

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

COVID-19 AND ACTIVITY BASED WORKPLACES

TIME FOR A RENEWED INTEREST.



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It actually works to work together yet apart!

In Sweden, white collar workers swiftly adapted to working from home when the Covid-19 crisis hit. The technology that enabled working together but apart, with virtual meetings and sharing documents in the Cloud, has been present for quite some time. What the pandemic changed was people's knowledge, habit of, and attitude towards using digital ways of work for close collaboration, if required. Thus, offices have been emptying during the pandemic and could continue to be empty after the crisis is over. How has the trend of working away from the office affected co-workers' work-life? How will the trend affect companies' use of workplaces? What will the impact be on the Swedish office phenomena Activity Based Workplace?

Sweden was well prepared for working from home because it was highly digitally developed. Apart from what many anticipated, Swedish co-workers' well-being and productivity did not decline. Even though media reported stories of loneliness and people working overtime, a comparative study shows that, in general, people actually thrived when getting away from the office. A qualitative case study, with twenty interviews during spring, tells a similar story. The study's interviews showed that what did happen was that people's strategies for separating work from the rest of their life were re-negotiated. The study revealed that many experienced people increased their focus, efficiency and productivity, but also felt a lack in their creativity and social life. Some co-workers longed to return to the office. Others hoped that they never would have to return. Most believed that they would keep some of the behaviors learned and gain a more flexible and efficient working life, by having more virtual meetings to reduce traveling and to advance co-worker collaboration.

Sweden has been a forerunner in developing the office of the future through integrated changes such as Activity Based Workplaces (ABW), co-working spaces and hofices (working from other people's homes) as examples. The fact that Swedes are eager to try out new office forms could be thanks to a willingness to digitally adapt and low cultural hie-

rarchy. The physical distancing strategy and emptying of offices will probably continue to affect Swedes use of office spaces and Swedish companies' office strategies. In short, the pandemic will change the future of the office. On a societal level, decision makers need to change and adapt to the changed work-life around HR policies, regulations around working time and responsibility for work environments. On an organizational level, companies need to support personnel's home offices with monetary support for workspace and ergonomic equipment. Organizations must rethink the actual meaning of their offices. Is it a place for people to meet and work together or is it personal space to do analytical and focused work? Is it a place to work full time in, or a place open when people want to visit? Or is it a place for meetings internally or externally? Moreover, is the office a symbolic space of culture and image? The answers to these questions will help decide on the geographical location, type, size and design of the office. After the end of the pandemic, individuals will need to renegotiate their own strategies for time and place as well as the balance of their work and life relation. This will have to be negotiated on a team, manager and company level. It will be argued that the pandemic will mean a re-revolution for the ABC workplace.

This discussion builds on my studies over the last seven years on how technology changes the way we communicate, organize, work, live and lead. I have studied offices of the future such as ABW as well as modern working behavior and leadership through social media and virtual co-working. During March and April 2020, I interviewed 17 co-workers, from the CEO to a bookkeeping assistant, at a medical company with the policy of working from home.

Do we need offices?

At the end of July, Anders Tegnell representing the Public Health Authority, encouraged Swedes to avoid public transportation, and to continue to work from home also in the autumn, if possible. Tegnell said that the pandemic might even affect our work life and society forever.

The Swedish branch of a tech company had by then already decided that personnel, from spring and forward, only need to be two to three days per week at the office, if such an arrangement works in their work role. The policy was set not only for 2020, but as a permanent policy. The company's headquarters has already started planning on how the company can downsize the number of its offices. Similarly, the US-based insurance company Nationwide has taken the decision to shrink their 20 offices to four. Microsoft Sweden, who has a long history of working Activity-Based and mixing virtual and physical cooperation, closed their office totally, and transformed to only working together virtually. Thus, the policy of working from home that was taken in haste in the spring, has been extended to a permanent way of working.

Swedish newspapers and websites were in March and April, alongside with crisis updates on Covid-19, filled with recommendations on how to work from home with efficient videoconferences and tips such as using an ironing board for creating a stand up desk for good ergonomics. The answer to how people are doing without their office is diverse looking at media, news and surveys. But it is hard to argue that an office is an inevitable must for people to get work done, and one comprehensive study shows that people's well-being and productivity significantly have improved during the pandemic compared to the same time last year prior to the pandemic. (Winnintemp 2020)

One could ask, do people need offices?

