or depression and improved physical health by increasing employee satisfaction with the creative workspace (Wells, 2000). Similarly, intangible elements, such as temperature, air quality, lighting, colour and noise, can enhance (or undermine) employee well-being (Burke, 1990; Knez, 1995; Küller et al., 2006; Kwallek & Lewis, 1990; Salin, 2015). For instance, Bjørnstad et al. (2016) found a link between natural workspace elements (e.g. daylight or windows with a view of nature) and reduced job stress, fewer health complaints and fewer sickness absences. By contrast, workplaces with poor light, temperature or air quality, higher noise levels and/or smaller room sizes tend to be negatively perceived (Ketola, 2004) and may lead to increased employee absenteeism, emotional exhaustion, physical health problems and stress (Burke, 1990; Hedge, 1986; Ketola, 2004).

Attitudes to work. There is some evidence that creative workspaces influence organisational identification (Knight & Haslam, 2010), trust in management (Zalesny & Farace, 1987) and work attitudes (Brewer et al., 2007).

Employees perceive creative workspaces equipped with plants, pictures or window views as supportive and consider them to be an expression of the organisation's appreciation for their work, thus increasing employees' loyalty to the organisation and enhancing their attitudes to work. However, moving from a conventional office layout to an open-plan office design can undermine employees' trust in management (Zalesny & Farace, 1987). Physical elements may also impact employee task engagement (Oldham & Brass, 1979; Zalesny & Farace, 1987); for example, working in an office decorated with plants and pictures can make workers feel more autonomous and more involved in their tasks (Knight & Haslam, 2010).

There is conflicting evidence regarding task involvement; for instance, while Oldham and Rotchford (1983) and Zalesny and Farace (1987) found that task significance and task identification increased in open-plan offices, Oldham and Brass (1979) reported reduced task significance and task identification in similar settings. More generally, task identification and task significance depend on self-assessment and the importance of one's tasks as perceived by colleagues in an open workspace (Oldham & Brass, 1979; Zalesny & Farace, 1987).

Certain physical elements also impact employees' abilities to work. For example, Hoff and Öberg (2015) found that work performance is enhanced by ergonomic tools and furniture, distraction-free spaces, adequate space and lighting, and adjustable spaces and furnishings. Mental work capacity is enhanced by less restlessness, fewer noisy coworkers and more comfortable working positions and temperatures (Tuomi et al., 1997).

Social effects

Researchers have also investigated the social effects of creative workspaces, including changes in workplace relationships, collaboration and communication (Brewer et al., 2007; Byron & Laurence, 2015; Wells, 2000) as well as privacy effects (Carlopio & Gardner, 1992; Zalesny & Farace, 1987).

Privacy. Several studies have reported that privacy decreased following a move from mainly enclosed offices to an open-plan layout characterised by increased noise, more distractions, higher workplace density and crowding (Oldham, 1988; Oldham & Rotchford, 1983; Sundstrom et al., 1980). More specifically, employees in open-plan offices reported reduced communication privacy (Carlopio & Gardner, 1992), visual privacy (Hedge, 1986) and task privacy (Brookes & Kaplan, 1992; Sundstrom et al., 1980).

Relationships at work, collaboration and communication. Information exchange, friendship opportunities and supervisor feedback are perceived to be worse in open workspaces (Brennan et al., 2002; Oldham & Brass, 1979; Zalesny & Farace, 1987), and the potential for conflict is considered to be higher in crowded or noisy open-plan offices (Oldham &

Rotchford, 1983). In general, workplace social life is enhanced by personalisation and appropriate opportunities for interaction in team spaces and lounge areas, while the absence of these elements tends to have negative effects (Brewer et al., 2007; Byron & Laurence, 2015; Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003; Wells, 2000). Bjørnstad et al. (2016) found that plants and views of nature enhanced the social climate at work, and personalised objects, such as photographs, children's paintings or certificates, can enhance work relationships by helping initiate conversations and facilitating communication, although such objects may sometimes create negative impressions (Byron & Laurence, 2015).

Performance

Creative workspaces have also been found to influence overall work performance (Dul & Ceylan, 2014; Hoff & Öberg, 2015) and creativity (Ceylan et al., 2008; Lee, 2016; McCoy & Evans, 2002).

Performance/productivity. There are three main findings in relation to performance and productivity. First, some studies of the move from enclosed physical work environments to more open and modern workspaces have reported a perceived decline in overall performance or productivity (Brennan et al., 2002; Brookes & Kaplan, 1972; Hedge, 1982; Zalesny & Farace, 1987) due to distractions and concentration difficulties associated with reduced privacy and higher levels of noise, crowding and employee density (Brennan et al., 2002; Hedge, 1986; Oldham & Rotchford, 1983; Sundstrom et al., 1980; Zalesny & Farace, 1987).

Second, there is evidence that certain physical factors can enhance or undermine performance and/or productivity (e.g. Byron & Laurence, 2015; Hedge, 1986). More specifically, a flexible, balanced layout with appropriate furniture, plants, window views, lighting, and relaxing and stimulating colours can enhance social interaction and idea generation, while objects of aesthetic interest can support productivity (Byron & Laurence, 2015; Stone & Irvine, 1994; Knez, 1995). Conversely, the absence of these elements may contribute to lower productivity (Byron & Laurence, 2015; Hedge, 1986). There is also some evidence that employees in a creative workspace may be able to ignore any distracting physical elements by focusing exclusively on their tasks (Hygge & Knez, 2001; Kwallek & Lewis, 1990).

Finally, employee productivity depends on workspace functionality, which includes flexible and balanced layouts for different modes of working, appropriate technological support and spaces for idea generation (Brewer et al., 2007; Lee, 2016). By contrast, inadequate functionality and support (e.g. poor illumination and dark wall colours, as well as overheated spaces) tend to reduce employee performance and productivity (Hoff & Öberg, 2015; Oldham & Rotchford, 1983; Wyon, 1974).

Creativity. Creative workspaces are known to influence idea generation and the execution of creative tasks, both directly and indirectly (Dul & Ceylan, 2011; Stokols et al., 2002;

Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003). A functional and inspiring psychosocial workspace that incorporates appropriate structural elements, along with a flexible, balanced layout that enhances social interaction and idea generation, objects of aesthetic interest (e.g. books, lamps and artworks), plants and natural materials, a view to nature or a view to the neighbouring interior environment, and technology support (Ceylan et al., 2008; Lee, 2016; McCoy & Evans, 2002; Shibata & Suzuki, 2004; Stone & Irvine, 1994), can directly impact employee creativity (Dul & Ceylan, 2011; Dul et al., 2011; Hoff & Öberg, 2015). A good physical indoor climate, positive smells (e.g. fresh air) and positive sounds (e.g. music and silence) can also enhance creative performance (Dul & Ceylan, 2011; Dul et al., 2011). Beyond these direct effects, indirect influences on creativity include a positive social climate with minimal distractions and conflicts (Stokols et al., 2002; Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003). Conversely, the use of materials such as steel, carpets or cool colours may inhibit creativity (Stokols et al., 2002; Vithayathawornwong et al., 2003).

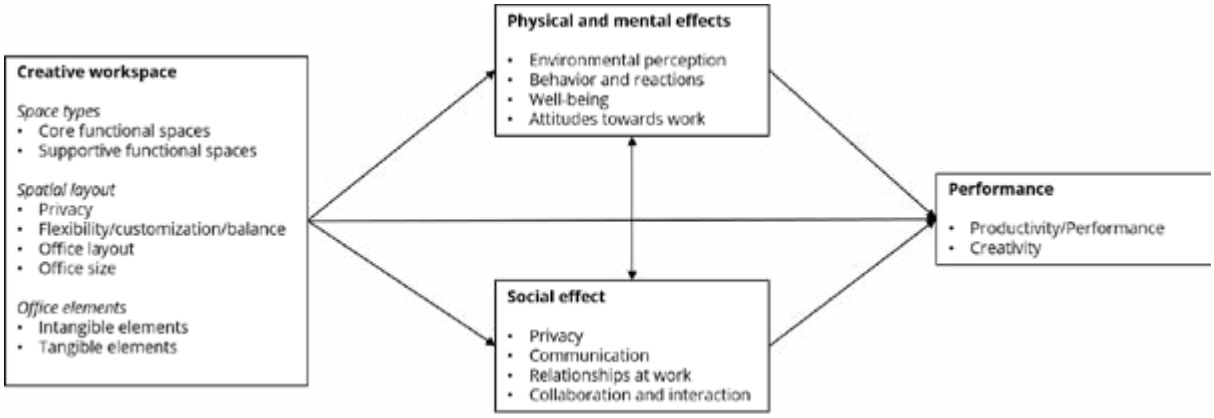

Figure 1: Impacts of the creative workspace as reported in the existing literature

Methodology

Research design

We employed a qualitative approach to investigate whether the effects of creative workspaces as reported in the literature reflect current business practices. To trace behaviour patterns and draw comparisons, we selected 20 experts from 20 organisations who were responsible for developing creative workplaces for their companies. This approach is appropriate when the research question is exploratory in nature (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009), as was the case in our study, and it enabled us to build on existing knowledge.

Data collection

We interviewed the participating experts over a period of three months. The dataset was heterogeneous in a number of ways. We selected firms from multiple sectors, including finance, sports, electronics, information and communication technologies, energy, transportation, mechanical engineering and health. The organisations also differed in size and internal structure. Moreover, the interviewees differed in terms of their competencies and organisational roles. However, all the experts interviewed represented management's views of the organisations. We distinguished between top-level management (n = 6), middle-level management (n = 13) and lower-level management (n = 1). Table 1 provides more information on the sample.

The interviews were conducted over the telephone and recorded. The average interview duration was 45 minutes. As we were interested in the experts' verbally expressed knowledge, the telephone was considered an appropriate medium. To ensure their willingness to provide relevant information, the participants were assured that the data would be completely anonymised.

