

Too much happens in the workplace

Karolina J. Dudek

In his fascinating book *Cubed: A secret history of the workplace* (2014), Nikil Saval described how workplaces have changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. With the rise of the clerks' tribe, they have in fact changed a great deal. As one of the characters in the US film *Office space* (1999) expressed it: 'Human beings were not meant to sit in little cubicles staring at computer screens all day' (quoted in Saval, 2014: 3). And yet they do.

Juriaan van Meel (2000: 25–53) has provided a comparison between European and US offices, demonstrating that the history of the office is complex and that discrepancies can be traced through local histories, as the same concepts were employed differently in various contexts. One can identify dominating trends, however.

Over the past 100-plus years, various types of overflows have had to be dealt with, but some problems seem to persist. At the end of the nineteenth century, the expansion of office work occurred so quickly and engaged so many new workers that there was no time to develop new ways of organizing space (Saval, 2014: 43). By the turn of the century, the need for new arrangements was extremely urgent. At that point Frederic Taylor introduced scientific management, which involved the division of tasks into smaller, more discrete activities and the subordination of employees under the control of a manager. In the first offices, such as the ones in the often-mentioned Larkin Building, desks were organized along corridors like a factory production line, and work was reduced to simple, repeatable activities (Saval, 2014: 66–71). There was no room for thinking or creativity, as all tasks were thoroughly pre-designed. Managers expected speed and efficiency. There could be no gossiping or socializing in the workplace. The idea behind

the creation of the open-plan office, where the manager could see everyone, was discipline and focused work. Supplying only relatively (at least by current standards) small social areas where employees could rest or develop a sense of camaraderie with their coworkers also made it easier for managers to monitor the employees' private use of time. Employees with nowhere to hide from the manager were easier to control, and managerial control was considered essential.

In the 1950s and 1960s, communication became crucial, and so-called 'landscaped offices' and 'Action Offices' became the dominant architectural model. The change of office settings was dramatic, a response to the rapid increase of knowledge work that had to be performed: fewer tasks based on routine and more tasks requiring judgment (Saval, 2014: 210). Spacious offices with thick carpets, flowers, and abundance – no doors, no walls, and few partitions – created an environment that produced non-hierarchical and human-centered space for organizational social life and reflected the end of Taylorism. It seemed chaotic and unplanned, but there was more planning behind the messy arrangements than there had been with Taylor's orderly array of desks (Saval, 2014: 202). Invisible lines separated clusters of activities and created paths of workflow. Action Office was a flexible combination of adjustable furniture and mobile walls, allowing the components to be arranged as desired. But these offices paved the way for the cubicles of the 1970s and 1980s, which were caricatures of the Action Office – crowded, generic, small, half-enclosed spaces where one could barely move.

'For a long time the norms and conventions of office design remained as stable as the simple technology of the typewriter and the straightforward habits and behaviour of clerical organisations', wrote Francis Duffy (2001: 324). Until the last decade, little had changed. The dominant model was a combination of open-plan offices and closed offices (individual and team rooms and conference rooms). The workplace design was a result of the domination of a full-time type of employment – employment on a full-time basis at the company for which the work was done. The number of planned workstations simply equaled the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) – the equivalent of one person working full time. All data were available in the Human Resources (HR; previously called personnel) department. People spent most of their time at their workstations, where their computer and all their belongings were kept.

But the workplace has recently faced a silent revolution. Nothing described here is still certain. The number of desks no longer equals the number of FTEs, and mobile laptops travel around the office

with employees, as the time they spend at their desks is diminishing rapidly. Office planning and space management used to be much easier than it is now, and offices are changing rapidly: old premises are being rearranged and new ones built according to new rules.

As an organization researcher who focuses on the way modern workplaces are created and transformed, I have had many opportunities not only to follow the events as they evolve and to observe actors that appear front stage, but also – to use a Goffmanian metaphor – to explore what happens backstage. On one occasion, during an informal business meeting, a director of the administration department in a multinational organization operating in the financial sector confided in the people gathered for lunch about a problem that the company was facing. It was necessary to move its employees from Building A to one or two other premises because the lease agreement on Building A was about to expire.