In the past few decades, Sweden has been a developer of the office of the future. Activity Based Workplace, ABW, is a phenomenon that has been formed and created in Sweden, Holland and to some extent in Australia. The Activity Based Workplace implies that the office space consists of zones meant for specific activities. Often there is a social space in the middle close to the entrance with a communal feeling where the coffee machines are, which is like the oasis on the savannah where you meet colleagues. Further away, spaces for project work and meetings with a constant level of talk and noise, turns into quieter areas with comfortable desks and chairs suited for silent focused work.

The argument from architects and change managers behind this trend is that work no longer is a matter of place nor a time. Work is comprised of activities to do, and they are best done in different environments, and in cooperation with others. Further, the change to ABW is more than an office change; it is rather a change of ways of working. ABW is a digital, paperless way of working, result-oriented, flexible and unrestricted with a lot of responsibility placed on individuals and teams with self-leadership as an effect.

Two of the most well-known and well-toured success office examples are the Swedish real estate company Vasakronan and tech company Microsoft of Sweden. Both also have an interest in exemplifying a modern successful office, since effectiveness is part of their business idea. Many companies, and lately also governmental institutions, are making the same transformational journey by moving into, building, or changing their office according to ABW principles.

Interestingly, these first adapters of the ABW are now moving on to a new, next level, ABW 2.0 with a focus on a central positioning and possibility of co-working with other businesses. Microsoft moved to a new office in the most central part of Stockholm last year. They have shrunk the office space hugely and worked on lowering noise, increasing meeting space, exclusive coffee machines and phone booths. A small part of the office is there for Microsoft employees. But the larger part of the new office also welcomes partners. Customers, clients and providers can come and work here too, and create new business in co-working with Microsoft. During the pandemic, Swedish Microsoft closed its office and now solely works virtually. Vasakronan will also move to a new office located in the center of Stockholm. They are building an office where they will not only have unrestricted seating options among themselves, but with startups and other companies in a co-working space. This last year has clearly shown an established trend of central offices or co-working spaces where personnel come to work when it suits them, and where companies seek interaction in co-working arrangements.

There are also examples of distributed companies, which never had

nor will have an office at all. Entrepreneur and Word-press co-founder Matt Mullenweg runs tech company Automattic with 1,100 employees working in 77 countries. He argues that the totally distributed work where people are recruited based on competence instead of geography, helps the environment and economy as well as individual freedom and adds better results for companies.

The question is inevitable, do companies even need offices? And if so, what kind of offices?

Evolution of technology creates a revolution in ways of work and office development

Office of the future as preparation for flexible work-life

Cell offices consist of personal or shared rooms, while landscape offices are larger rooms, where every co-worker sits at a designated desk. The flex office is a landscape of desks where co-workers sit down whenever there is place available. It looks like a traditional landscape but without personal belongings. A flex office is a typical consultant or sales company where people spend most of their working time with customers or clients. All these are different from an ABW.

Technology has gone through an evolution. With the internet, laptops, tablets, cellphones, websites, cloud computing, and Wi-Fi, this digital evolution has created a revolution in work life. If you have a white-collar job, you can work anytime, anywhere. And these activities do not need to be done at a personal desk in your own room in the company office.

This is one of the foundational thoughts behind the phenomena of Activity Based Workplace, a different way of organizing offices and work.

The office of the real estate company Vasakronan has a similar feel to a small town. The entrance leads to the reception where the personal are baristas, so you are asked what coffee you would like and whom you want to meet. The square is for coffee and food and used as a social hangout. Here there are always people, cappuccino, fruit and the

Swedish cherished Fika. Around the square are rooms for sit downs for spontaneous work meetings. Further away from the square, quiet areas for focused work exist, as well as bookable meeting rooms of different sizes. Some work desks are fitted with a single screen, some with several or very large screens.