The interview guide was based on the conceptual model proposed by Moultrie et al. (2007). Following the guide-based methodology of open questions and a flexible structure, our five-part interview process facilitated exploratory enquiry and allowed for new insights to emerge (Kasabov, 2015). The first part of the interview included general questions about the organisation and the expert's field of activity. The second, third and fourth parts included questions about the process of workplace reorganisation and creativity in the organisation. Finally, the interviewees were asked to assess the potential of the transformed workplace in terms of work performance.

Table 1 Details of the interviewed experts

Expert	Position	Industry sector	Company category (staff headcount)
1	Top-level management	Manufacturing	Micro
2	Middle-level management	Service industry	Medium-sized
3	Middle-level management	Manufacturing	Medium-sized
4	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
5	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
6	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
7	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
8	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
9	Top-level management	Service industry	Large
10	Middle-level management	Manufacturing	Large
11	Top-level management	Service industry	Large
12	Top-level management	Service industry	Large
13	Top-level management	Service industry	Large
14	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
15	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
16	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large
17	Top-level management	Manufacturing	Large
18	Lower-level management	Service industry	Large
19	Middle-level management	Manufacturing	Large
20	Middle-level management	Service industry	Large

Micro: < 10 employees | Small: < 50 | Medium-sized: < 250 | Large: > 250

Data analysis and reliability

Following the telephone interviews, the recordings were transcribed (Krippendorff, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and a content analysis was performed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using a systematic rule-led approach to ensure intersubjective verifiability (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), we derived inductive categories (Gioia et al., 2013) directly from the material, transforming the textual material into coding units (smallest usable text passages). In this way, we could identify similarities, differences and patterns without reference to existing theories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To reduce the number of features of categories we summarised similar categories using the method described by Gioia et al. (2013). This gradual process of categorisation facilitated the iterative structuring of the data in line with our research objectives.

Results

Objectives of creative workspaces

Table 2 summarises the perceived objectives of workplace transformations in the participants' companies. The interview quotations that follow serve to clarify what these differing goals mean.

Objectives	Subcategory	Frequency*
Physical and mental goals	Increase employee satisfaction	5
Social goals	Support cultural change	10
Performance goals	Support work processes (spatial effectiveness)	18
	Financial performance (spatial efficiency)	9
Strategic goals	Employer branding	18
	Move	17

*Multiple answers by the same interviewee were possible

Physical and mental goals

As employees spend most of their day in the office, a creative workplace should engender a positive atmosphere that *increases satisfaction and supports task completion* (n = 5), encouraging an entrepreneurial approach and new ways of thinking. A supportive climate of this kind ensures that employees feel comfortable and enjoy their work.

> I have to assume that I will spend almost all day in this environment. As we spend more time in the office than at home, the aim was to develop a pleasant ambience in the [work] environment. The expectation is that if employees feel comfortable, they will also be satisfied and will enjoy their work. (Interviewee 1)

Clearly, employee satisfaction alone is not the desired outcome; rather, the key economic driver is that satisfied employees tend to be more productive (on average), and companies can support this effect by providing a modern workplace.

Social goals

Among the stated social objectives for implementing creative workspaces, 10 interviewees referred to *cultural aspects*, including transparency, communication, flat hierarchy and peaceful relationships. Several interviewees emphasised that corporate cultural values should be reflected in workplace design and that these core values should be identified and communicated to architects.

> We oriented our design to our values, and we tried to map our different identities in the house in terms of the design. (Interviewee 4)

Taking corporate values into account when designing a creative workspace was seen to have a culture-reinforcing effect, channelling a spirit of optimism and identification.

> We have a strong corporate identity, which is highlighted by the colours found throughout the building, helping every employee to identify with the company. (Interviewee 15)

Beyond a workspace design that acknowledges corporate values, employees must recognise, accept and live those values to make that culture a reality.

Performance goals

There was a strong consensus (*n* = 18) that *work process support* (*spatial effectiveness*) is the most important goal of creative workspaces. In particular, the workspace should support company-specific working methods in a user-oriented manner and should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate any emerging changes.

> The most essential goal was to provide a more flexible workplace arrangement because project workspaces are highly dynamic rather than static, which means that we may need to rebuild teams within a week. (Interviewee 5)

A majority of the interviewees (*n* = 9) also referred to improved spatial efficiency as a performance goal by increasing overall flexibility and cost efficiency through better use of space. In general, the interaction of *spatial efficiency* and *cost efficiency* is likely to improve *financial performance*.

> We have a tool in which we enter the number of persons, and then it tells us what we need to consider in terms of rooms and space. This typically achieves savings of 10 to 20 percent, and that's significant if you consider buildings across the world because real estate is one of the biggest cost drivers. (Interviewee 10)

Strategic goals

The most frequently mentioned strategic goal when implementing creative workspaces was *employer branding opportunities* (*n* = 18). A creative workplace presents the organisation in a positive light, both internally and externally. One beneficial outcome of having an improved image is an enhanced ability to attract and retain high performers, as ongoing competition with other organisations makes it important to retain and motivate good employees and to understand their needs.

> You have to make it [the workplace] attractive in every way for existing employees as well as for potential recruits. (Interviewee 4)

A creative workplace was also seen to support and strengthen brand positioning. By improving an organisation's image and performance, a workplace transformation can change existing perceptions as an element of corporate strategy.

> We sold things to the customer that we did not live by ourselves. For example, we sold virtual PBX (private branch exchange) and VoIP (voice over Internet protocol), but we still used desk phones with long extension cords. (Interviewee 20)

Another frequently mentioned strategic goal was the facilitation of a *move* (n = 17). To accommodate more people following economic growth or to consolidate locations, an organisation may decide to abandon the classic office structure in favour of a new configuration that helps change the existing culture.

> A second fact was that we grew a lot, with 60 percent more employees since the sale. That meant we also had to accommodate a lot more people who were working at different locations because there wasn't room for all of them in the old building. This made collaboration more difficult. (Interviewee 15)

Perceived consequences of implementing creative workspaces

Based on the above findings, we identified three perceived consequences of workplace transformation, which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3 Perceived consequences of implementing creative workspaces

Perceived effects	Subcategory	Frequency*
Physical and mental	Well-being	19
	Environmental perception	16
Social	Communication	8
	Collaboration and interaction	5
	Relationships at work	2
	Initiation of cultural change	3
Performance	Productivity/performance	11
	Creativity	6

*Multiple answers by the same interviewee were possible

Physical and mental effects

Despite the initial skepticism, the interviewees confirmed an increase in employee *well-being* (n = 19) following the introduction of creative workspaces. In particular, changes in form, equipment and appearance, as well as collaboration options and team cohesion, contributed to this perception.

> We also assumed that we could increase employee satisfaction, and we succeeded. There was less space [...], but we had much better facilities than before. (Interviewee 8)

Moreover, employees who missed their desks and personal phones realised that they had gained a lot of functional space through workspace sharing. There were also more opportunities for communication, concentration and community building, which compensated for the initial stress.

> Everyone is afraid of change, which is why it has to be done carefully. We took the view that if we took something from people – for example, individually assigned desks – then we should give something back. We equipped them with iPhones and laptops and provided areas they can use for their own projects. And if you need to focus, you can use a think tank. (Interviewee 16)

Creative workspaces were also seen as changing the *environmental perception* (*n* = 16), both internally and externally. This refers to the use of specific physical elements, such as plants or individual colour concepts, to promote a positive atmosphere. A PWE that fosters inspiration, spontaneous encounters and small talk embodies thoughtfulness and care.

> To make the most of these opportunities, we wanted to be able to have more meetings and small talk, encountering each other as often as possible to talk and exchange ideas without booking meeting rooms. (Interviewee 5)

Some employees may be concerned about noise levels in open offices, which is a very sensitive topic. On the one hand, ambient noise can inspire employees by reminding them that they are part of a motivated team that is constantly exchanging and generating new ideas. On the other hand, employees sometimes find increased noise levels disturbing or stressful and are unable to concentrate on their tasks. The interviewees identified two coping options: organisations can introduce noise-reducing furniture and materials and employees can adjust their behaviours to strike the appropriate balance in line with privacy and work requirements.

> Acoustics is a very important topic. Looking at these photos, you can see that the office is very spacious. In an open-plan office, sound can travel relatively unchecked, and we've done a lot to improve that. (Interviewee 17)

Social effects

The interviewees referred to *communication* (*n* = 8), *collaboration and interaction* (*n* = 5) and *relationships at work* (*n* = 2) as key social effects that are closely related. Communication issues include the quality of instructions and the frequency of information requests. Collaboration and interaction influence teamwork and cooperation with co-workers or other company branches. Relationship issues with co-workers or customers include collegiality, social climate, social cohesion and bullying. To contribute positively to these social effects, a creative workspace must enhance interaction by providing opportunities for employees to come together. Elements such as team spaces, equipment, personalisation and lounge areas can exert a positive influence on social life at work. Conversely, if creative workspaces fail to support appropriate interactions, social relations may suffer.

> I do think that the new workplace design has a positive influence on creativity. The range of different rooms enables colleagues to meet more frequently, which promotes and improves communication and strengthens relationships. (Interviewee 2)

Three interviewees also referred to *cultural changes*, including the strengthening of corporate identity after the replacement of closed office structures by creative workspaces and shared spaces. The use of colour concepts, zoning and appropriate furnishings helped to communicate the corporate culture and the functionality of the different rooms. Desk sharing and regular changes of place were considered to encourage employees to get to know new colleagues and to become more familiar with different departments and topics, promoting cross-departmental exchange, transparency and identification. In addition, employees tended to work more often outside of regular hours and brought family and friends to see their new work environment.

> Yes, sometimes, I see colleagues in the house on weekends. Sometimes, I come on the weekend to show my workplace to visitors, and I always meet colleagues who are doing the same. You wouldn't do that in your free time if you didn't like going there. (Interviewee 15)

Desk sharing and the freedom to choose a workplace that suits them helps employees feel more autonomous and responsible. In a creative workspace, employees decide independently when and where to perform their tasks, which is a significant cultural change. In these circumstances, existing evaluation criteria become obsolete. Managers have to learn to lead on the basis of trust and results, which promotes employee empowerment and an internalised culture of accountability as employees take on more responsibility.

