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Featured Paper

Activity Based Workplace (ABW)
by Charles Villanyi Bokor
& Bernard Fiset

Activity Based Workplace (ABW)[1]

Charles Villanyi Bokor and Bernard Fiset

I   INTRODUCTION

A most profound workplace transformation is taking place. The traditional role of the workplace is transforming and challenging the current way individuals work, even if "... most companies stink at observing how real work gets done and at recognizing what matters to the people doing the work." [1- Jensen, 2002]. This cannot but have a profound impact on corporations, their managers, their employees and the resulting outcomes, because the output produced is the result of the environment in which employees are put into to work. [1.5- Sinek, 2014] So, corporate leaders must take a new look at the long road ahead and identify emerging workplace design trends that will have to be considered. This is fraught with danger as predicting is difficult, especially when it is about the future.

The current interest of (some) organizations that are considering transforming the workplace, is firstly, to align with the expectations of its employees. Secondly, it is to align with an emerging school of thought that claims that improving the workplace improves people's health and wellness, and that healthier people perform better. Thirdly, some organizations believe that improving their workplace improves their ability to attract new talent and retain some of their employees who otherwise may leave. Lastly, as the cost of accommodating employees is rising, not managing this cost directly impacts the organizations' bottom line. So, many are looking to Activity Based Workplace (ABW) to not only improve employees' work-life balance by increasing their mobility, but also to improve asset performance (some claim by as much as 20-50 %) by making more efficient use of its space.

First referenced, in the late 1970s by the American architect Robert Luchetti, the term ABW was first coined in the books "the Art of Working" and "The Demise of the Office" by Erik Veldhoenm a Dutch consultant, and was first implemented by Interpolis in the Netherlands in the 1990s. Over the past several years, a number of organizations have adopted ABW and now prioritize their employees' needs by allowing them, within boundaries, to make the office environment into a necessary component of their tool set.

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Deloitte's Bersin report, *Predictions for 2015: Redesigning the Organisation for a Rapidly Changing World* [2 - Bersin, 2015], includes 10 predictions of the enormous changes underway, including a move to ergonomically adjustable work stations and chairs, height adjustable desks and foot stools, encouraged physical activity, functional kitchens and more access to natural light. However, simply different does not equate to better. What the changes must first include are deployed systems that can reduce employees' commute time and allow them to choose when and from where they work, and the replacement of a number of HR generalists with a few senior engaged human resources (HR) business partners. In short, the coming transformation needs both IM/IT and HR as strategic transformation partners.

Today, in part due to the technology we possess, *"We've reached a point where a physical office is no longer essential for all employees,…"* [3 - i-office], one physical office may not be enough. Specifically, millennials, who already represent the majority of the workforce and by 2030 will comprise 75 percent of it (4- U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics), want a variety of commuter options, and physical activities that include mobility throughout the day, health and fitness amenities, ergonomic equipment, natural light, sound-attenuating materials, environmental controls, and social spaces. This may be, in part why the Canadian Government is rolling out ABW and is focusing on employees' needs and allowing them, within boundaries, to decide on: how to work, where to work, when to work, the tools to use and with whom to collaborate to get the needed and defined work done. If done well, this may contradict a Harvard study published in 2018 [5- Smith, 2019] that shows that open office plans do not support the vision of collaboration and increased employee productivity.

II   THE ABW STRATEGY

While **there is no shortage of information about the office of the future,** much of the information available is like 'a blind man describing the elephant': it depends which end he is at. So, knowing what is the best workplace strategy comes at a cost but without a guarantee for employees' satisfaction. ABW is built around a number of concepts, one of which is that during the course of a day employees engage in many different types of activities and need different types of work settings in which to execute these activities. This supposes that they need the flexibility to choose amongst different workspaces to best suit the work they're doing. So, designed workplaces in the ABW environment are unassigned, allowing employees to move around, and are based on functional/activity requirements and not position in the organizational hierarchy. This allows employees not to sit at the same desk every day, or all day, but to choose the workspace that best suits their working style, preferences and current task. While some people need peace and quiet for reading, writing, or analysis, others find the stimulation of nearby activity an energizing context for such heads-down work. As an example, one may start one's morning with a conference call in a meeting room, move into a less formal "huddle" room to brainstorm with

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other team members and afterward spend the afternoon compiling a report in a quiet, more private setting where it's easier to concentrate. Not having assigned desks lets employees, supposedly and hopefully, feel more satisfied, but the jury may not have arrived at a final conclusion on this one.