The core idea behind ABW is based on the insight that work is not a place we need to be, nor a time we need to fit. Work consists of activities we do. Some activities need focus in silence while some activities both require planned and spontaneous meetings with others. I interviewed a manager who expressed the shift in leadership attitude by saying: "I don't give a crap where people are or when they work. I care about their work results and their wellbeing." Many of today's work activities are basically all done paperless, not even saved on a private computer, but in the Cloud. Co-workers log in to their workplace and job tasks on any screen, in any room, in any company office. They switch places depending on what they need to do and how they feel. The over-hearing and sitting next to different people in the organization will deter silo thinking and instead encourage efficiency and collaboration. The ABW office does not look like an office. It looks like a combination of a fancy hotel lobby and a café with some desks added to the scene.

There are profits to be made, both financially in reducing office space, and also in flexibility. The organization can expand with more people without having to make changes in the office. When studying ABWs, it has also become clear that offices have to deal with image management. Not only must the office be a representative space of company values, it must also be fresh and clean from personal belongings. Having a flexible, adaptive, digital workplace communicates that the organization itself is flexible and modern. Office change is also a visible and effective opportunity for a CEO and a board to demonstrate drive, decisiveness and profit awareness. Swedish companies have tried to export the paradigm of ABW examples, resulting in different levels of success. Not all managers are willing to let go of their long-sought corner office. The Swedish traditional low level of authority and hierarchy combined with

Swedes' high interest in and willingness to adapt to new technology could be two of the reasons behind the success of the ABW way of work in Sweden. After several years of studies and data gathering, we now know more about the ABW office. For example, performance outcome is not affected by office type. Performance is more affected by co-worker's ability for self-leadership through goal setting (Bäcklander et. al 2017). In general, boards and management are positive towards ABWs, but the resistance prior and sometimes also after the initiated ABW change, can be difficult from the co-worker's perspective. Over the years, I have met people confessing things like "this way of working is perfect, I can never go back to a traditional way of being at work at a certain time, at a certain desk." But I have also met attitudes like "ABW is like communism. "To share everything only works in theory.". The ABW is not the answer to the perfect work environment, but it is an example of Swedes' willingness to explore new ways of working.

Sweden's level of tech preparedness for working remotely during the pandemic is off the scale compared to rest of Europe, based on country per capita population that works from home often or sometimes, as well as the share of the nation's broadband network that consists of optic fiber. (HSBC April 2020) This fact could have a large effect on post-pandemic work life and way of organizing business.

Productivity and being content in working from home during the pandemic

In a report written by scholar Leif Denti and company Winningtemp (April 2020), personnel's experience of stress, workload, autonomy and leadership significantly changed for the better during the first months of the pandemic. The report builds on questionnaire responses from 400 Swedish businesses and is a comparative and longitudinal study, where these measures are done regularly. The results are positive when compared both to the months before the pandemic and compared to the same time last year. Staff in many sectors also show an increased feeling of meaningfulness. (Winningtemp April 2020)

In the past year, I have studied an organization in the pharmaceutical industry, specifically focusing on the co-workers' experience and attitude to their new ABW office. During the spring, I started conducting interviews in the office. It was an interesting case where some co-workers simply did not follow guidelines of clean-desk policy, but instead anarchistically occupied desks and/or areas. On the other hand, very content co-workers found the new office attractive, affable, creative and enriching. Among the positive things experienced was the opportunity to sit next to people who you have things in common with personally, rather than just business related. Thus, getting to work alongside colleagues in your age group or with similar interests was a clear benefit, and gaining insights about other parts of the company was also an added bonus.

Then the pandemic happened. We switched a number of interviews to online conversations. During April 2020, I interviewed 17 co-workers, from the CEO to a finance assistant. The interviews were held virtually between my home and their homes, gardens, summer cottages and in a few cases the company office. All those interviewed witnessed that it works well with physical distancing. People experienced that the communication with colleagues functioned thanks to an increased use of virtual meetings, both with departments, teams and individuals. They also arranged virtual meetings with the sole purpose of being social. Digital Fika took place with coffee and buns and small talk. None of the interviewed experienced a lack of productivity or efficiency. They spoke of the possibility to work uninterrupted with good focus. Some have home office spaces from before, while others had created home office spaces after a week spent on the living room couch or by the kitchen table, neither of which ergonomically functioned well. The phenomenon of Zoom-fatigue was experienced. What was lacking was the experience of creativity and the absence of socially spontaneous interactions. The interview study showed a general agreement on that it works to work apart, but also showed a large variety regarding how much people appreciated the working remotely experience, everything

from never wanting to go back to their offices, to longing to hug the office coffee machine and their office colleagues as soon as possible.