The way the director framed the story was telling, and it opened my eyes to a completely new aspect of workplace organization. Where did the problem lie? In what follows, I answer this question and discuss the nature of similar problems in a wide range of organizations. The interpretative framework is the concept of ‘overflow’ and ‘overflow management’ (Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2012, 2013), as the modern workplace is facing the challenge of an overflow of people, activities, machines, and other things. My goal is to explain how these overflows change the modern workplace and how organizations attempt to deal with these overflows by generating new coping strategies. My starting-points are the questions posed by Barbara Czarniawska and Orvar Löfgren (2012: 2): ‘What is overflowing? According to whom? Is it desirable or threatening, and if so, to whom?’ Answering these questions, I discuss new workplace concepts and control systems.

Fieldwork

In this chapter, I analyze fieldwork material that I collected in Poland, as both a researcher and a consultant. The approaches that I have taken in these two circumstances differ somewhat, but they have much in common as well.

As a consultant, I take part in architectural projects and serve as a liaison officer between the business and the architects. I conduct the qualitative part of the research and coordinate the research process. The main product of my work is then a brief organizational ethnography, which becomes part of a workplace strategy report.

The need for such a description emerged from my repeated observation that organizations produce documents like organizational charts and job descriptions, but that they usually describe a situation that is fundamentally different from the way organizations actually work (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Becker, 2004: 15). What I do is a quick description, in the positive sense of the word: my task is to sketch the nitty-gritty of how an organization works. I provide answers to questions such as: What do different departments do? What are the daily routines? Which processes occur quarterly or annually? What are the spatial requirements for different teams?

To build this knowledge base, I usually conduct extensive interviews and focus groups, followed by workshops during which employees act as architects and designers and plan their part of the office. Occasionally, I also perform a ‘visual audit’ (visual ethnography), inspired by visual anthropology techniques (Strangleman, 2014: 255), to build an understanding of how business processes and spatial practices are materialized in the workplace. In other words, I focus on temporary forms of spatial organization created by the flow of things, and on space as a means of visual communication. I then write descriptions with recommendations for each department, which enumerate the types of spaces that a department needs and suggest how to organize the workstations. Work processes are translated into architectural design requirements, types of furniture, and technology facilities. I became a consultant after one of my interviewees asked me to help in a project.¹ In this way, I gradually became involved in the research conducted for the interviewee’s company’s clients and subsequently other companies as a freelance researcher, adapting my scholarly methods to the needs of business. In the workshops that I conduct, I refer to theoretical notions that have formed the groundwork of my scholarly research, including *boundary objects* (Star and Griesemer, 1989), *situated knowledge* (Resnick et al., 1997), and *linguistic artifacts*, such as labels, metaphors, and platitudes (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1988).

1 As a part of my research project ‘Creating Office Space’, financed by the National Science Center in Poland (decision number: DEC-2011/03/N/HS6/04945), I have conducted interviews with many specialists involved in planning and arranging workplaces: architects, designers, project managers, and furniture suppliers. All quotes from interviews cited in this chapter marked [R] are excerpts from interviews conducted as part of this research that I have translated from Polish.

As a scholar, I am exempted from the need to deliver a description of ‘how things should be’ and am primarily interested in sensemaking (Weick, 1995). My research focuses on the way discourses are translated into artefacts (forms of visual inspiration, sketches, space plans, and visualizations) and on the processes that lead to the creation of offices. I investigate how the process of creating office space is enabled and constrained by various factors, and how multidisciplinary teams communicate. My studies encompass the role of technology as well – in the workplace, in managing people, and in manufacturing control and discipline (see also Czarniawska, 2008: 50–52).