Connected with the necessary technology, digital workplaces allow users to telework from home, public areas or corporate workplaces, and allow dispersed teams and work units, which according to one school of thought, are less efficient than teams whose members are physically close. It also provides greater flexibility in deciding when to work in order to be as productive as possible in delivering programs and services to Canadians. This changes the way we work and fosters a culture of health and well-being and may contradict Samuel Butler's claim that: "All animals except man know that the ultimate business of life is to enjoy it.".

To change to such an environment requires executives who can challenge preconceived notions about how individuals work and how teamwork can be facilitated. It requires HR and managers to have a deep understanding of how people work and what motivates them, and to be able to focus on employees' outputs rather than on their physical presence. It relies on information technology (IT), both hardware and software, information management (IM) and security. An ABW type of environment is not only different, but is also one that is a cultural transformation bordering on a revolution. While changing to (deploying) such an environment is a challenge, ABW is a better way to deal with employees' (especially the younger employees') evolving demands, than by not having a plan.

The Key Elements of ABW

The Employees

One of the driving forces of ABW is the overall health and wellness of the employees. Retention and engagement of outstanding talent, the number two issue around the world, is a close second. Maintaining or improving the results achieved with the staff must be the third priority. However, as we go forth and millennials take charge of organizations, what we call the new workplace might be a necessity not a luxury. A new place, especially natural lighting and flexible work schedules may make people happy but will not by itself result in better performance.

The Environment (sustainability and design)

Making more efficient use of space is also a requirement. However, simply providing a new looking workspace while necessary, is insufficient. An ABW work environment must provide physical activity (health and fitness amenities) and mobility throughout the day, ergonomic equipment, natural light, sound-attenuating materials, environmental controls, and social spaces.

However, a review of the existing HR department, the IM/IT innovation effort and how facilities are managed to promote collaboration, flexibility, mobility and green ways of working, is as vital as the ABW strategy, physical environment and its implementation.

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The Deployment

The success of the ABW project depends on how it is deployed. While everyone is capable of building new physical spaces, not everyone is capable of assuring that the possible corporate benefits are attained. ABW is a cultural change and organizational transformation. Executive Management must assure that a proper project structure is in place, that the resources are qualified and engaged, that management is ready to lead, that the technology tools and applications are in place and that the environment with the new policies is in place. So, deploying ABW is not simple, and the effort required to implement it must not be underestimated.

The Information Management and Information Technology (security)

In order to accomplish the above, IM/IT needs to become a strategic transformation partner in the establishment of the new virtual environment. This demands a review of the current management of information (comprised of data, information and knowledge), information technology and security, to confirm that it supports mobile, collaborative, remote working and green ways of working (Today Docusign, Dropbox and other cloud technologies make paperless a breeze).

The IT group must investigate the software it has available, and develop a *sine qua non* integrated workplace management system (IWMS) that is sufficient for the needs of the contemplated ABW environment. This is to allow people to find and connect with other people instantly, find and reserve meeting rooms, allow employees to reduce commute time and work securely from remote locations, make service requests and be able to receive and/or access important information throughout the day. Great flexibility in moving around is useless unless the equipment - hardware and software - support the new freedom, employees know how to use them efficiently, have the technical support needed and management can track accountabilities, which unfortunately includes their own. In addition, an IWMS will allow workplace leaders to see how employees are actually using space (e.g. how many people have reserved workstations; how many are working remotely; how often; which spaces are being used the most,) and to make adjustments based on fact-based determined need.

