

Workers resist shift to hot desks by placing personal items on workspaces, says new research

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Workers place personal items, like photographs, on their desks in order to resist a change to a flexiwork style of working, according to new research from emlyon business school.

The research found that employees believed this is the most effective approach to show their dissatisfaction and halt the change to a new way of working, utilising their personal items as an overt way to resist the shift to flexiwork.

These are the findings of research by David Courpasson, Professor of Sociology at emlyon business school, alongside colleagues from Universite catholique de Louvain.

The researchers wanted to understand how employees react to changes in their work environment, especially in the context of flexiwork and the space used for working.

To do so, the researchers conducted a study of a large Belgian organisation, which was shifting from a standard office environment to a flexiwork system, where employees worked both from home and in a shared office.

The researchers collected data from interviews with employees and photographs of their workspaces which they submitted.

The researchers found that employees used various tactics to resist a change to the shared office system, such as leaving personal objects like pictures on desks, leaving material and work equipment lying on desks or even leaving their desks dirty or untidy in order to keep the same desk as their own.

Professor Courpasson says,

“These workplaces, alongside working from home, offer employees flexibility, freedom and autonomy, whilst also supposedly reducing existing hierarchical gaps between management and workers.

However, employees believe it rather dispossesses them of a personal space, which many believe makes the workplace identity-less and “de-humanized”. Therefore, our research clearly shows employees utilise tactics to change this, with the main effective way being place personal items on supposedly shared workplaces. This permits to identify the key role objects play in the resistance to workspace changes in organizations”

This study provides into the impact of a shift to a shared office, where desks must be left empty, clean and tidy at the end of the day, in order for anyone to sit anywhere each day that they work in the office, and whether or not employees adhere and accepted this.

The research shows though there is a shift to this work method, workers simply used their own methods to resist the change, and used personal objects to ensure they effectively still had their own specific

workplaces despite it being a shared office.

As many companies have looked to employ flexiwork and shared office strategies since the beginning of the covid pandemic, this research showcases how employees are likely to react to the shift to a hotdesk workplace. This suggests that organisational management should see spatial changes as more complicated than mere geographical transitions. For instance, accepting that specific occupations may require a specific use of space, instead of considering flexiwork as “good in itself”.

This research was published in the Human Relations journal.