

# CAN FLEXIBLE “NWOW” ENVIRONMENTS LEAD TO WORKERS EMANCIPATION?

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# Introduction

Focus : **NWOW environments** (New Way of Working).

= Open, modern workspaces with no assigned desk (ICT, remote working)

« *Contemporary manifestation of the evolution of work environments* » (Cole et al., 2012, p.184)

« Aims to modernize the company's image and to energize its internal culture. » (Nathan & Doyle, 2002, p.1).

In Belgium (tertiary sector) :

- 41% of companies adopted this type of environment (cost reduction, better performance at work).

- 52% of companies are looking at implementing this kind of environment in the future  
Taskin et al., (2015)

## Research questions

Dualistic vision of this NWoW environments in the academic and managerial literature :

- **In the academic literature** : negative impact of this kind of environment (loss of work territory, no or little improvement in team communication, noisy workplaces, difficulties to concentrate, “war” for the best places...)
- **In the managerial literature** : This innovation has a number of advantages. Cost reduction for the company and more freedom for workers (“win-win innovation”)

### Research questions :

- Can flexible "NWoW" environments lead to workers emancipation?
- If so, from what kind of domination do the workers emancipate themselves?
- What are the limits to this potential emancipation?

## Theoretical framework

*Emancipation* -> Classic use of the term “*empowerment*” in the literature (Carter et al. 2015) + notion of “*autonomy*” in the models of Toterdill (2015) and de Kok et al. (2014),  
→ **Liberating finality constituting a gain in power for workers, in comparison with the initial situation before the change.**

3 control mechanisms in postfordist environments : (Deffayet, 2002; Taskin, 2004)

**Administrative control** : Individual behaviors must comply with the organizational rules (i.e. training, procedure)

**Social control** : Centered on the need of belonging to a group, a culture. Sharing of common values.

**Auto-control** : Occurs spontaneously

**Critical approach** : New organizational designs (reduction of rules, better well-being at work), are not necessary emancipatory, nor easy to implement even if it's done gradually. (Alvesson et Willmott, 1992).

**Political approach** (Crozier et Friedberg, 1977) :

Success of change = learning new power games. Two main strategies :

*Pressure strategy* : Threat, orders, emotional blackmail (directly or indirectly).

*Legitimization strategy* : To persuade other workers to adopt a certain point of view.

## Methodology

Field research in a public Belgian company **MobileCity** (700 workers) conducted in 2015. NWOW environment of 12 000 m<sup>2</sup> implemented in 2009.

**Ethnographic approach** : particularly non-participatory observation and semi-directed interviews.

Grid of interview with three main thematics :

- Preferences and habits of workers in the social and material occupation of space.
- Social interactions with their colleagues and hierarchy.
- Perceived qualities and flaws of this kind of environment over time.

+ Archives consultation

Sample : 43 knowledge workers (including 10 middle managers and 3 senior managers).

# MobileCity

In 2009 : NWoW environment + clean desk policy + new organizational values (responsibility, attention, simplicity, rigour) + conviviality chart

## Extracts

- *I adjust the tone of my voice based on my work environment in order to avoid disturbing my colleagues by speaking too loud (for instance on the phone).*
- *I avoid one-on-ones.*
- *I sit wherever I can find room*
- *I clean up my desk each day, because I know that my desk is ALSO yours.*
- *I make sure to always be available on the phone, using an efficient call forwarding system.*

*“The rule here is autonomy, flexibility, interaction, proximity and transparence. We wanted to break this image of a heavy administrative organization . Now the CEO works among the workers, which express well the new horizontal structure of our company.” (A senior manager)*

*“At MobileCity, each worker is totally autonomous in the handling of his projects” (A senior manager)*

*→ Bureaucratic organization => wants to become a adhocratic organisational system through flexible structure and operational decentralization.*

# Results

## Questioning the emancipatory dimension of the NWoW environment

- Contrary to the organizational rhetoric, there is no change in the hierarchical structure.
- Identity regulation strategy through the organizational discourse (values, behavioral chart...)
- Managerial control through ICT.
- Aims to reduce costs but without remote working possibilities.

*“Some workers don’t throw their coffee cups, or leave files behind. It upsets me and it upsets a lot of people as well. The rules apply to everyone!”*. (An employee)

- Strong social control triggered by the openness of the workplace, the wide use of transparency and the psychological integration of behavior rules.
- Little confidentiality
- **Emancipation limited by formal rules, social control and the material dimensions of the environment**

## Results

### "Cocoon war" et power games at play

*"There is a war for cocoons. They are saying these are only for managers. But sometimes, it would be nice to let the employees use them when we need concentration or confidentiality. Again, this morning, two senior managers were quarreling for a cocoon." (An employee)*

- Strong competition among middle and senior managers for the most preferred places.
- Exclusive use of cocoon and most prized places by middle and senior managers.
- Legitimization of this usage.

## Findings

- NWoW environments are not intrinsically emancipatory
  - Autonomy of workers is closely linked to power games and materiality of space.
  - When it's not coupled with remote working, this kind of innovation is likely to strengthen social control and inequality => just a cosmetic renovation of space.
  - Way to deal with the changing world of work but struggles to transcend the organizational discourse.
  - When it's motivated by cost reduction, it could be at the expense of workers
- The finalities of this innovation must be questioned.

# Thank you.

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