IM/IT is an imperative partner in workplace modernization and for the ABW project, and must:

- Determine what are the IT equipment requirements for the various workspace types; and update the information management systems;
- Implement WIFI technology (networking, videoconferencing and space reservation) to allow individuals to connect their laptops to the IT network;
- Install, connect and test all IT equipment as part of a branch relocation;
- Implement cloud printing (policy), document sharing to reduce paper consumption;
- Collecting workplace utilization data and to reduce energy consumption; and
- Determine new needs (responsibilities for laptops that have no wires) and self-service tools.

ABW is a significant undertaking, a significant investment and a significant effort. (see image: https://www.iofficecorp.com/hs-fs/hub/167521/hub_generated/resized/bc68fe17-51ac-4da2-be24-631dd973b21c.png).

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The HR

Today, the role of HR in many organizations is more about personnel administration and records filing and keeping than defining the strategy and the policies to manage human resources. This is inadequate in an ABW environment, where advanced HR strategy is vital. So, HR must become a change agent, strategic partner and mentor, that is able to align with forward–thinking practices. It must establish policies on employees telecommuting (the priority of 74% of the millennials), [6- Landrum, 2019] and on compressed workweek policy while updating current performance management approaches, mentoring business transformation and contributing to the discussion of what is the business' purpose, its goals and how will it achieve the required profitability.

To create a successful work environment, HR has to know how employees behave, what they need and what they want. It must as well undertake the accountability for and the responsibility for upgrading executives' skills, i.e. assuring that the provided training is not only offered, but is also effective in facilitating the transition from a command and control environment. Executives in HR have to be accountable for the needed behavioural changes, and for resurrecting accountability.

So, ABW needs to be implemented with significant training not because of a deficiency in the employee or the manager, but rather to emphasise that ABW is different. But no matter how this will be done, some people will resist and some will have problems. As the ABW concept demands that the troubled people have to be helped, the Organizational Change Management Team not only has to define the training that is imperative but will also have to ascertain that the level of capability of the trainee has reached the necessary level. This means that the need for workshops and lunch time discussions may be on the rise, and that HR has a critical role in helping the human resources transition.

ABW is not incremental change but reinvention. It is based on cooperation as no predetermined map or approach can be expected to be unchanging during the process. It is not to correct what is not working but to do things differently. So, it requires the best of people before it can bring out the best in people. To do this, HR must construct a plan. Innovation is a Group Effort and "Being innovative has nothing to do with the individuals…" [7- Bahcall, *2018*). Hence HR has to be strategic and set up the right operating circumstances, after the organization has developed HR's capability to do this. Champions are critical during this phase and should be actively communicating the benefits the employees can expect and deal with misconceptions.

To define and make people adopt the needed changes, requires senior HR business partners, not HR generalists. HR must understand how people work, how they change and what drives successful employee engagement. It will need specialists, because their role in addition to improving the work environment in order for people to be more productive, also includes encouraging people to use stairs between floors and eat healthier food. This is potentially a serious matter because if anytime soon there will be evidence that the work environment influences peoples' health, then soon after that there will be legal obligations for departments to protect employees' health. It is much easier to say that management and executives in ABW will manage based on output and not employee presence, but harder to make management and executives accept this concept's implications (e.g. employees being hard to locate; colleagues being harder to find; fire wardens not being on the floor).