> Because we are currently undergoing cultural change. A culture of trying things out, where you are allowed to make an occasional mistake, is desirable; just don't repeat it

> two or three times. This helps to shape a more modern way of thinking. (Interviewee 7)

Performance

Regarding work performance, the introduction of creative workspaces was seen to affect *productivity* (*n* = 11). To optimise work processes, different departments can be located in close proximity, thus improving communication and collaboration as well as spontaneous encounters, with shorter routes to meetings and quicker exchange of important information, all of which contribute to increased productivity.

> Let's assume that employees are then happier. A happy employee works more productively. (Interviewee 19)

Six interviewees also emphasised the importance of *creativity*; that is, the production of innovative ideas or the execution of creative tasks. Although creativity cannot be enforced, it can be supported or hindered by environmental factors. In this regard, the PWE can be understood as a platform that brings various stakeholders together to inspire and interact with one another. A creative workspace must combine emotional appeal and a high degree of freedom to support individual work, networking and collaboration involving diverse people and projects.

> So, there are a lot of room offerings that can promote creativity, perhaps because the synapses are doing something a little different. (Interviewee 6)

Discussion

The findings from our qualitative analysis reveal that companies implement creative workspaces for multiple reasons and that employee reactions to the implementation process were only partly anticipated. Table 4 summarises the key findings from the literature review, the qualitative analysis of the creative workspace goals and the perceived consequences of switching to a creative workspace. The key findings are reviewed below in relation to the literature on creativity-enhancing work environments.

Table 4 Perceived goals and impacts of creative workspaces

	Literature	*Company objectives*	*Perceived consequences*
Physical and mental perspective			
Environmental perception	✓	-	✓
Behaviour and reactions	✓	-	-
Well-being	✓	-	✓
Attitudes to work	✓	-	-
Employee satisfaction	-	✓	(✓)
Social perspective			
Privacy	✓	-	-
Communication	✓	-	✓
Relationships at work	✓	-	✓
Collaboration and interaction	✓	-	✓
Supporting/initiating cultural change	(✓)	✓	✓
Performance perspective			
Productivity/performance	✓	-	✓
Creativity	✓	-	✓
Support for work processes (spatial effectiveness)	-	✓	-
Financial performance (spatial efficiency)	-	✓	-
Strategic perspective			
Employer branding	-	✓	-
Move	-	✓	n/a

Note: ✓ = addressed; (✓) = partially addressed; - = not addressed.

Physical and mental perspective. Our findings align with previous reports that companies change their work environments to enhance employees' environmental perceptions and well-being. According to Dul and Ceylan (2011) and Hoff and Öberg (2015), a creative workspace that enhances employee creativity and productivity is also likely to enhance well-being and environmental perceptions. In particular, the presence of plants and window views of nature

is associated with a more positive environmental perception as reported by Tuomi et al. (1991) and Bjørnstad et al. (2016).

Surprisingly, companies seem to consider only improved employee satisfaction when planning to implement creative workspaces, and most of the research on workplace design is related to this issue (Kegel, 2017). Our findings indicate that corporate real-estate managers fail to take account of the full range of relevant issues when designing creative workspaces. Furthermore, our empirical findings are in line with the literature on workplace transformations, which highlights the relevance of changes in employee behaviour (e.g. Burke, 1990) and attitudes to work (e.g. Brewer et al., 2007).

Social perspective. Our findings also confirm previous evidence on the role of creative workspaces in increasing communication, collaboration and interaction and in building closer relationships at work (e.g. Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011; Elsbach & Bechky, 2007). The present study also supports the findings of Eismann et al. (2021), who reported that participation and regular exchanges of ideas and information increase the likelihood of developing new and useful solutions. Therefore, it is surprising that none of our interviewees referred to these issues as explicit objectives of workplace transformation, despite extensive discussions in the literature (e.g. Brewer et al., 2007; Byron & Laurence, 2015). In this context, the only link between the interview data and the literature was related to the area of cultural change: corporate culture is a known driver of workplace transformation and company creativity (e.g. Barclay & York, 2001; Lamproulis, 2007; Lindahl, 2004; Wineman et al., 2009), and it seems clear that corporate real-estate managers must take greater care to ensure the compatibility of cultural and social aspects.

Corporate culture is also a crucial ingredient in maintaining employee privacy (Pitt & Bennet, 2008). In an environment where the potential for disturbance is high and privacy is low, negative impacts include employee dissatisfaction and poorer concentration, which, in turn, undermine productivity and creativity (Brennan et al., 2002; Oldham & Brass, 1979; Oldham & Rotchard, 1983; Sundstrom et al., 1980; Zalesny & Farace, 1987). According to Kim and De Dear (2013), this privacy-communication trade-off is a source of ongoing difficulty in creative workspaces, but the issue was not mentioned by any of the interviewees as either an objective or a consequence of implementing creative workspaces.

Performance perspective. Previous studies (Engelen et al., 2018; Haynes et al., 2019; Rolfö, 2018; Skogland, 2017) have reported that creative workplaces impact employee performance, and our interview data confirm this effect. The combination of open spaces and desk sharing facilitates frequent interaction and communication between employees, accelerating the flow of information and decision-making (Moultrie et al., 2007), while closed spaces support confidential and concentrated tasks that require greater privacy and fewer distractions (Maher & Von Hippel, 2005). This mix of spaces ensures the flexibility that individuals and teams need for collaboration, knowledge sharing and idea generation, prerequisites for productivity and creativity (Arundell et al., 2018; Suckley & Nicholson, 2018).

None of our interviewees mentioned improved employee creativity as a reason for the workplace change in their companies; instead, they cited organisational performance goals, such as process optimisation, cost efficiency and reduced set-up costs. Given that the workplace is a company's second-most expensive resource (McCoy, 2005; Steiner, 2005) and that more than half of all employees work outside the office (Steiner, 2005; Van der Voordt, 2004a), it makes sense to reduce workplace capacity as a means of improving company financial performance. From an employee perspective, however, this approach is counterintuitive (e.g. a lack of personalisation, a lack of feeling of control over the environment and identity threat) (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009), and companies need to ensure that work processes are properly supported to facilitate individual and decentralised ways of working (Steiner, 2005).

Strategic perspective. The present findings confirm that companies introduce creative workspaces for strategic reasons, such as strengthening and positioning the brand. According to Steiner (2005), a creative workspace affects corporate image and how a company is perceived by customers and potential recruits. However, this external focus risks neglecting internal issues, and Gorgievski et al. (2010) noted that corporate real-estate managers must also consider their current workforce's ways of working when making decisions about appropriate equipment and infrastructure. In this regard, our interview data suggest that workplace transformations may sometimes be driven by a lack of space and a need to relocate. Haner (2005) recommended that corporate real-estate managers should view such contingencies as an opportunity to transform workplaces into centres of creativity and innovation. In other words, the workplace should be an integral part of innovation strategy, and its design must actively support the flexible deployment and reconfiguration of resources and infrastructure (Moultrie et al., 2007).

Managerial implications and further research

Managerial implications

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to provide empirical evidence regarding the experienced effects of creative workspaces. Unlike previous studies that typically focus on single objectives and effects, this article offers a holistic and structured overview by synthesising and categorising the organisational goals and perceived effects of creative workspaces. The existing literature acknowledges the complexity of these issues, and there is a need for increased organisational awareness when reassessing work environment design and use for enhanced creativity and innovation.

Our investigation of best-practice companies that have already implemented creative workspaces provides insights for business practitioners regarding implementation objectives and perceived consequences. Our findings confirm the challenges of workplace transformations and offer lessons for organisations considering this approach. The following

concrete takeaways may help such organisations fully exploit the potential of creative workspaces:

1. *Make creativity and innovation a strategic priority.* To ensure the effective design and use of creative workspaces, leaders must develop a coherent understanding of creativity and innovation management within the organisation, which should be anchored in corporate strategy. Although organisations attach great importance to these issues, none of our interviewees mentioned creativity and innovation in the context of strategic orientation.

2. *Develop a workspace strategy that fits your company.* To exploit the full potential of creative workspaces, we recommend that corporate real-estate managers and executive managers should systematically verify and reassess the experienced effects. Such workplace interventions require significant investment and planning, and our findings revealed that only a few organisations conducted a systematic retrospective evaluation of the new workplace.

3. *Corporate real-estate managers should focus on the workforce's physical, social and psychological needs.* To optimise support for employees' daily activities, we recommend that corporate real-estate managers consider strategic, performance-oriented, physical and social perspectives when introducing creative workspaces. The present findings indicate that although social processes are an essential element in the development of new and useful ideas, these processes tend to be neglected in the planning of creative workspaces.

4. *Think beyond the physical design.* To promote creativity, we recommend that corporate real-estate managers and executive managers continually monitor the socio-organisational impacts of physical workplace elements. A better understanding of such impacts will ensure a more purposeful workplace design and use, particularly in organisations that have failed to exploit the full potential of creative workspaces.

5. *Provide separate spaces for privacy and communication.* As preserving individual and team privacy is essential for creativity, we recommend that managers and employees develop and adhere to common rules of conduct. None of our interviewees mentioned privacy as either a consequence or an objective, but employees appreciate the opportunity to withdraw individually or as a team to work in a focused manner on new ideas.

It is clearly impossible to specify a generic ideal workspace for every individual and situation (Hedge, 1986). A creative workspace does not guarantee optimal work outcomes or creative ideas but provides the necessary support and inspiration for their emergence.

Further research

This qualitative study has several limitations. First, although the interviewees were carefully selected to ensure that all relevant topics were covered, the information they provided may have been influenced by their positions in the organisations. Further interviews and a survey approach could improve the quality and relevance of the information provided. Second, creativity was not necessarily a central characteristic of the participating companies, all of which were based in Germany. Future research should investigate national and international creative organisations to test the relevance of these findings across different cultural backgrounds. Third, the present findings concern organisations that have already implemented creative workspaces. Research conducted during the transformation process may provide more accurate insights. Finally, although this study offers a useful point of departure for future research, quantitative methods should be introduced to build on the present findings (Gioia et al., 2013) regarding design goals and the perceived effects of creative workspaces on creativity, productivity and health.