A workplace, I came to understand, is not only a space where technology may be installed, but also a hybrid: an aggregate comprising humans, space, furniture, and machines. From my perspective, the designing process begins with a narrative during which the company’s CEO or board of directors meets the architects, telling them how they envision the office (Dudek, 2017). Their narrative rarely begins with a vision, however. More often it starts with a history of the company, which serves as a backdrop for a more detailed description of how the company operates at present. The reason that the workplace requires a rearrangement becomes the pivotal point. Later, in the process of arranging a new office, such stories become translated into visual inspiration, sketches, space plans, and a design concept. Organizational structure and business processes are also translated into diagrams and descriptions in workplace strategy reports, which in turn are translated into a space budget (a budget in which the total number of square meters is divided into various types of workplace areas) and space plans, into which various norms are also inscribed.

Enter the overflow

In most cases, the need to rearrange the office is framed as anything but the need to deal with overflow. Just as managers see challenges rather than facing problems, ‘overflow’ is not one of their linguistic devices. Rather, they look for ‘opportunities for organizing in a more effective and flexible manner’. Franck Cochoy explained it boldly:

In most business cases, ‘management’ and ‘overflow’ are antithetical notions. Management is about producing and channeling flows – not overflows. If overflow occurs, the ‘over’ means that management has failed to some extent to accomplish its distinctive mission of flow

generation and control. Management is about framing the world, and overflows challenge managerial frames and underline their limits (Callon, 1998). Once the overflow occurs, of course, a new managerial task begins: overflow channeling and/or reduction. (Cochoy, 2012: 52)

When one adopts the managerial perspective, the flow of things, tasks, and people in the office indeed creates ‘opportunities for organizing in a more effective and flexible manner’, even if researchers refer to such instances of flow as overflows that call for channeling and/or reduction. In the following examples that I analyze, various methods of dealing with overflows have been adopted. Some of these methods involve the application of management tools in order to make these flows visible and countable and, as a result, controllable.

What flows, overflows

I now return to my starting-point. Both in Building A and on other premises, employees of the company only constituted a portion of those who worked there. The HR department could count the FTEs on the payroll, but there were also trainees and interns, consultants and auditors, self-employed specialists, and other people employed by temporary staffing agencies. Thus, the FTE index did not reflect the company’s spatial needs. In principle, all employees were given cards that allowed them to enter the office. It was not the company that issued these cards, however, but the building administrator, who did not collect any data apart from first names and surnames and was unable to analyze the dates of entrance and departure. ‘How do we count how many desks will be needed?’ was a question the director could not answer, though it is a common question asked in many organizations. She simply did not know how many workstations were occupied in the company offices, if there was enough space, and whether it was possible to relocate the employees to other buildings. The flow of people appeared as an overflow because the desks could not be calculated.

An overflow of people and profound changes in the way people work generate an overflow of activities. People not only work individually at their desks; they make calls using mobile telephones and Skype, meet for teleconferences in conference rooms, join small groups for ad hoc arrangements, discuss and brainstorm in small and large groups, join large meetings for strategic planning for three hours or interdisciplinary project groups for 10 days, and print and scan documents. New managerial fashions or concepts of managing

people like Agile with its Scrum methodology² bring greater diversity and unpredictability to organizational life: distributed knowledge in organizations, learning on the job, or acquiring information from various people become extremely important, as does reacting to problems and situations for which there are no guidelines or procedures. Thus cooperation, discussion, and brainstorming become at least as frequent as individual work.

Imagine an open-plan office with conference rooms, and add an IT specialist. Let's say she works in a unit that provides applications for online stores, and her job consists of testing business applications. She works in an international environment and spends half her time at her desk via Skype – gathering information, explaining sophisticated issues, or participating in webinars. On average, 20% of her time is dedicated to cooperating with office colleagues during formal and informal meetings; only 30% of her time in the office does she spend working individually. Let's also assume that her colleagues' work styles are similar, so when she is trying to focus on a report, the colleague sitting next to her is discussing the recent update in the system on Skype with team members working outside the office. Imagine the amount of noise in that part of the office. It is like in a call center, where everyone has earphones and talks into a microphone. But these IT specialists do not perform repetitive tasks described in a prewritten script; they must concentrate on highly demanding issues, answer sophisticated questions, and write code. Imagine how difficult it is to focus and how drained they feel at the end of the day.