Benefits of ABW

Healthy work environments provide some fundamental benefits that make them attractive no matter how they are deployed. Many of the chronic illnesses that plague our time, e.g. diabetes, obesity, depression, have been associated with the increase of our sedentary behavior. Sitting has become the default position in a traditional office setting and is now considered "the new smoking". It has been shown that sitting for more than six hours per day increases a person's risk of death by up to 40%. The emerging HR department will have to understand and provide the opportunity for regular exercise, to improve concentration, and reduce stress anxiety (many millennials take stress leaves), as mental and physical wellness are closely linked. Activity-based workplaces need:

- adjustable height desks, and balance ball chairs;

- improved air quality (air circulation and climate control);

- more access to natural light;

- to improve employees' mood and energy with colorful designs, while the greater variety of spaces empower and inspire employees to choose where and how to work to be most productive;

- to save space and money by optimizing the use of the facilities with efficient heating and ventilation systems;

- to provide more green spaces that affect the mind, body and emotions, boost creativity, inspire innovation and are anticipated to reduce the office's overall environmental footprint; and

- to commit to the digital paperless office that allows for fewer hard copy documents, partially by limiting physical storage space. Such an environmentally friendly environment necessitates collaborative and self-service tools and information management systems, video-conferencing and document sharing to allow it to outperform most others.

Modernizing the workplace provides employees a healthier environment and gives them more power to manage their work/life balance. This results in:

- ✓ meeting spaces and video conferencing that enable greater collaboration and improved creative thinking [*The Leesman Review* is a quarterly journal];
- ✓ use of technology allowing for seamless access to information;
- ✓ knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, while satisfying privacy and security needs;
- ✓ an environment that is conducive to people admitting when they have made an error, admitting to leaders whose priority is making their staff succeed, when they do not know how to do something;
- ✓ higher employee satisfaction from significant employee benefits;
- ✓ the organization attracting and retaining the best talent as Baby Boomer retire, resulting in a possible shortage of skilled workers; "According to a recent study by McKinsey, freedom and autonomy ranked equal to, or higher than, compensation in job-interview questions."; [1- Jensen, 2002] and

✓ an emphasis on the IM/IT and HR's collaboration in order to provide better technology and work processes thus increasing employees' productivity.

However, simply giving the 'cell phone generation' many of whom are insecure, do not read (books), do not know how to establish deep relationships, or service customers and are impatient with long term plans, all that they want will not in the long run change anything. Simply telling them how to fish, will only result in them getting a sunburn and drinking too much beer.

Figure 10: GCworkspaces feature standing desks based on ABW concepts

Dell Technologies, number 10 on the top companies in 2019 where the U.S. workforce wants to work list, *"*estimates its "work-wherever" policies have saved U.S. employees 136 million miles of travel a year." [8- Roth, 2019]. It claims that "Flexible work can be a mutual benefit to the team member and the company as well as have a positive impact on the environment.". Other recorded achievements by making changes to the workplace include:

- The We Company (WeWork, number 13 on the list of top companies in 2019 where the U.S. workforce wants to work list), went to new lengths last summer to reduce its environmental impact when it decided to ban meat from all corporate events and employee expense reports.
- Disney (number 17 on the list) now pays full tuition upfront for part-time workers who are earning their high school diplomas, college degrees or are going back to school to learn a new skill.
- Goldman Sachs (number 21 on the list), "extended a "firm wide flexible dress code" for *all* employees."
- IPG Mediabrands, one of its biggest agencies, employs office hot-desking — none of its 12,000 workers have an assigned workspace. Everyone finds a new desk (and neighbors) every day. "Having more control over your destiny also means increased accountability for linking your efforts to what really matters." [1- Jensen, 2002]
- Interpolis, a Dutch insurance company, reported a 45% reduction in necessary work space and a 24% reduction in yearly occupancy costs.
- Sodexo's office transformation in southern Stockholm, Sweden, resulted in all workstations now having access to natural lighting, office space going from 3,500 square meters to 2,200 square meters, one employee per desk (185 desks) going to 1.7 employees per desk (116 desks), 370 work spaces going to 440 work spaces. One thing they didn't anticipate was the need to offer additional support to management.