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Co-creating New Dancefloors Through a Parallel Organisation: Organisational development through union–management cooperation in the public sector

Kristin Lebesby, Hanne Finnestrand, Ola Edvin Vie

Abstract

Across industries, union density is under great pressure from different forms of organisations and, in many ways, a more individualised working life. Employee relations within the public sector have undergone a transition due to privatisation, decentralisation, and the adoption of quality management approaches. Employee relations in Nordic countries are strongly embedded in national regulations and agreements. However, research on organisational development within the public sector rarely includes discussions of the union role. The Nordic model perspective acknowledges that the different social parties share interests and visions, and it promotes a collective effort when organisational development is sought. This paper poses the question of how public organisations can change the "boxing and dancing" behaviour in union–management relationships through the establishment of a parallel organisation (PO). The PO serves as a different organisational mode when the operating organisation is unable to successfully deal with certain prevailing issues, where knowledge rather than authority should determine decisions. The findings show that the PO creates a "dancefloor", less confined by bureaucratic barriers, where unions and managers co-create new relations. In addition, participants experience more enhancement of their roles, and their focus towards developing their workplace collectively is more prominent. Our findings contribute to the industrial relations literature by proposing POs as a tool for building relations between unions and managers in a public organisation. Our paper also contributes to the PO literature by proposing that the inclusion of unions in a PO can be crucial when attempting to transfer outcomes into the operating organisation.

Keywords: Organisational development, Action Research, union–management cooperation, parallel organisation, public sector

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1. Introduction

In November 2014, the main Norwegian unions at the national level initiated trial several projects within several large public organisations. The primary goal was to improve the quality of their services for the benefit of employees and clients. We were involved in one of these public organisations, the Norwegian Public Roads Administration. Their HR department found that employee participation in external workshops and learning activities seemed predominantly to result in individual learning rather than organisational rewards, like collective organisational development. The management, union representatives, and employees wanted to develop closer relations to move towards stronger and expanded union–management cooperation.

In international studies of industrial relations, the Nordic countries are often described as possessing highly organised labour markets, high levels of unionisation, and well-functioning systems of industrial relations (Jensen, 2017; Nergaard, 2020). This article aligns with a mutual gains approach to industrial relations that sees union–management cooperation as a fruitful strategy for unions when looking after the interests of their rank-and-file members (Ackers, 2015; Kochan et al., 2009). Huzzard and Nilsson (2004) indicated that a close partnership between management and union is easier within industrial contexts because the union's strong legal position creates a level of trust and confidence that makes it easier to participate in organisational development (OD). However, this is true mainly for large industrial companies where the union has a strong, legal position. In fact, literature on union–management cooperation within the public sector shows that there are several barriers when organisations seek to develop cooperative relations between unions and management that go beyond traditional bargaining, and when direct participation is sought (Bie-Drivdal, 2021; Gold et al., 2019). These barriers can be related to decisions being made politically, changes tend to be initiated top-down, and to the notion that unions tend to deal with wages and working conditions rather than looking past traditional bargaining matters (Bie-Drivdal, 2021).

The Nordic industrial relations system has paved the way for many OD projects, involving a large number of companies with political and institutional support (Levin, 2002). In Norway, the trade unions' participation in OD dates to the aftermath of the Industrial Democracy Program (Emery et al., 1976; Herbst, 1977), and has evolved into a variety of workplace innovation practices and learning models (Johnsen et al., 2021; Klev & Levin, 2012). It is a paradox that most of these union–management-based OD projects in Norway take place in industrial companies, while unionisation is much higher within the public sector. In fact, the unionisation level within the public sector is stable at around 80 percent, in contrast to 38 percent within the private sector (Nergaard, 2020). The high level of unionisation in the Nordic countries is to some extent due to a large public sector where employees usually are organised in unions (Jensen, 2017). There is relatively limited research on OD projects in the public sector where the role of union representatives is included (Bie-Drivdal, 2019; 2021). However, recently attention has focused on the transformation of industrial relations systems in this sector, and the consequences for those working within it (Kjellberg, 2021). Increased privatisation and the use of work systems familiar to the private sector, such as the

decentralisation of service delivery, the adoption of quality management systems such as new public management (Boyne, 2002), and increasingly individualised forms of management, have impacted the management of people in the public sector (Lucio, 2007; Poole et al., 2006). This again often leads to what Exton and Totterdill (2009) have called a "low-road" approach to governance.

Zand (1974) introduced a tool for developing public organisations in the 1970s where the purpose is to avoid structural obstacles by creating a more flexible organisational form called a parallel organisation (PO). A PO is constructed when the operating organisation (OO) is unable to deal with certain prevailing issues, for example, the introduction of new technology (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974). POs have been developed and tested in several projects in which the organisations seek OD (see Hawk & Zand, 2014; Engesbak & Ingvaldsen, 2018; Bushe & Shani, 1991 for examples). The potential strength of including the trade union as a partner in OD has been established (Claussen, Haga and Ravn (2021); Finnestrand, 2011; Øyum et al., 2010), although these studies does not include the establishment of a PO structure. Our understanding of OD rests on Levin's (2004) two main foundations. Firstly, the most crucial feature of the change activity is the *participation* of organisational members, who take part in shaping their own work situation. Secondly, the *type of learning process* that is supported in the OD activity is important, which in this paper is defined as collective reflection processes that creates insights that feed back to new and improved organisational practices (Levin, 2004, p. 72). Also, research has put the spotlight on how the involvement of employees in decision-making and strategic matters could help drive the organisations' ability to innovate, through employee driven innovation (EDI) (Høyrup, 2012).

We view the PO in line with Huzzard et al.'s (2004) metaphor of dancing on the dancefloor, which involves including both unions and managers in an arena for cooperation and OD. The question is therefore: How does the establishment of a PO change the "boxing and dancing" behaviour in union–management cooperation in the OO within the public sector?

The data were collected within a Norwegian public organisation. We explore this question by presenting the findings from our case study of an Action Research (AR) project, lasting more than one year. The AR project was designed in line with AR approaches (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), which in this case included action researchers, HR facilitators, managers, union representatives, and employees working together on developing their organisation. We collaborated closely with primarily the HR department in the design and execution of the OD project.

2. Organisational development through union–management cooperation

The industrial relations literature has considered labour–management relations in "transition" and undergoing change in different contexts and countries (Hyman, 2018; Rødvei, 2008; Bean, 2021; Kjellberg, 2021). Originally, labour-management relations refer to the interactions between employees, as represented by labour unions, and their employers. A labour union is an organization formed by workers in a particular trade, industry, or company for the purpose of improving pay, benefits, and working conditions for its rank-and-file members. Basically, this takes place through collective negotiations between the labour unions and the employers' associations on both national and company level. In Norway, there is a high rate of unionization among workers, a long tradition of collective bargaining between the social parties, in addition to a very regulated system for labour market conflicts in collaboration between employers/management, employees/union and government (Kongsvik & Finnestrand, 2022). The degree of unionization has been stable at around 50 percent in recent years, and in the public sector the degree of unionization is as much as 80 percent (NOU, 2021:9). In addition to this, the Nordic approach to labour-management relations has been characterized by cooperation for mutual gains (Eikeland, 2012).

The main argument for the mutual gains approach is that management and union share the same essential goals, values, and interests (Heckscher, 2001; Kochan et al., 2009), and that trade unions have certain characteristics that may enhance organizational development. For example, research shows that trade unions contribute to a long-term and organisation-wide perspective when involved in decision-making (Finnestrand, 2011). In addition, trade union networks can provide an effective communication infrastructure that facilitates lateral communication and coordination both intra- and inter-organisation (Addison, 2005). Unions can also promote stability, trust, and commitment through a strong relationship with management because elected representatives protect and represent employees when change is sought (Gill, 2009; Kochan & Osterman, 1994; Levine, 1995).

This requires that the union has an active voice in the company, which is listened to and followed up by the management. For example, Oeij et al. (2015) described a case in their study where the union accepted cross-cutting policies and lay-offs because the company was in an open, constructive, and honest dialogue with them. The management provided them with a voice about the company's and the employees' future. Furthermore, Gill (2009) has shown how union–management cooperation can have positive effects on individual employees' involvement in OD issues. In these instances, the level or quality of union representation play a crucial role. Oeij et al. (2015), who studied workplace innovation practices, argued that union representatives play an important role in (co-) designing and developing workplace innovation and its implementation partly because management realises that employee participation is crucial for support and success. Finally, recent research indicates that trade unions have the potential to proactively address prerequisites for sustainable work, which appears to be a very important role in future working life (Harlin et al., 2021).

However, the actual conduct of union–management cooperation in public sector organisations may be difficult to develop and sustain (Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018). This is primarily because public organisations are characterised by more bureaucratic structures (Farnham & Horton, 1996) and have lower managerial autonomy, than private organisations (Boyne, 2002). This is because decisions are often made politically, where the local managers or employees have none or limited opportunity to apply their voice (Falkum et al., 2009). This means that the structural changes that can be introduced are limited. Attempts to navigate such "public barriers" have involved transferring the approaches and models of private organisations to public organisations. For example, projects and temporary modes of organising have been used to deliver or transform services, notably with little evidence of success (Hodgson et al., 2019). Although innovation policies have been increasingly introduced in the public sector, these are rarely implemented successfully due to gaps between the management groups at different hierarchical levels and overly bureaucratic control systems (Whilman et al., 2016). Consequently, researchers have turned to investigating how unions have changed their role and how managers and unions can jointly overcome the barriers to cooperation (Connolly et al., 2017; Gold et al., 2019).