Now think of a situation when a problem arises that the IT specialist cannot tackle alone. She urgently needs help, because this issue cannot wait until tomorrow. All the conference rooms are already booked for the day. Apart from everyday meetings, there are colocations with team members from another country, and some of the conference rooms are fully booked for the whole week. The office kitchen is too small for them to meet as a group of four with their laptops and flipchart. And there are no sockets in the kitchen that would allow them to access a database on the Intranet, which

2 Agile is an adaptive, evolutionary, and flexible approach to software development. It advocates early delivery, continuous improvement, and management that involve flexible responses to issues that emerge during the process. Scrum is an iterative and incremental Agile software development framework. The term 'scrum' is borrowed from rugby, where it is a method of restarting play. Management ideas often borrow terms from the vocabulary of sport.

they need in order to discuss the problem and find a solution. What should they do?

Today's workplace must encompass a great many different activities. The flow of tasks is seen as an overflow when there is not enough space to perform the activities, when the space is not properly arranged, or when the work becomes toil that leaves the employees exhausted.

With the overflow of people and the overflow of activities comes the overflow of things: from laptops and docking stations to vending machines, and enormous numbers of other things, from product samples to stacks of papers. A director of a company in a fast-moving consumer-goods branch told me about a huge space problem in their marketing department. The employees kept samples of products and catalogues under their desks, because all other available storage places were fully utilized. The employees claimed that they could not go around the office looking for a sample they needed – it had to be close at hand. Because so many samples were kept in such a messy condition, ants appeared in the office. The director mentioned a practical joke that was played on one of the employees. His desk was carefully dismantled and temporarily removed. Left was a pile shaped in the form of the desk, made of different things that he kept in boxes.

In another company, the managing director went out of the office during an interview, pointed to a shelf in front of the door, and shouted angrily: 'This drives me crazy!' Various objects were randomly cramped on the shelf; actually, the whole office was a mess. The core product of the company was business services that involved printing and preparing special packages. Unused items were stored in different parts of the office because they could be needed later. The director asked if I knew that they even had cabinets brought from a previous location and never opened, because the keys were lost. As the interviewer, I couldn't help but think that the message was: 'We have lost control over things that we keep.'

Control over things is often lost in production companies that display their products within their offices or organizations and must process many documents. One of the architects I talked to commented on the visual mess in a client's office. The company produced toys and tried to arrange a display in the office:

In this company, slackness and negligence must have been allowed, because there were many toys scattered everywhere. [...] Besides, they had no idea about how to arrange all those boxes or toys on the walls. There were some hanging glass shelves, but everything

was completely chaotic, and there was no organizing framework. And I do not want to use the word ‘messy’, but that’s just how it was: everything was so crammed. All this has to be arranged; it must be consistent. I have devised a shelf system for them: they can move these shelves, depending on the size of the box with the toy. [...] And I suggested that these displays should be rearranged every month, for example, or every quarter. [R]

Another architect told me that he almost cried after the people moved into the office he had designed. They brought in an enormous number of things. Almost everyone brought a pot with a flower, he said, and managed to create a visual mess within the first week.

People decorate their workstations with plants, family photos, toys, mascots, mugs, plates, and travel souvenirs. They hang printed memes, comic strips, crosses, and portraits of Pope John Paul II, paintings, film posters, posters with animals, naked women, male film stars with naked chests and unzipped jeans: in other words, *sacrum* and *profanum*.