These examples may not provide a proof but rather only findings, as per Williams and Holland's Law, which postulates that: "If enough data is collected, anything may be proven by statistical methods." [9- Bloch, 1979]. However, the way people work is being transformed. The challenge is that this ushers in a new paradigm and a new culture in which managers must not only manage but also lead - "Management works in the system; Leadership works on the system." [10- Covey, 1994]. So ABW must not only be a wonderfully transformed new environment that purports the illusion of progress, but must also be one that is measured to be efficient and one that positively

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engages both management and employees. This emphasizes the need for deployers to be experienced before the deployment.

Disadvantages of ABW

While some employees embrace change, others who are attached to working from a single physical or assigned space with personal belongings all around them, and dislike an impersonal, nonproprietary unassigned desk, resist it. Change requires additional effort which some employees are not ready to make without seeing or understanding the benefit of the change or 'what-is-in-it-for-me' (WIIFM). If they only see the transformation as the "flavor of the month", or are fearful of the unknown, they will protect their habits and resist change, thinking "If it isn't broken, don't fix it.".

These employees are not part of the 'Early Adopters', and will either create some obstruction or will refuse to participate in the activities that lead to the described change becoming the norm. They will promote a negative environment, which will:

- Reduce productivity and organizational performance;
- Strain work relationships, cooperation, and reduce the benefits of teamwork; and
- Reduce the effectiveness of any existing communication.

Therefore, it is vital for the new HR department to know about human behaviour and to know that if an irritated individual becomes a believer of the change, e.g. becomes part of the Early Adopters or Early Majority, he or she becomes the most ardent supporter of the change, and causes other staff to listen to his or her new belief. Adequate education as well as effective communication about the change (e.g. Who is accountable for the safe keeping of the laptop, corporate asset, if the wire is removed?) becomes an imperative requirement for a smooth functioning ABW environment, as is interdepartmental collaboration, specifically between the facilities team and their design logistics (e.g. which rooms and workspaces will need updating), the IM/IT team whose expertise identifies and deploys the new technology and the HR department's crucial insight into how to onboard and train all the staff to collaborate in an ABW environment. The 'same old, same old' deployment approach will provide valuable lessons learned but only from the bad experience which will come because of bad judgement.

The other three major difficulties with ABW are that:
- ABW is a paradigm shift in how employees will be lead by the existing management team. Hence leadership or the new type of employee oversight and direction setting must become a fundamental management skill and practice. This however, may not be an advantage to many Directors who are termed leaders because of their rank, and whose main focus is their own interests.
- ABW requires new physical facilities which become visibly apparent and provide the impression that ABW is the transformed work environment, rather than simply a need.

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- The emphasis of some policies and some ABW implementations on teamwork, devalues the feelings of the best performers. It does not allow an 'I' in the spelling of 'team' (all human resources, arguably, long for being distinguished), while it facilitates the worst performers to hide away in the team. Accepting people to be simply participants in the team, is counter-productive. It makes management's ability to prioritize the success of their staff (not the goal of many managers today), and support them to be more successful much more challenging.

Based on research articles and published surveys from studies of organizations that have adopted ABW concepts, there are, not surprisingly, some common challenges even after an ABW environment is implemented. These include:

- An increase in employees' stress due to the need to find a seat that they want to work from;
- An increased difficulty in locating coworkers (who are not always in the same place);
- An increase in noise levels and in the number of interruptions and distractions due to the ease of accessibility to people;
- A loss of privacy as many conversations can be overheard more easily;
- The inability to personalize the workspace (which according to some / old schools of thought may be influential to employees' productivity); and
- A perception of decreased support from supervisors (for more Workspace Challenges read https://www.iofficecorp.com/blog/4-barriers-to-activity-based-working-and-how-to-overcome-them#fCVWiMfKKRyo1sMG.99).