In summary, one may conclude that projects aimed at OD could be more successful by building on union–management cooperation. An important proposition of how to create arenas for successful union–management cooperation is given by Huzzard et al. (2004) who promoted a perspective in which the partnership arena is viewed as different dancefloors, where unions can "box" and "dance". There is still an arena for bargaining (boxing), but also there is cooperation on the dancefloor with a more developmental focus. The metaphor of boxing and dancing supports, in our case, the development of suitable arenas, or dancefloors, for union–management cooperation within public sector organisations. We elaborate on the application of this metaphor in the findings chapter. The next section outlines some propositions about how workplaces can facilitate a "dancing" environment through a systematic and strategic intervention, namely, the PO.

3. Developing a parallel organisation for organisational development

For organisations to work with and solve complex, ill-defined strategic issues, Zand (1974) proposed using a PO as a systematic and strategic intervention. He promoted free-form organisations, participative leadership, and humanistic values, rather than hierarchical organisations, directive leadership, and mechanistic values. Fundamental to this perspective is the notion that knowledge rather than level of authority should determine decisions, and that environmental complexity and turbulence should lead to group decision-making. The PO serves as a different organisational mode when the OO is unable to successfully deal with certain prevailing issues (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974), such as a hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation. Compared with a project having a clear end product as the desired outcome, a PO is more concerned about the process leading to defining and finding solutions by building common ground.

Hawk and Zand (2014) claimed that authority or production centred organisations often work best with "well-structured" problems, while knowledge- and problem-centred organisations work better with "ill-structured" problems. Production centred OOs rely on authority, hierarchy, specialisation, and defined, predictable, repetitive routines. These organisations are often challenged by unique, ill-defined, system-wide, complex, or strategic issues, especially those requiring the knowledge, experience, and insight of people across organisational levels and locations to be combined in a collaborative, creative mode. In the context of public organisations, research shows that there are more formal procedures for making decisions, and that these organisations are less flexible and less likely to take big risks, which entails more bureaucracy (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Farnham & Horton, 1996). Furthermore, public organisations also experience more delays and subsequent irritation caused by formalisation and stagnation (Bozeman et al., 1992). Finally, lower managerial autonomy entails that managers have less freedom to act differently or appropriately based on the context or the individual circumstances they face (Boyne, 2002). The characteristics of public organisations mean that POs and different organisational modes are a possible intervention, as the OO can clearly benefit from being more flexible and able to cope with ill-defined issues or from the facilitation of organisational learning (Bushe & Shani, 1991). Hawk and Zand (2014, pp. 309-3010) define the conceptual dimensions of a parallel organisation as:

1. The purpose of the parallel organisation (PO) is to identify, define, and solve issues of a strategic nature (ill-defined, non-routine, unpredictable, and ambiguous).
2. The PO creatively complements the operating organisation (OO); it does not displace the formal OO.
3. The PO consists of a steering unit (SUN) that guides one or more basic inquiry groups (BINs). The SUN may specify what is not acceptable for the BINs to explore and may accept or reject issues for inquiry. Inquiry units can only make recommendations to the SUN. They do not have hierarchical power and cannot issue directives to the OO.
4. The SUN communicates with the BINs in circular feedback loops to provide guidance, exchange information, and collaboratively shape recommendations.
5. Outputs of the PO mode are the inputs to the OO mode.
6. The SUN works with the BINs to determine tasks and review progress.
7. BINs enable new combinations of people, new channels of communication, and new ways of viewing old ideas.
8. The PO operates with exploratory-inquiry norms (questioning, collaboration, consensus) that differ from the OO's directive-compliance norms.

Empirical case studies provide us with descriptions in varying detail of an actual organisational development (OD) intervention, often from an action research (AR) perspective (Hawk & Zand, 2014). A primary purpose of AR is to produce practical knowledge useful to people in their everyday lives, as well as to bring about change in organisations by building competencies for

self-help among participants and contributing to scientific knowledge (Coghlan & Shani, 2014; Shani & Coghlan, 2019). However, it is far more challenging for organisations to create knowledge or new capabilities than to identify more tangible resources such as finance and physical inventory (Roth et al., 2007). Action researchers often help bring together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice in order to ensure a better understanding of prevailing issues and to realise changes (Eikeland, 2012; Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Gustavsen, 2017; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). McIntosh (2010) argue that reflective practice in AR is both of a way of collecting data and for the participants to learn. Greenwood and Levin (2007) emphasise the importance of being able to facilitate reflection among the research participants as a way of producing both theoretical and practical knowledge. They claim that "a professional action researcher can assist the local group in opening up its sense of the situation and some options for the future" (Greenwood & Levin, 2007 p. 120). The democratic perspective of AR and the notion of involving participants across organisational levels, making management and unions accountable, might also aid the challenge of obtaining approval in the OO, when ideas and actions are formulated in the PO (see Engesbak & Ingvaldsen, 2018).

AR practitioners are different stakeholders within the organisation (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), which in our research case included management, HR, union representatives, and employees from different trades. This collaboration is an arena for collective learning where changes are made based on the organisation's practice and prevailing issues. Bushe's (1988) classic work addressed the possibilities of a PO as a facilitator of cooperative relationships. His plea for more attention regarding relations between union officials, workers, and managers who interact daily is shown to still be of importance, as the AR project described in the next section placed the spotlight on developing such relationships.

4. Research design and method

4.1. Research design

The data were gathered over the course of two years (2016–2018) as part of an AR research project in a large Norwegian public organisation. Our research team included three action researchers and one PhD student, and the action researchers had an active role in planning the project, providing conceptual and theoretical (Bolman & Deal, 2017) tools, and interacting with the practitioners. It is also important to point out that the first author had a more detached role throughout the project as a PhD student. Evaluation reports were written by the researchers both at a midway point and at the end of the project, and they were presented and discussed with the organisation's steering unit for common learning and further decisions. We also had regular discussions with the steering unit throughout the project. A more detailed description of the steering unit is given in the next section. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the AR project activities.

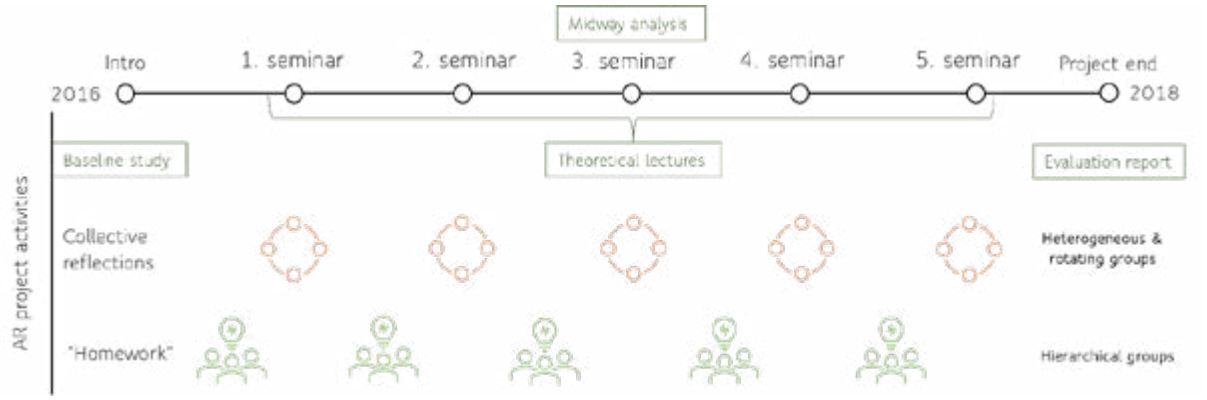

Figure 1: AR project activities

The AR project consisted of several activities across the organisation. In this paper, we focus mainly on one part of the project, which is the management development seminars. The activities within the management seminars are illustrated in figure 1, namely research activities, theoretical lectures, collective reflections amongst participants, and homework in between the seminars. The AR process itself builds on AR projects that have been developed within the private sector from The Industrial Democracy project in the 1960s until today (see Qvale, 1976; Gustavsen, 1992; Finnestrand, 2011; Claussen, Haga & Ravn, 2021). This includes the involvement of union representatives and a normative idea of building democracy in the workplace.

In the management seminars, there were participants from three different managerial levels and from several unions. The collective reflection groups were rotating and heterogeneous, which means that the participants took part in different groups, with different compositions throughout the activities. At the end of each seminar, the groups became more homogeneous and hierarchical, meaning groups based on management solely or based on roles, as a preparation to undertake the homework. The groups that carried out homework assignments were assembled based on the hierarchical structures in the OO. In addition, facilitators from HR provided guidance and process tools throughout the collective group activities. A more thorough description of the different participants and activities is given in the findings chapter.

For further discussions around project activities, we consider it important to give a more detailed description of why we defined the AR project as a PO. In line with the PO literature, we observe that the AR project is an arena that is established as a parallel structure, which reports back to the OO. The PO enables working with different types of questions and matters that are more loosely defined than in a formal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical organisation. The characteristics and structure of the AR project, now defined as a PO, gave us a theoretical framework when analysing the outcomes of the activities (Hawk & Zand, 2014). The composition of the steering unit (SUN) and the basic inquiry unit (BIN) is also important. Figure 2 provides a simple illustration of how we defined these units.