The Leesman Company measures how office environments support staffs job tasks. Based on questionnaires with over 50,000 respondents from 313 workplaces in 61 countries from the spring and early summer of 2020, 81% answered that their home environment enables them to work productively. The activities they feel worked best while working from home were 1) individual focused work with 84% agreement, and 2) planned meetings at second place with 76% agreement. (Leesman, July 2020) The Leesman report showed that 38% answered that creative thinking is supported by the home office, and 35% said that social interaction is was supported while working from home. The activities that were the least supported when working from home were spreading out of paper and materials and hosting clients or customers.

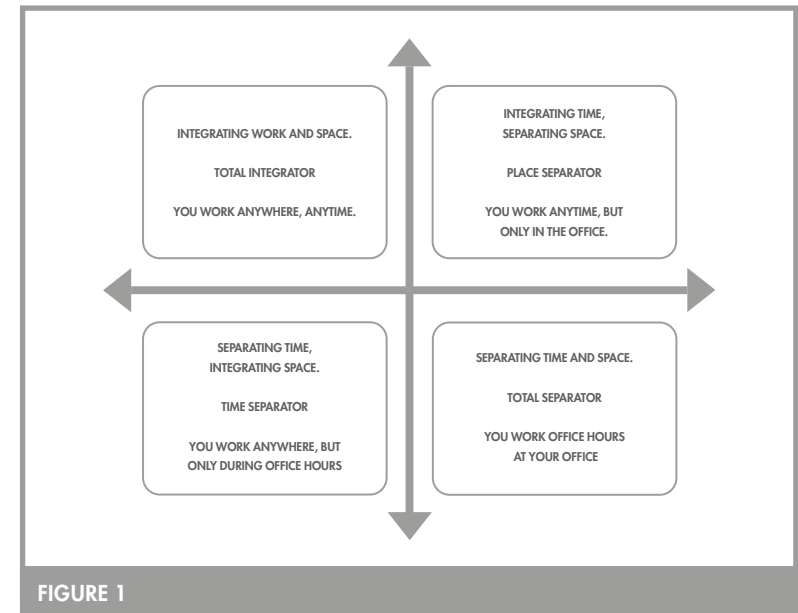
Re-negotiated strategies for time and space in work-life balance

In work-life science, the terms integrators and separators have been used to describe how people deal with work vs private life. For example, Ann Bergman with colleagues found seven strategies used in digital work-life and argues that people switch or combine different strategies. (Bergman et. al 2020)

In the interviews conducted, it was quite clear that the two most common factors for integration/separation was time and place. If you work in an Activity Based Workplace, with a looser focus on time and place and an enhanced focus on results, you are already used to taking your own decisions around these factors.

Inspired by the Bergman model and my interviews, I could see four different core strategies for dealing with your work and life in the digitally set work-life.

A time-separator works only during office hours, while a time integrator can work anytime such as weekends, evenings and vacations. A place separator only works at dedicated spots such as a desk at home. A place integrator works wherever; for instance, in the bedroom, the



kitchen, living room and bathroom. Most people combine or switch strategies due to work-load, family life or personal taste. (Bergman et al 2020) During the pandemic, these strategies had to be re-negotiated.

How then is the experience of work-life balance when one is working from home? In the Leesman study, 71% witness that they maintain a good balance while working from home. The balance between work and life can both be improved, for example, by not having to commute. But this balance can also be hindered by working long hours and by not having colleagues who tempt them to take breaks. A colleague of mine expressed how she before the pandemic was annoyed by interruptions with questions and talk from people around her. However, now she actually misses being interrupted.