Above all, as the most challenging part of change management is to change … management, so, the biggest challenge to achieving benefits from ABW is its implementation. Not prioritizing managers' new responsibilities, accepting too many ideas simply because they are new or because someone thought of them (i.e. not everything is OK, is needed or is supportive of the vision), not measuring achievements and reporting them without analysing the results, and not making changes to direct the outcome towards the elaborated objective, impacts the results as much as inadequate IM/IT and HR leadership. ABW requires a change in management's focus, practices and paradigms. This is hard, but the changing demographics necessitates a more efficient, effective and flexible way to work. According to L. Duxbury, a Carleton professor and pioneer in organizational health "For organizations to survive, they really have to start managing their people a lot differently." [11- Duxbury, 2012].

III   WORKPLACE EVOLUTION IN THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

The **public sector workplace is evolving significantly in response to the shifting expectations of the workforce,** specifically the expectations of the millennials. This drive is to 'get the work done', as "..it will take three people to replace two boomers" according to Linda Duxbury [11-Duxbury, July 24, 2012]. In some countries and organizations, if employees are asked to work twice as hard, they work twice as hard, simply because they were asked to, creating a new kind of competition, and work paradigm for millennials. Similarly, our public sector employees want to work smarter and greener too. They want the tools and an environment that is designed to optimize their performance, their productivity, health and wellness, as well as one that allows teleworking for a better work life balance. Employees want to make a difference not just report on problems. This change in culture requires work to no longer be a place to go to, but what one does from anywhere and anytime one wishes.

A Government of Canada (GoC) - wide consultation identified the overall health and wellbeing of employees as the fundamental element of the modern workplace. To attract and retain outstanding talent, industries will need to offer modernized workplaces. They will have to make an investment as quality employees are more likely to favour a business that demonstrates leadership by offering a work environment that fosters a culture of innovation, digital technology and encourages collaboration.

The vision of ABW is focused on employees' expectations and organizational priorities. It is about 'getting the work done', not just about a new workplace design. Specifically, it is about accommodations, people, technology and greening, so one-size is not a solution for all departments. Deployments must be tailored to suit the functional needs of the occupants, and:

- Empower people to choose when and where to work;
- Make more efficient use of real estate, to reduce costs;
- Offer tools to enhance personal productivity, and encourage collaboration;
- Retain and attract diverse and outstanding talent; and
- Support a favorable work-life balance.

In addition, one of the intended or unintended outcomes of ABW is that decision making is moved to a lower level in the organization. In the government where it is generally assumed that only Directors are capable of making decisions, this is a reason for management to reconsider its support for the change.

V   THE WAY AHEAD

"However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results." according to Winston Churchill, so, the success or outcome of an ABW implementation should continually be measured. Having or not achieved space utilization targets per FTE (full time equivalent) that translate into savings on the cost of accommodations, is a measured fact not an opinion. So, the

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achieved results must be known and formally communicated, thus allowing the formalized plan to be fine tuned and the assigned accountabilities to be reviewed.

To develop an ABW environment, organizations must first develop leaders who are able and willing to inspire others to share their vision. Leaders can and help their followers overcome obstacles in pursuit of their vision as leadership is: "The art of getting what you want done by someone else who wants to do it" according to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. It is showing by example not assigning with command-and-control and making others achieve what they have not thought possible. So, top management must resolve to develop leaders, and a phased deployment strategy that is based on the organization's priorities and constraints. Then, those doing the work will buy-in and exceed doing the work, as an individual who becomes a believer, becomes the most ardent supporter, and one who others will listen to.

To start, organizations must define a clear vision and specific business objectives; remember that implementing a new workplace strategy takes time; manage the undertaking as a project, with a full-time project manager accountable for all aspects of the project, and a Chief Transformation Officer to oversee the holistic ABW implementation (accommodations, technology, policy, training, …); define a post-pilot deployment model and a transformation plan (culture/people) that includes reviewing current policies, and training both managers and employees; have a Communication Plan and defined performance measures based on critical success factors and specific goals.

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APPENDIX A

WHY LIBERATING YOUR WORKFORCE WILL GET THEM TO LOVE YOUR WORKPLACE:
https://www.iofficecorp.com/hubfs/2018/Team/Mike%20P/MikePetrusky_blog.png

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