A search for office images in a stock photography bank would yield photographs of neat offices, where clean furniture occupies an otherwise empty space. No mascots, family photographs, ferns, printed or handwritten way-finding signs, piles of documents in binders and boxes scattered on the floor or falling from shelves. The reality as seen by the researcher (me) and described by interlocutors is far from the reality of stock photography’s generic offices. It is messy and chaotic or cozy and creative, depending on who is looking. ‘My order may be your mess,’ Orvar Löfgren (2017: 1) reminded his readers: ‘Differences of class, gender, ethnicity and generation are at work here. The production of disorder is a cultural practice, mirroring changing ideas about order, value and taxonomies’. There may be hidden order in the office chaos. Or office mess may be a result of failed order when an organizing scheme stops working for some reason (Abrahamson and Freedman, 2006: 71).

The flow of things becomes an overflow, however, when things cannot be found or when nobody is keeping track of what is stored where, when things create a visual mess that is described as overwhelming, or when insects appear.

Coping with overflow: apps, diagrams, and the activity-based workplace

Managers are trying to handle and control the overflow of people, activities, and things in many ways. A variety of managerial concepts,

management tools, and technological and architectural solutions are used to separate streams of flow – to sort, categorize, count, estimate, and handle. In what follows, I present three ways of channeling and reducing overflow, as Franck Cochoy aptly put it (2012: 52). These are not separate ways, but rather aspects of the same process of coping with overflow. Two of them are undertaken in order to control the overflow of activities: it is a creation of new types of offices, and the employment of new methods of organizing these activities in time and space. Things are tamed when subordinated to the concept of a ‘clean-desk policy’ or crammed into archives. All overflows can become flows again when they are controllable by applications in a smart office.

The activity-based workplace: translating tasks into diagrams and desk-sharing

One of the concepts that have a great impact on the way offices are currently organized is the ‘activity-based workplace’ or ‘activity-based working’. This approach to office design can be traced back to the 1990s, when Erik Veldhoen (1995) coined the term, and when Francis Duffy (2001) proposed the new models of space organization. Duffy’s models were based on a taxonomy built on two key dimensions: autonomy and interaction (Laing et al., 2004: 21–25). These changes were introduced slowly but were seen as inevitable. As Franklin Becker put it:

No longer does the way space is designed and allocated presume that most employees come into the office in the morning, go directly to their office, and sit there for most of the rest of the day. Instead, the individual workspace is smaller and more open, reflecting value placed on face-to-face interaction. Designed with a range of distinct types of formal and informal meeting areas, identical conference rooms give way to greater variety of settings in which staff can choose to work. (Becker, 2004: 55)

An activity-based workplace in an office means that there are separate areas dedicated to different activities (see, e.g., Crespi, 2016: 233). During the day, employees no longer sit solely at their desks, but move between different areas in the office designed to support different activities: informal spaces for collaboration and brainstorming; formal spaces for meetings in conference halls; phone booths for telephone calls; a focus room for quiet, ‘heads down’ work or individual teleconferences; lounge areas; chill-out rooms and games

rooms for relaxation. Some of these rooms need to be booked; others can be used freely whenever they are unoccupied. The idea is to separate activities that involve individual, focused work from those that involve group cooperation, those that involve noise from those that must be performed in silence by highly focused employees. When the overflow of activities is channeled into spatially separate areas, it becomes a controllable flow.

Another means of coping with overflow, which comes in a package with activity-based working, is desk-sharing. People currently spend significant amounts of time away from their workstations, attending meetings, taking training, working at home, and visiting clients or other company sites (Harrison et al., 2004: 21). Desk-sharing means that there are fewer desks than employees and that they must share workstations. One of my interlocutors explained it this way:

People sit at their desks on an average of 45% of their working time; the rest of the time desks are used passively: people are in meetings, etc. People don't sit at the desks as we suppose they do. So, just compare what people are in fact doing with how space is constructed: 80% of the space is designed for desks and 20% for meeting space. There is a huge dissonance. [...] And now it turns out that employees can be divided into three types.³ We call those who sit at their desks 'anchors'. 'Networkers' work inside the office but not at their desks. And the last group, the 'nomads', are people who travel a lot; they are often outside the office. And it turns out that you can introduce an office-sharing system for this last group. [R]

