



OPEN SPACE...



And was there light?

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If there are exchanges which enrich through the clarity and rigor of the arguments put forward, this is indeed the case of the workshop organized by the Budgetary Control Committee of the European Parliament on October 29 entitled « [Open spaces at the EU Institutions versus traditional work spaces: justification, evolution, evaluation, and results](#) ».



[see the workshop](#)

WORKSHOP

European Parliament

POLICY DEPARTMENT D
BUDGETARY AFFAIRS

**OPEN SPACES AT EU INSTITUTIONS
VERSUS TRADITIONAL WORK SPACES:
JUSTIFICATION, EVOLUTION,
EVALUATION AND RESULTS**



DATE
29 October 2020

TIME
09:00-11:00

ROOM
European Parliament,
Brussels,
Virtual meeting

Committee on
Budgetary Control

CHAIR:
MONIKA HOHLMIEER
RAPPORTEUR:
ISABEL GARCÍA MUÑOZ

poldep-budget@ep.europa.eu

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As we already did for its resolute action in the fight against all forms of harassment, we would like to thank the CONT Committee for having organized this seminar.

Indeed, on this occasion, it was finally possible to ensure an overview of the approaches of the European institutions.

For R&D, the leading trade union in the European civil service, it has always been essential to guarantee not only the uniqueness of the statute but also the coherence of the institutions' policies concerning the safeguard of staff well-being.

On the one hand, we are immediately delighted that during this seminar it was possible to shed light on the isolation and unreasonable attitudes of certain Directors-General of our Institution who are "open space fanatics", that R&D has always denounced.

On the other hand, the quality of the speakers as well as the frankness of the debates highlight the following lessons...

In general and without taking into account the specificities of each situation, even though essential, *open-plan offices* have benefits and disadvantages which are however not equivalent and do not relate to the same aspects.

The benefits would be :

⇒ reduction of costs by increasing the number of workstations on the same surface;

⇒ improvement of communication and creativity, collaboration between colleagues, which would allow the sharing of knowledge, aiming at the increase in productivity and innovation within services;

⇒ improved teamwork: in an open space, it would be easier for colleagues to interact with each other.



But as the philosopher Hannah Arendt puts it so well,

"Progress and Disaster are the face and the reverse of the same medal"

Indeed, behind these alleged advantages, there are also undoubted disadvantages, revealed by numerous studies, on the impact of these open spaces on the well-being of many workers and, therefore, on the functioning of services, such as:

⇒ **loss of productivity** due to noise (phone calls, conversation, etc.), which results in a difficulty to concentrating: as experts agree, it takes 25 minutes on average to re-focus after a distraction, which translates into a loss of 3 to 5 hours per day ;

⇒ **the temperature at the workplace**, since it cannot be individually regulated, a source of unease for some, is added to poor air quality, with the consequences of an accumulation of fatigue and increasing numbers of sick leaves. This is all the more worrying when it comes to the contagion of diseases like the one we are currently experiencing, COVID19, which will change the way we work as well as the organization of our offices ;

⇒ **the negative impact on the well-being of staff**, unhappy with working in open-plan offices, which increases the level of stress (already present with the noise) as well as the lack of privacy, the feeling of being all the time monitored, saturation of the conversations of others ... In the short term, people experience a degradation of certain cognitive processes such as memory, writing and reading. In the long term, the company will bear additional costs related to sickness and disability absences. In addition, experts have learned that the personalization of workspaces gives a sense of identity, which helps reduce stress. This customization is impossible in open space and even less in *hotdesking*.



The COVID 19 pandemic has affected all areas including the business area. We are facing an inevitable paradigm shift in the world of work with the introduction of new information and communication technologies as well as of a new organization of workstations.

We need to think about it, but first of all let's take stock of the experiences of the European institutions



The European Court of Justice has set up a pilot project. Staff representatives echoed colleagues' complaints such as noise and privacy. A survey on the satisfaction and impact of open-plan offices on working conditions, and the quality of life at work has been launched. The results corroborate the factual drawbacks listed above. In addition, it was noted that involving of the

staff concerned is essential in the development of their workspace.

The open-plan offices set up in 2013 have been transformed again into individual offices.



The European Court of Auditors favours its tradition of efficiency in a welcoming and attractive workplace while taking into account the well-being of its staff. Its mission is based on the combination of teamwork and individual work in an innovative work environment combined with digital technology (no paper). In 2016, a pilot project for the renovation of a floor, for communication and legal teams, was launched based on the creation of new collaborative spaces based on the activities and needs of the services including kitchen areas, discussion areas and quiet rooms with particular attention to the quality of the furniture. The concept was successful and will be repeated for future projects.

All staff are in individual offices while having collaborative spaces. The next renovation of the premises will focus on individual offices accompanied by collaborative spaces gained by the elimination of archives due to digitization.



The *European Parliament* has also started a discussion on future needs and prioritizes an environmental and security policy. It opts for a policy of flexibility and proposes to allocate a surface area of several m² to each Directorate-General, depending on their workforce and working method. The Directors-General in consultation with their staff will define the use of the granted area.

Kitchen corners and collaborative meeting points will be included in each new project. This has already been implemented in some services through several staff surveys to ensure that their needs are met. The EP bans hot-desking.



On behalf of the *European Commission*, the representative of the *OIB*, said that following the results of a staff satisfaction survey, colleagues confirmed that open spaces are the least desirable option.

We can only rejoice in this observation, which is in line with the positions we have always expressed!

The European Commission, seems to finally be focusing on reducing the environmental impact by taking into account teleworking, the apprehension for shared offices due to COVID-19 which lead to questioning what the "normal" framework will be.