In France, there are regulations against answering business-related emails outside working hours. In Sweden, even though we have regulations in law, we have left the boundary-setting very much up to the company, the managers, the teams and the individuals. These expectations of when and where to work, sometimes collide. Regularly, I meet people

who have wanted to work from home but felt that their managers would not let them. It will be interesting to see if these managers, now when we are being allowed to work from home, will go back to their earlier opinions about where work should take place, or if they will change their views after this pandemic period.

There are reports from unions and the government health agency that show stress in Sweden is increasing and that digitalization and flexibility is one possible explanation for this rise in stress. Many people I have interviewed during the years have argued that the possibility to have flex work hours and to work digitally is not causing stress, on the contrary, it is reducing stress. Leaving from work early meant that they can feel like good parents when picking up their children from daycare on time and to prepare dinner for the family, and to then work an hour after the kids have gone to bed. In a time-study on ABW offices I performed, one work peak was in the evening. Perhaps this stress reduction is experienced from a short-term perspective. By working flex hours, people experience stress reduction now, but the fact that they are always online and seldom totally off from work could add stress from the long-term perspective.

Advice for people, leaders and organizations

Individuals now have an opportunity to experiment with what works best for them. Work early or work late, and work from home or from a summer cottage or at a friend's, instead of from the office. Based on this experience, people can then adapt to these insights when they are welcomed back to the office. What individuals need to make clear for themselves is which work/life strategies functions best for their work tasks and their personal needs. Is it a matter of time separation compared with place integration or place separation with time integration?

Managers need to be adaptive and flexible regarding their personnel's individual needs and work/life strategies. What managers should focus on are the results that co-workers produce and about their staff's well-being. This is moment presents a paradigm shift, a letting go of

controlling time and place to instead measuring results.

Do companies need offices after COVID? Offices could be a "nice to have" rather than "need to have" issue. Offices can be needed as a symbolic narrative for a company and a spatial representation of corporate identity. It can be important as a meeting and collaboration space. Or it could be an asset for co-workers to come to work, following the traditional way of working. No one option needs to be right or wrong.

What is certain is this. Decision makers who lead companies and organizations need to create a new office strategy and new policies not only during the Covid-19 crisis, but also after the pandemic. Our work life behavior, business travel, communication channels and meeting culture have changed. It is not solely due to new technology; it is due to attitude, culture and knowledge of the possibilities of working together while apart. Organizations need to ask themselves what they want with their office. Is it a place for all co-workers to spend full time; a place to meet and collaborate internally; or a place to meet and collaborate externally? The answer to this will then define geographical location and commuting possibilities, office type, size, structure and design.

On a societal level, we need to upgrade policies and laws. When someone is sorting out her email on the bus while commuting to work, is this travel time and/or working time? It is quite clear that the employer has been chiefly responsible for the work environment. Should this responsibility be shared? I believe that responsibility could be shared, but companies should support their co-workers in attaining a good working environment.

It works to work apart and what can happen if we really take this seriously.

In recent years, I have heard from experts that ABW offices is a dying trend. The pandemic will change this. I believe that ABW offices will be even more popular from now on, since ABW offices are designed to be flexible depending how many chose to come in to work, and the work these spaces most encourage is work done together.

I believe that many companies now will downsize their office space, and I hope that they take the responsibility to support their co-workers' at-home work environment by supplying monetary support for space, screens, desks, office chairs and high-speed internet connections. If this does not occur, we will see different conditions, depending on where and how workers live, for different people when performing their jobs.

We have had the technical solutions for working together apart quite some time, but we have not yet really fully achieved functioning capability. Working digitally has still meant a rise in urbanization. One doomsday predictor of the future said that due to urbanization large areas of Sweden such as Gotland in short will be "garbage space". However, urbanization will continue because we will work in flexible and digital work spaces in the inner areas of the large cities. Rather than doing work from a distance, we could work from anywhere in the inner city, on subways, at bus stations and at home. If we take this opportunity seriously, we could organize our workforce based on competence instead of geography, our offices will then be activity based hubs for meetings where co-workers can be creative and social. The work generated in such hubs could then be sustained and supported through digital cooperation, while people can live outside of the cities close to nature for life quality. This would be a truly digital Sweden, fulfilling the high aim set by the government, namely that Sweden shall be best in the world in using the possibilities of digitalization.

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