My interviewee's company performed space-utilization studies in clients' offices. They selected departments in which there was a significant number of nomads and provided a universal consulting recommendation: introduce desk-sharing in these departments, and the space-utilization costs will go down. This business-consulting service, brilliant in its simplicity, provided the same off-the-shelf generic solutions for all clients, regardless of the industry or the tasks that their employees performed, and it is now being used as

3 The inspiration for this typology of employees was most probably an article by Catherine Greene and Jeremy Myerson on types of knowledge workers, with regard to their mobility and work styles (Greene and Myerson, 2011). Greene and Myerson's qualitative research focused on types of interactions within offices, and they concluded that knowledge workers can be divided into four groups: two with low mobility (anchors, connectors) and two with high mobility (gatherers, navigators). My interviewee connected the last two types under the unifying term 'nomads'.

a universal overflow-management tool. Implementation of activity-based working associated with the introduction of desk-sharing renders obsolete or at least less dramatic the director's question I cited earlier: 'How do we count how many desks will be needed?'

The activity-based workplace is yet another management fad. As Czarniawska (2005) has noted, organizations are subordinated to fashions, just as clothes shops are. Innovations are introduced for various reasons, however. In Amsterdam, for example, activity-based working may be a way of reducing high rental costs by reducing the number of square meters per employee. In Poland, consulting companies and architects first tried to sell activity-based working in a similar fashion as a cost-reduction tool, but the response from the market was moderate. Thus, the dominant narrative about the activity-based workplace is currently that of a modern office that meets the needs of employees and especially of Millennials. It is supposed to deliver tailored solutions that satisfy different age groups and help companies retain employees.

The clean-desk policy

The overflow of things is something that organizations are trying to learn to live with. Sometimes the mess is treated as part of the company culture and it is discursively explained as a visible sign of creativity, the sign of a homey and cozy atmosphere, or a sign of a business where things are going well: it is so viable and fast-paced that there is no time to clean up the mess.

Some companies try to develop policies that make it easier for managers to demand order and tidiness; some such policies fail, others succeed. The introduction of activity-based working and desk-sharing especially increases pressure on employees to keep things in order. The clean-desk policy is an attempt to deal with the overflow of private things and documentation. At the end of the working day, all things must be removed from the desk; even such items as teacups or pens must be put away into lockers.

'If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?' – Albert Einstein allegedly asked.⁴ In a world where creativity is so highly valued, an empty desk seems to be a paradox. Eric Abrahamson examined the connection between creativity and mess and concluded that neatness has certainly become

4 This quotation or slight variations of it have been variously ascribed to Truman Twill, Lyndon B. Johnson, Laurence J. Peter, and Paul A. Freund.

a multibillion-dollar business, but he was not so sure whether the payoff of keeping things in order outweighs the cost. Oddly enough, office messiness tends to increase sharply with increasing education, salary, and experience (Abrahamson and Freedman, 2006: 32–33).

Tim Harford (2016: 65) noted in his analysis on mess in the workspace that ‘So far the desire for formal order is winning. We like tidiness to the point of fetishizing it; we find clutter and irregularity disturbing and don’t notice when it is doing us good’. The tidiness obsession is nothing new; rather, it is a recurring fad. The *Business etiquette handbook* printed in 1965 warned against over-decoration of one’s desk, suggesting, in fact, that the proper atmosphere for business is neatness (Harford 2016: 66).