The Commission confirms that it is facing a double context: the green deal policy (reduction of the carbon footprint) and the development of better workspaces while reflecting on new working methods including the use of ICT.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been found that teleworking is an option that perfectly ensures the quality of work.

Staff will certainly want to develop these teleworking capabilities that will impact the organization of the office. The reflec-

tion arises on increasing in a convenient, attractive way, collaborative spaces of up to 9 people, that allow more hybrid meetings. These working arrangements would become the normal framework and particular attention will be paid to the needs of staff for suitable teleworking at home, respect for the green deal, and the progressive abandonment of old buildings in favour of more efficient buildings. In this process, the Commission has committed to return 50,000 sq. m of space.

On the one hand, the contours of this new approach are not at all clear and it is feared that the Commission will want to continue its ideological opposition to individual offices.

On the other hand, It is clear that we are far from the dogmatic comments made before COVID-19 and from the unreasonable attitudes blindly supported by the OIB during projects such as that of BRE2 (DG BUDG).

We can but wish that it is possible to put an end to the real Wild West where each DG claimed to implement its own policy in this area with the blind and helpful collaboration of OIB, which seemed to have disguised itself in the "open space sales department" by deli-

vering absolutely caricatured presentations, trying to pass open space for 6 star hotels with spa and swimming pool... in the Maldives, in Bali....

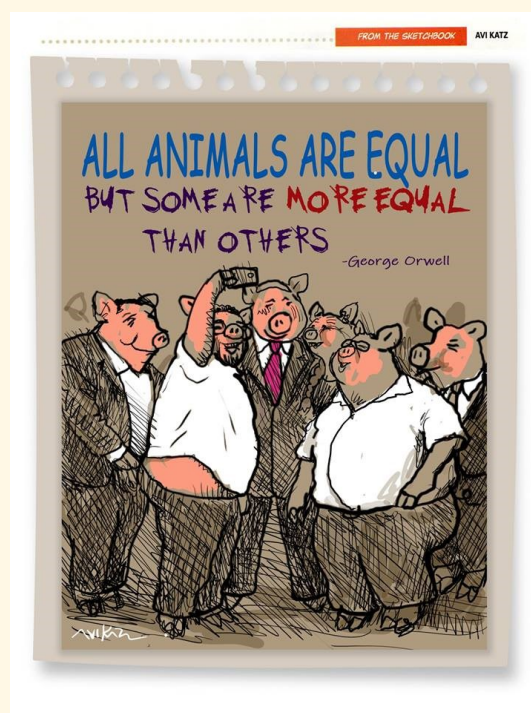
It should not be forgotten that only through the determination of **R&D** and that of all the staff representation, namely within the CPPT, **it was finally possible to enforce the formal opinion of the Legal Service** and submit this project to the central governance established by the communication of the Commission for the organization of the workspace.

The same communication from the Commission of which DG HR had been so proud until then, notably underlining the importance of governance at central level having finally been put in place ... the same communication that suddenly seemed to have become in the eyes of

DG HR as well simple collection of good intentions without the slightest binding character.

Such an incomprehensible change in approach which resulted in the arouse of a firm and united reaction on the part of all the unions in our institution ([response from the Common Front](#) ; [joint note for the attention of Ms. G. Ingestad, DG HR](#) ; [Note for the attention of Ms. U . von der Leyen, President](#)).

It is with the greatest amazement that on this occasion, we thought we were witnessing a sad staging of "Animal Farm" where there would be Directors-General "more equal than the others" to whom no one seems to dare to say no.



Just as the earth is not flat, the reality of open spaces with its accompanying ills is undeniable

At the conclusion of the seminar, the representatives of the Institutions agreed that it was necessary to initiate an inter-institutional approach in the guise of reflections, the sharing of studies and experiences, and also the inclusion of staff representatives. R&D responds favorably to this invitation!

The speakers came to the same conclusion as R&D (see [our communications](#); [our program](#); [dossier](#)), namely that open spaces are not a panacea and that hotdesking must be banned for good.

Flexibility is certainly necessary without ever forgetting that the workspace has direct effects on staff, affecting their health, well-being and satisfaction.

It is essential to create a good, attractive working environment that brings about positive stimulation, so that the staff is willing to go to work.

Staff must be at the heart of any policy, must actively participate in the decision-making process that affects their workspace, and their opinions must be taken into account.

But this is where the mistake lies...

This is what some of our Directors-General firmly refuse, by indulging, at most, in mock consultations aimed only at getting ex-post buy-in for decisions already taken.

In this regard, the "consultation" process concerning the renovation of BRE2 is one to absolutely blacklist among the Worst Practices never to be repeated.

R&D has always defended real involvement of staff in any decision-making procedure regarding the setting up of their workspace, by launching **targeted staff surveys** for each DG concerned, as well as their working conditions.

It is important to keep in mind that this negligence, or even the outright dismissing, in taking into account the opinions of the staff, is recognized by experts as a psychosocial risk factor, which in time may give rise to untoward behaviour or even to an increased likelihood of cases of harassment.



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Conclusion

The European Commission is at an intersection at the present context. The conception of current real estate projects such as “the One” building or “Copernicus” must take the new reality into account.

The organization of the workspaces at the European Commission cannot be based on anachronisms initiated by an obsolete management, "short termist" because centered on costs if not on the perverse obsession to control colleagues, without opening to the "working together ".

Finally, the increased use of teleworking should not become the scapegoat for everything!

Back to the Berlaymont, will a light of hope be lit through a clear and modern line on the workspaces? That is the question...

**Cristiano Sebastiani,
President**