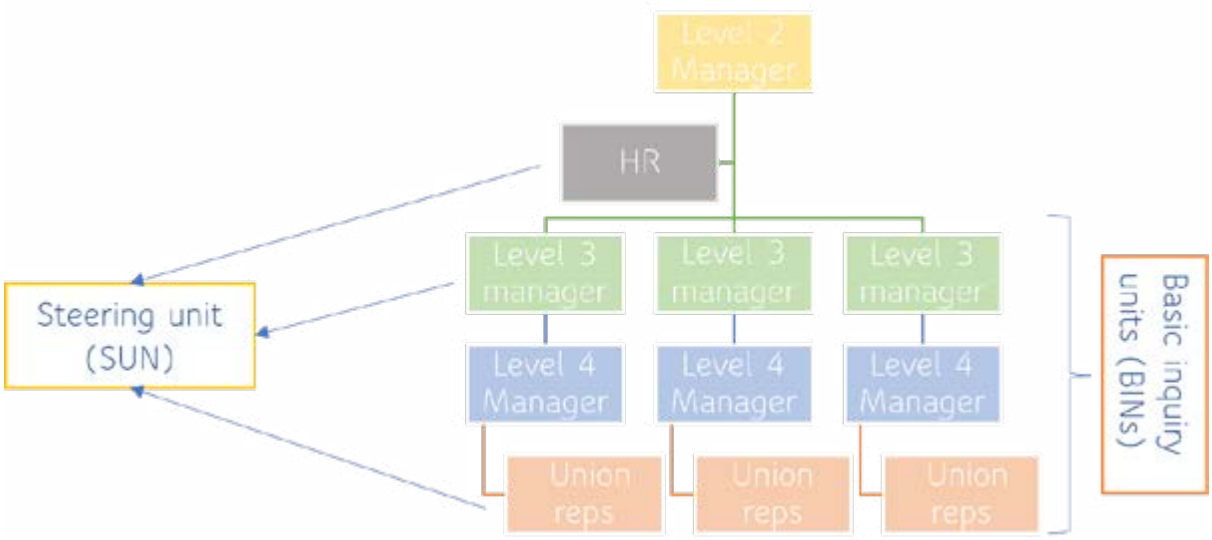

Figure 2: Defining the SUN and BIN(s)

Before examining the different units in detail, note that there are different levels of management within the OO; for example, the department manager (level 2), area managers (level 3), and local managers (level 4). As illustrated in figure 2, the SUN consists of representatives from HR, level 3 managers, and union representatives. Furthermore, it is important to note that the HR department representatives in the SUN are highly represented, with the responsibility of reporting to the level 2 manager. Also, the HR department is highly represented throughout the project and in the PO, as project managers and facilitators, which in this case is something different from their representation in the SUN. The HR representatives in the SUN have overall responsibility for planning, execution, and resource allocation, whilst level 3 managers and union representatives have the opportunity to give advice and suggestions. Ultimately, the cooperation in the SUN governed the activities carried out in the PO and guided the process in the intended direction.

As shown in figure 2, the BINs consisted of participants from different levels and roles within the OO. During the PO activities, the units were both heterogeneous and homogeneous, which meant that during some activities, the participants were divided based on roles, for example, groups consisting of union representatives. In other activities, the roles and levels were mixed, which also gave the participants experience with a more collective way of dealing with organisational matters. The process of working together and creating dancefloors, not limited by barriers from the OO, is described and analysed in the findings chapter.

4.2. Methods

We conducted 37 interviews in total, which included 15 individual and 22 group interviews (two or three participants). The data we used in this paper are part of a larger archive and consist both of field notes on project activities and of transcribed semi-structured and group interviews. The entire body of data comprises our entire collection of field notes and interviews with managers, union representatives, and other participants in the development project. The first author collected, transcribed, and analysed parts of the data material as a part of their [separate] PhD project. The co-authors had a more active role, as action researchers, taking part in designing the project, providing theoretical lectures, and collecting and analysing the data material. Table 1 describes the different phases of data collection through interviews as well as observations of project activities.

Table 1. Data gathered throughout the project

Interviews	**Project management group + HR**	**Level 3 management**	**Level 4 management**	**Union reps**	**Workers**
Pre-project	1 individual interview	1 group interview	3 group interviews		2 group interviews
Midway evaluation					13 individual interviews
Project end	1 individual interview 2 group interviews	1 group interview	3 group interviews	4 group interviews	6 group interviews
Observation	6 union-management development seminars				

In this paper, we emphasise the realities and experiences of the project participants. The analysis of field notes, observations, and transcribed interviews led us towards a generative process where an observed phenomenon required further evaluation and discussions. Going back and forth between the empirical data and theoretical concepts helped us to define interesting phenomena and find theoretical concepts that helped to describe and investigate the research question. Drawing upon Gioia et al. (2013), Table 2 illustrates the process of breaking down data into concepts, themes, and dimensions. The first-order concepts are classified as “pre-project” and “post-project” to better illustrate the development over time.

Table 2. Analysis of transcribed data

	First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimensions
Pre	Lack of interactions between unions and managers "Us against them" type of situation Formal structures for cooperation in place	Union–management cooperation limited to bargaining and conflict	Expanding union–management relations
Post	Building relationships between union reps and managers Awareness about similar goals/joint goals Better defined roles for managers and unions	Union–management cooperation based on cooperation	
Pre	Low degree of sharing responsibilities with union reps Unions not included in goal setting or decision-making Unions not actively engaging in making suggestions for improvement	Lacking procedures for knowledge and responsibility sharing	New procedures for organisational development
Post	Unions and managers discuss aims and decisions as a joint effort More focus on learning and development, less focus on "crunching numbers" Higher degree of knowledge sharing	Developing the organisation in a joint effort	

In addition to the two aggregated dimensions, we also provide a baseline analysis of the AR project design and context, which is considered in the findings chapter. This is relevant and particularly interesting because of the character of the public organisation and how the PO provided a different and necessary organisational mode. The development of a PO and the process of working within a more flexible and developmental environment is a phenomenon that needed further investigation.

5. Findings

Our findings are discussed based on our baseline analysis and on the dimensions presented in Table 2: "expanding union–management relations" and "new procedures for organisational development". We aimed to investigate how the development of a PO can enable OD through union–management cooperation in the public sector.

5.1. Baseline analysis of AR design and context

The AR project was defined as a national agency project, although the main activities were in the Traffics and Vehicle department (TVD), with the regional director as project owner. The SUN, with feedback to the regional director, was responsible for the overall economics, time frame, and quality of the project. The AR project was called "TVD-development" and the department worked on it from 2015 to the end of 2017. TVD employed approximately 500 people spread over a range of professional departments and geographically dispersed locations. A department can be characterised as hierarchical as it consisted of three managerial levels and decisions were often made by top levels of management. Work routines were highly determined by national and international legislation, and there was limited scope of action. The character of the TVD is illustrated through several managers' experiences of how decisions were made and how employees were often not included in decision-making:

"Decisions are often made over our heads [...] We need to prepare our employees for the changes that are coming. Our employees are competent, but they need time" (Level 3 manager).

"As managers, we decide and are responsible, and the employees must do what we tell them to do. Even though they might have sensible suggestions. We use a lot of time and resources to explain why they are not involved in every decision" (Level 3 manager).

These experiences show that authority was mostly held by the managers and that the daily practice was regulated both politically and by the upper part of the organisational chain of command. In addition, the second quotation says something about the extent to which employees were included in decision-making, indicating a low degree of autonomy This interpretation is also supported by an introductory presentation from the project manager in TDV, about the challenges in the organisation. The findings were: 1) mangers, particular on the lower levels, feel confined and insecure by bureaucratic rules, 2) employees are not sure how to contribute and take responsibility for the common work environment, and 3) formal arenas for union-management collaboration is not systemically followed up in the organisation. Our interviews in the beginning of the project confirmed and expanded this understanding. In particular, participants reported limited collaboration between the lowest rank of managers and the local union representative, which was explained by 1) more involvement of union representative on the regional level than the local, 2) few lower mangers not knowing their local union representatives, 3) many different labour unions, and 4) not acknowledging local representatives as a potential resource for development, not only a "watch dog".

Several of these challenges seemed to be connected to the characteristics of public organisations as described by Boyne (2002). The organisation was not flexible, the hierarchy limited communication, and processes of decision-making were cumbersome or executed at higher organisational levels. These characteristics reflect how the PO literature defines formal

organisations as less flexible and less equipped to deal with ill-defined issues (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974). By establishing a PO, the TVD was able to overcome some barriers to communication, reflection, and cooperation within the OO. With that in mind, we viewed the AR project initiated within the TVD as a PO.

As researchers, we performed the role of friendly outsiders within the project (Greenwood & Levin, 2007); we facilitated reflection, contributing with theoretical perspectives, and conducting research. The design of the management development seminars was based on theoretical perspectives of OD, such as organisational structure, power perspectives, human relations, and organisational culture and, finally, training in using these perspectives in practice through multi-perspective analysis (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Figure 3 illustrates the different stages and activities within the PO.

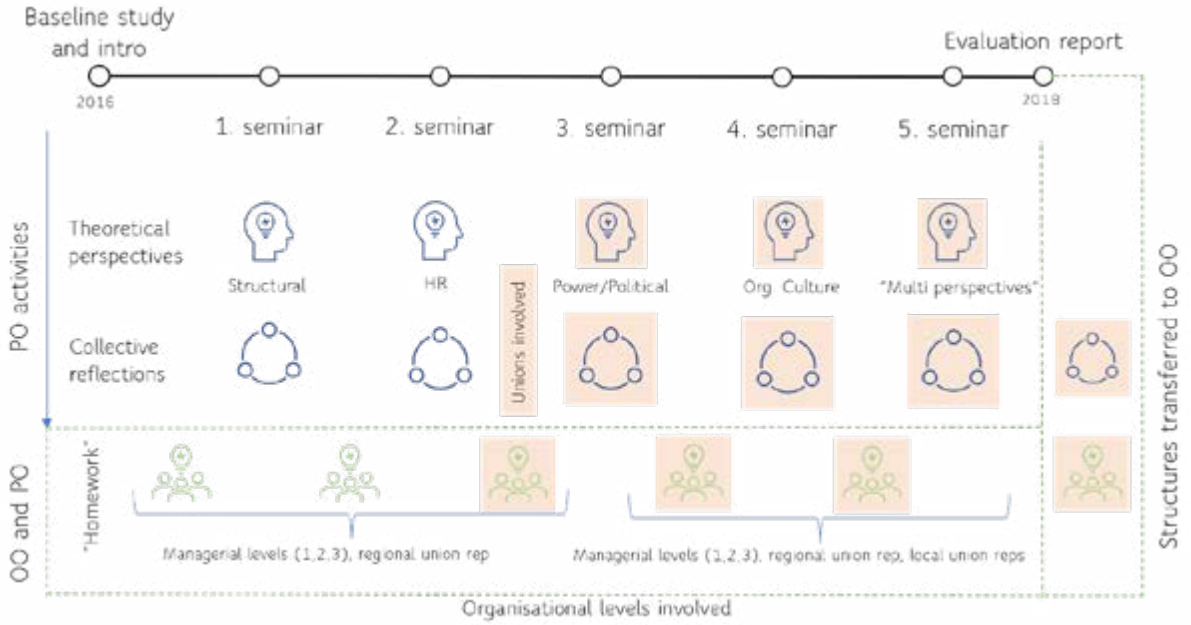

Figure 3: PO activities

We introduced managers and union representatives to these perspectives over the course of five seminars. The seminar discussions, which were organised in heterogeneous and rotating groups, created an arena for critical reflection, knowledge sharing, and the development of improved practices and services to the public. As shown in Figure 3, there was a turning point after the second seminar. In fact, the homework between seminars two and three required the management groups to involve and work collectively with the union representatives. The homework assignment prompted managers and union reps to collectively discuss what they needed from each other to succeed with developing their organisation. Going forward, local union representatives were included in the PO. To make this happen, a document with information about all of the local union reps was developed, which helped managers not only in the PO, but was also helpful to locate the representatives in ordinary work processes within the OO. The process and realisation following the turning