Smart offices

Activity-based work created a need for real-time coordination of space utilization. The dream of both architects and office managers is to use smartphone apps or beacons or special cards that make it possible to generate reports on the number of employees working in an office and where exactly they work, in order to calculate not only how many, but also the type of spaces needed. The buzzwords are: ‘Internet of things’ and ‘smart workplace’. First such tools are created and employed in practice. For example, Philips used smartphone apps in the Edge, an office building in Amsterdam. The company created a tool that was initially designed to monitor how the office is utilized and to control energy usage, so that the system could switch off lights in areas where no one was working. ‘Facility managers use the software to visualize and analyze this data, track energy consumption and streamline maintenance operations’, is the explanation on the company’s website.⁵ Thus, the overflow is framed as something that can be managed as soon as it is made visible. But this app also proves that it is possible to exert control – in real time – over the number of people who work within an office:

It knows where you live. It knows what car you drive. It knows who you’re meeting with today and how much sugar you take in your coffee. (At least it will, after the next software update.) [...] From the minute you wake up, you’re connected. The app checks your schedule, and the building recognizes your car when you arrive and directs you to a parking spot.

5 <http://www.lighting.philips.com/main/cases/cases/office/edge>.

Then the app finds you a desk. Because at the Edge, you don't have one. No one does. Workspaces are based on your schedule: sitting desk, standing desk, work booth, meeting room, balcony seat, or 'concentration room.' Wherever you go, the app knows your preferences for light and temperature, and it tweaks the environment accordingly. (Randall, 2015: 74)

Fascinating or scary? This description, written by Tom Randall for *Bloomberg Businessweek*, may make one's hair stand on end. Drawn to its logical conclusion, Smart Office becomes an electronic Panopticon:⁶ The prisoners never see the guards, but they are constantly under surveillance.

There are other apps that use the location of the smartphone to find the nearest available meeting-room, book it, and provide directions to the room; or show where people are in the office.⁷

Polish managers are aware of these novelties, but just like their Western European counterparts, they still rely on less sophisticated technologies to arrange activities in time and space. They use add-ons for Outlook – again, the underlying assumption being that activities can be managed once they are made visible in calendars or charts. All meetings are planned with the space-booking system: in front of each conference room is a tablet hanging on the wall that displays information about forthcoming reservations. The presence of people in the conference room must be confirmed by clicking a button on the tablet within the first quarter of the meeting; otherwise the system cancels the meeting and other employees can book the room. The overflow of people and activities is – with the means of technology and space-utilization protocols – channeled into separated, purified flows that are directed into separate space vessels.

Learning to live with overflow: new coping strategies

Too much happens at the workplace – too many people, too many activities, too many things ... These overflows are dealt with by creating new coping strategies: activity-based working, desk-sharing,

6 A panopticon is a building in which all the occupants can be seen from one vantage point. Social activist Jeremy Bentham originally introduced the concept in the eighteenth century for the design of prisons, to eliminate the need for discipline and punishment.

7 http://www.arubanetworks.com/v/?v=/Events/ATM2015_KeertiDEMO3_INTELLIGENTWORKPLACE.mp4&width=960&height=540&t=Demo%202:%20Intelligent%20Workplace.

clean-desk policies, and the employment of applications to control the flows. One of the unintended results is, as Latour (1993) has noted, that new hybrids still can be and are continuously created.

The management of different overflows follows a similar logic: to separate, purify, visualize, and subordinate to strict rules. Separation involves the endowing of old activities with new meanings; talking on the phone becomes an activity generating noise, for example, just as consulting a colleague does. Then new categories of space are created for these newly distinguished types of activities: phone booths that create a soundproof environment, standing meeting-points, ad hoc meeting-booths with fully upholstered internal faces. Types of activities are separated and special areas that indicate quiet or noisy zones are marked on space plans, which become covered with bubbles in different colors. Strict rules are introduced – ‘We do not pick up or make telephone calls in the open space’ – and new institutions are inscribed in workspace by signs and graphics.

In most business cases – to paraphrase Cochoy (2012: 52) – overflows sooner or later manage to challenge managerial efforts to control flows, and some overflows (like mess) have been successful in doing so for over 100 years. Managing overflows is always an ongoing process, with new ways of coping still to be introduced.