point in the PO also had consequences in the OO, as the management groups started including local union representatives in their management meetings.
The arena for reflection and knowledge sharing (Greenwood and Levin, 2007; McIntosh, 2010) provided participants with the opportunity to identify less defined and non-routine matters, as proposed in Table 1 (Hawk & Zand, 2014). Each group had one or two facilitators from the HR department who helped to guide the discussions. As illustrated in Figure 3, the homework activities became a task that had to be carried out in the PO as well as in the OO, because it required the participants taking the time in their daily work to complete the assignment. The combination of more theoretical input provided by the researchers and feedback between the SUN and BINs ensured a cooperative structure and guidance.

The character of the project gave participants from different groups within the department a new way of working together; they were able to "compare notes" and to reflect on both similar and different practices, and the discussions had the character of exploratory–inquiry norms, that differ from OO's directive-compliance norms. This means that the parallel norms promote careful questioning and analysis of goals, assumptions, methods, alternatives, and evaluation criteria. (Hawk & Zand, 2014). One of the union representatives commented on the experience of working on this type of project, and on how the PO provided an arena for cooperation:

"With the TVD-development project, we had an arena where we built relationships, and that is really important. In our day-to-day work, you do not have time to do that. The managers also participated in the seminars, and that gave us the possibility of being in the same room and taking part in joint discussions" (Union representative).

As this experience indicates, the PO provided opportunities for the participants to engage in cooperative and reflective actions that would otherwise be difficult in their day-to-day working life in the OO. They created an arena that was beyond the cumbersome bureaucracy and red tape (Boyne, 2002), which meant that the sharing of experiences and perspectives was less dependent on position, authority, or role.

To sum up, the pre-project situation in the TVD was highly regulated, constrained by bureaucratic characteristics, and limited in its structures for union–management cooperation. During the project, however, some of these challenges were overcome through the creation of a PO that improved cooperation and communication. In the following section, we further discuss how the PO and the activities impacted on union–management relations and cooperation.

5.2. Expanding union–management relations

The character of the TVD had previously limited how unions and management worked together, which also affected the matters that they usually dealt with in a joint effort. For the most part, they interacted in relation to bargaining and/or conflict situations. As mentioned earlier, the Nordic countries have traditionally had high levels of organised union membership (Nergaard, 2020), and partnerships in the workplace are often characterised as cooperative and focused on strategic issues at all levels (Eikeland, 2012). However, our case illustrated a situation with a high level of membership but limited cooperation. According to our field notes from the third management development seminar, managers had little knowledge of who the local union representatives were and where they were located, which became an issue when the homework assignment had to be carried out. Important to note here, is that there were no big conflicts to solve, rather a process of moving beyond bargaining focuses between the partners, defining roles, and clarifying the potentials of working collectively and more actively towards developing their organisation.

The PO provided the union representatives and managers with the opportunity to come together and reflect on matters beyond bargaining and conflicts. It is important to note that not all union representatives were able to participate in the PO, but they were included in PO-related matters within the OO. As previously mentioned, the turning point after seminar two had effects concerning the inclusion of union representatives in the OO. The homework assignment forced managers and union representatives to participate in a "dancing class", practicing dance routines that would be carried out in the OO. By working together on homework assignments and in mixed groups, hereby meaning participants across organisational levels, issues were raised pertaining to both their different and mutual interests. Even though it is not surprising that if you work together, you learn about the other's interests, this was a necessary realisation to the participants to move forward in the process. One manager shared his experience of getting to know the union representatives and how that led to the realisation that they had some mutual goals:

"First of all, we get to know the union representatives. Previously, that was not something I focused on. We had a very limited dialogue [...] We have our separate roles, of course, but we have the same goals when it comes to developing ourselves and being as good as possible" (Level 2 manager).

This manager's experiences clearly show that the communication between the partners was limited at the start of this project. During and after the project, however, they established a new relationship, central to which was reflecting on mutual goals and developing the organisation. Moreover, the experimental and reflective approaches are connected to AR (McIntosh, 2010; Greenwood and Levin, 2007), and the participants engaged in processes where knowledge and perspective sharing resulted in both individual and collective developments (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Their goal was to find ways of developing their department jointly. Like the manager's experience, one of the union representatives also found that the dialogue had changed during the project:

"I can see that the managers have better knowledge of who the union reps are and have included us to a greater extent. […] We have a more open dialogue between us" (Union representative).

During the AR project, therefore, the role of the union representatives was more clearly defined, because who they were, where they were located, and what their role was within the management groups were established. According to Rubenstein (2001), this can give unions a more distinct voice within managerial and organisational processes, which in turn also represents the employees' voices and perspectives. A stronger relationship between the partners also provides a longer-term perspective and can result in higher levels of commitment and trust throughout the organisation (Gill, 2009).

Based on this section, we can see that managers felt more in control at the end of the project and perceived a larger room for development and actions. The collaboration between labour unions and management was substantially improved. 1) managers and union representative better understood the purpose and role of each other, 2) managers got to know their local union representatives, 3) the different union became better at collaborating among themselves, 4) the role as local union representative became attractive, 5) formal arenas for union-management collaboration was systemically followed up on all levels of the organization, and 6) labour representatives were perceived and involved as resources for development. Our findings are also supported by a joint presentation held by the top TDV manager and the top regional union representative delivered at a national government employer conference. Here they said that 1) union representatives are invited as an active partner in meeting with management teams at all levels in the organisation, both formally and informally, 2) higher level of trust and more focus on collaboration between the parties, 3) an organization more focusing on development issues rather than just reports and numbers, and 4) unions representatives is active in spreading correct information and culling rumours. This was perceived as particular important during a huge reorganisation starting one year after the end of the project.

Our findings show that the establishment of a PO helped the TVD to develop and expand union–management relations and to move towards a more cooperative approach. This included more acceptance for union work, with no specific additional funding. Due to the increase in formal and informal meetings, the hours spent on working with union matters were substantially increased. In hindsight, we reflect upon the starting point for the expanded cooperation. As illustrated, the cooperation between the partners were limited, but we also realise that this does not mean that the relationship between them was characterized by conflicts. Also, there was a sense of trust between the partners, which was essential in the process of establishing a cooperation beyond traditional bargaining. Our reflections may have implications for which conditions such cooperation can be developed and succeed. In the following section, we discuss the new procedures connected to union–management cooperation and a clearer developmental focus.

5.3. New procedures for organisational development

Our case exemplifies how national regulations and agreements reveal little about the actual conduct of employment relations (Johnstone & Wilkinson, 2018). Like the workforce more generally in Norway, the TVD had a high degree of union membership. Nevertheless, we found little evidence there of the cooperative efforts described by Eikeland (2012). However, we observed that participation in the AR project and being part of a PO led to the development of arenas, or dancefloors, where cooperation between unions and management became possible. During the project, union representatives were also given a clearer role within the formal organisational and managerial processes. One of the managers commented on how unions participated in strategic and managerial processes at local levels:

"It has become clear that the union representatives take part in the strategic and management processes in our local area. The commitment has increased and now there are people who actually *want* to become union representatives" (Level 2 manager).

According to this manager, the increased involvement of union representatives also increased the level of commitment in the organisation; in particular, there was increased interest in becoming a union representative. Basically, the work in the PO enhanced the union representatives' position since it was obvious that their engagement would be important and taken into consideration by the management. This development resulted in a shift towards new perspectives and awareness connected to roles and interests, moving towards a perspective that aligns with the notion that unions and managers do have similar goals, values, and interests, and that such agreements can create a supportive environment when developing workplaces (Heckscher, 2001; Kochan et al., 2009; Oeij et al., 2015).

Another manager spoke about how the expanded union–manager relations and the project activities allowed them to shift their focus in their working life:

"I have noticed that we have moved beyond the huge focus on production. I feel that we share experiences and talk to each other more than we did before. We focus less on crunching numbers" (Level 2 manager).

By moving beyond a production focus and by sharing knowledge and experiences, the partners moved towards knowledge production and were able to reflect on current and future practices. This shift is important to provide a long-term and organisation-wide perspective (Finnestrand, 2011), and provide the unions with a voice in matters that concern the future of both the organisation and employees (Oeij et al., 2015). As another manager reported, the ability to view matters from different perspectives and to work towards joint goals made their work easier, which is in line with the ideas behind PO literature (Hawk & Zand, 2014; Zand, 1974) and the ideals of AR (Greenwood & Levin, 2007):

"It's become easier, I think. We have the same goals [...] It's easier to make decisions. We are able to view things from different sides. There is no blueprint. We can discuss things together" (Level 3 manager).

The notion of a lack of "blueprints" indicates the difference between a PO and the OO (Hawk & Zand, 2014). Within the OO, the structures, procedures, and routines previously prevented or made it challenging to become aware of longer-term and intangible matters. Hence, by using facilitators and discussion, the PO provided something different to the blueprints and highly regulated practices with which the organisation was familiar. By working in a joint effort on the project activities, based on jointly acquired theoretical understanding, it was apparent that the activities and outcomes in the PO had an impact and were being transferred to the OO. This is illustrated by the experiences of the union representative:

"You get used to being the grey ghost who is put in the corner. All of a sudden, people start asking for your opinion. That's not something we are used to. Now, you are out up front and supposed to speak your mind. Of course, you will grow from that. It's a personal development" (Union rep).

This experience can be viewed as a shift, where the union representatives are now invited to dance with the managers, and maybe even taking the lead in certain dance routines. The newfound procedures for cooperation and the expanded relationships can also benefit the organisation as a whole and promote organisational reflection and development on behalf of the collective. For instance, the AR literature recommends looking closely at the workplace and practices in a joint effort, because this can generate knowledge production and solutions closely connected to and based on participants' own experiences and needs (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Our findings also show that the PO helped the TVD to navigate around bureaucratic barriers, and that it enabled participants to create new procedures with a shift in focus away from the traditional hierarchy solely focusing on production and accounting, towards cooperation and collaborative OD.

6. Conclusions

The use of PO in organisational development builds on many years of experience from AR projects in the Nordic countries that involve union representatives and managers in various companies from the aftermath of the Norwegian Industrial Democracy program and up to today (see for example Levin, 2002). Many of these projects have contributed to improved lines of communication in the company (Finnestrand, 2011), better cooperation between the various trade unions (Ravn & Øyum, 2020) and improved development and implementation of new technology (Claussen, Haga & Ravn, 2021). The problem is that virtually all these attempts have been made within the private sector. The findings of our AR within a Norwegian public organisation show that the PO created a dancefloor that was less confined by bureaucratic barriers associated with public sector and on which unions and managers could dance and co-create new relations, enhance their roles, and shift focus towards developing

the workplace in a joint effort. Although working life and union–management cooperation is highly regulated in Scandinavia, a regulated partnership with formal agreements and structures might lack the dynamics that promote exploratory and reflective norms. In this case, both managers and unions were more development oriented and had a more defined role by the end of the AR project. We argue that this was possible, mostly, because the AR project and management seminars ran parallel to the formal, large, public organisation. Our findings may also be relevant across sectors, particularly for highly bureaucratic organisations, as collective ways for organisations to develop and improve practices in a parallel structure may be relevant for a wide range of organisations. Also, for other organisations to initiate such efforts, we observe that a minimum level of trust and a manageable level of conflict is required.

Another important argument here is how union representation made important contributions to the organisation in general and to OD in particular. The unions provided effective communication structures and promoted trust and commitment within the TVD. In addition, they provided an organisation-wide and long-term perspective that resulted in a more distinct focus on development. Organisational development leading to more effective processes is clearly one form of public innovation. Ultimately, ensuring the direct participation of all employees is more demanding on resources and time, which was also the experience in this AR project, as local pilot projects were carried out as an additional part of the project. Rational reasons for why employees did not participate actively in the AR project were studied in a previous paper (Lebesby & Benders, 2020)).

Our findings have three practical implications. First, when broad participation and flat structures are sought, a PO is a legitimate intervention to facilitate better communication, especially within public organisations. Second, the PO can function as a relations- and network-building structure, and it can be used as a tool for enhancing cooperation between unions and managers. Third, AR approaches and the purpose of POs can expand the cooperative effort, help participants develop their roles, and increase commitment to organisational development.

Our findings contribute to the industrial relations literature by proposing POs as a tool for building relations between unions and managers in a public organisation. Our paper also contributes to the PO literature by proposing that the inclusion of unions in a PO can be crucial when attempting to transfer outcomes into the OO. As previously mentioned, literature on public sector development rarely discuss the union role (Bie-Drivdal, 2019; 2021; Kjellberg, 2021). Hence, this paper contributes to, and might inspire, future discussions about union–management development projects in public sector organisations. It is a good example of how organisations can facilitate indirect participation, and the broad involvement of employees in OD matters can in turn result in new practices and innovations. However, an apparent limitation is the establishment of an arena that also facilitates direct participation. Our observation is that while unions and managers participate on the dancefloor, the employees are, at best, waiting on the outside of the dancing venue. Hence, it is

recommended that future research studies how action researchers and practitioners can include a greater number of ordinary employees in PO efforts and how that will impact organisational development in the long run.

Concluding remarks

Ideally, all prospective parties should be invited to the dancefloor and be viewed as qualified dancers. In this paper we observed that the dancefloor served the purpose of an arena for collective development. However, the final dance routine is to be carried out within the OO without the guidance of facilitators or friendly outsiders.

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Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges

Book review

Edited by Kenneth Abrahamsson and Richard Ennals (2022)
Publisher: Peter Lang, Berlin
By: Paul Preenen

Many relevant books, reports and publications about sustainable work and quality of work have been written. However, the book *Sustainable Work in Europe: Concepts, Conditions, Challenges*, edited by Kenneth Abrahamsson and Richard Ennals may be more needed than ever. As Allan Larsson mentions in his preface: "never in modern times has working Europe been faced with such a fundamental and far- reaching transition pressure. We are at the beginning of two powerful transition processes, innovation- driven digital transformation, and policy- driven climate transition. On top of these processes, we are now facing a pandemic-driven restructuring of important sectors of our economies and the way we are working."

Many or all European countries are struggling with this new uncertainty, and with the associated social and labour market challenges. Temporary jobs and precarious working conditions are increasing in many sectors, while high-performance jobs are increasing in the advanced manufacturing sector. Rigorous research, new models and theory are needed to deal with these challenges of the future of work. Strategies to meet the new challenges need to be developed by countries, social partners, and companies. We need to learn from the Nordic frontrunner countries and researchers. More specifically, knowledge is needed on how to accomplish secure and adaptable employment, equality and health and safety at work, proper work life balance, a good social dialogue and effective participation of workers. New workplace innovations for job quality, productivity and growth are increasingly necessary on the road to a sustainable future of work.

The book addresses these topics and has carefully outlined sustainable work as a process to cope with present and future issues on digitalisation, climate change and the Covid pandemic at the workplace. A sustainable workplace reflects the reconciliation between health, the development of work environment for the employees, and a productive and value-creating mission for organisations. In this regard, the book offers novel intellectual insights, frameworks, and approaches stimulating thinking, further research, and planning for the future of work in Europe. The book looks forward rather than back. It bridges gaps between social science and medicine, adding emphasis on age and gender. The book links workplace practice, theory and policy, and is intended to provide the basis for ongoing debate and dialogue.

Sustainable Work in Europe brings together a strong core of Swedish inspired working life research, with additional contributions from across Europe. Chapters have been authored by leading members of the European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN), as well as from Eurofound, EU-OSHA and the Perosh network. As a result, the book offers a broad European perspective on Sustainable Work. The book targets fellow researchers and students, but it is also very inspiring and informative for labour professionals, employers, employee representatives, unions, and policy makers. It builds on a special double issue 6.1- 2, March 2021, of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*. Most chapters have been revised for this book, and some completely new chapters have been added. The book is divided in three parts consisting of 17 chapters, excluding the preface, foreword and postscript.

The first part *Sustainable work, job quality and equality* focuses on the sustainable work concept, its policy background and relation to job quality, inequality, gender, older workers, and senior employment. Successful sustainable work necessitates social protection, and gender-based welfare systems, such as pension rights. An eyeopening read is Frank Pot's chapter *Monotonous and repetitive work: Some people are more unequal than others*. Over the years more than 20 % of the working population in Europe carry out tasks of less than one minute. However, in the last decade there has been very little in- depth research into this kind of work. It is time to place repetitive work prominently on the agendas again. We can learn from programmes that were executed in Denmark and Belgium in the past. We can better enforce existing legislation. Criteria for "good work" are available, as well as appropriate design theories. Let us not forget this special category of workers with monotonous and repetitive work.

The second section *Sustainable workplace innovations, digitalisation, and the green revolution* highlights the importance of sustainable workplace innovations. It takes a deeper view at change mechanisms and drivers caused by digitalisation, climate change and the Covid 19 pandemic. The message of Lena Abrahamsson and Jan Johansson in their chapter *Digitalisation and Sustainable work: obstacles and pathways* may seem logical but really needs attention. It is a topic that resonates to all of us. We are all concerned about how our work will be in the future: will we be able to handle the new technology, or will technology control us? The aim of their chapter is to identify obstacles, and find pathways for sustainable work, in a digital future. To enable positive development, the technical and organisational development needs to include knowledge and needs of the society, the human and the worker.

The third and final section *From policy to practice: Channels of implementation* focuses on implementation and the channels and methods to connect research, policies, and good practices in order to support employers and employees, unions and employee representatives to move to better workplaces, including better job quality. This is done by highlighting the importance of workplace innovations, social partners and the social dialogue, OSH research collaborations and dissemination as well as the importance of higher education to implement the SDGs. For example, in their chapter *Workplace innovation: Are we serious?* Peter Totterdill

and Rosemary Exton share their experiences and a framework to address the, to date, still limited adoption of Workplace Innovation practices in European organisations, and thereby better helping realising their key public policy goals. Their approach and insights are built on their extensive research, consultancy, workforce development, policy advocacy experience and EUWIN cooperation.

In conclusion, the book is highly informative and inspiring from many viewpoints of both theory, research, practice and policy. The authors and editors should be applauded. It puts forward highly interesting, relevant and inspiring research, theory, and pathways to increase sustainable work and job quality in various European contexts. Now that the concepts and importance of sustainable work and job (e)quality, handles for the current big societal challenges, as well as channels of implementation (e.g., Workplace Innovation) have been well described for the route to sustainable work in Europe, one ongoing challenge remains. Firms, social partners and nations should actually use this knowledge to ensure good work in the future, for everyone. As Kenneth Abrahamsson puts it: "*We must invest in protecting and creating jobs, and in driving our competitive sustainability, by building a fairer, greener and more digital Europe.*" So hopefully, in the coming years, we can also applaud our policy makers and leaders.