Leadership and co-workership in the virtual workplace – A spatial perspective

Karin Högberg, University West, Karin.hogberg@hv.se
Sandra Ebojoh, University West, Sandra.ebojoh@hv.se

Introduction

Work is currently undergoing a major transformation in terms of where and how it is carried out, hence light is shed on space and place. The development of digital technology has created the possibility of working anywhere and anytime (Stoker et al., 2021; Dwiwedi et al., 2021). However, using digital technologies and working in a virtual environment is hardly something new to organizations (Qureshi and Vogel, 2001; Hertel et al., 2005; Mehtab et al., 2017; Chamakiotis et al., 2021). With the outburst of COVID-19 and the following social distancing, workplaces faced a rapid digitalization around the world. Almost overnight people were sent home from their workplaces and started to work from home, mainly using digital tools. After the pandemic, many companies are still working in a hybrid mode, that is working in both the physical office space as well as in the virtual space (Babapour et al, 2022). As platforms, virtual spaces provide both simple communication tools such as email and videoconferencing, group calendar, chat, document management etc. (Brünker et al, 2022). Organization scholars often argue that organizational life and its processes, culture, routines, and interactions are deeply rooted in the physical space e.g., the physical office (Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Siebdrat et al., 2014).

Organizations have for many decades made efforts to plan and design physical workspaces to create better conditions for organizational communication, collaboration, and creativity (Taylor and Spicer, 2007) But the physical workplace has also been used as a tool to manifest power and structure. One example of this is how many offices provided spacious offices strategically placed in the building to managers to show off status. Organizational hierarchies between leaders “upstairs” and co-workers “on the floor” are ancestors that goes way back in the history of the workplace and has been, and are used to reproduce hierarchies, power, and differences between professions (cf. Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Most importantly, space has made organizing possible (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004) and created the physical arena in which leadership and co-workership is practiced (Taylor and Spicer, 2007).

Interestingly, the topic of leadership and the workplace and space, has been rather overlooked in research (Garretssen et al, 2022; Stoker et al., 2022, Carroll & Conboy, 2022; Lamovšek & Černe, 2023). Still, the effects of place on organizations and on leadership, behaviors and relationships are potentially important issues for managers. Therefore, as work transcends the office and is more and more digitalized, virtualized, globalized, dynamic and flexible, scholars have raised questions concerning where and how leadership and co-workership happens and what leadership looks like when we think of it in terms of a spatial phenomenon (Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This has raised questions on how
virtualization has affected leadership and co-workship in the virtual workplace and workspace (Conteras et al., 2020; Garretssen et al, 2022; Stoker et al., 2022). Arguably, leadership has become more difficult and complex due to the distributed working environment (Krehl and Büttgen, 2022). The present paper therefore aims to study the leadership and co-workship in the virtual workplace. The following research questions are asked: How do the practices of leadership and co-workship change in different spatial arrangements? And, how do the virtual workspaces shape leadership and co-workship?

This paper views virtual workspace as a type of virtual space that enables and shapes the workplace and shapes the arena for leadership and co-workship by providing a imitation of the ‘real world’ with different affordances as a platform for organizational work that includes tools to interact, collaborate and influence (Vartiainen et al., 2007). Furthermore, we view leadership as a relational construction between people, and the environment rather than as an individual quality (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Also, we join Alvesson and Willmot’s (1992) discussion that argue that spatial practices ‘produce people’ and that organizational aesthetics is an issue of politics and power (Dale and Burrell, 2003) – and thus of socially constructed leadership. Therefore, we also view the relationship between leadership and space as a mutual construction that shapes and inform each other in an ongoing process (Wood, 2005; Taylor and Karanian, 2008; Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010. The objective of this study is to make theoretical contribution to the IS research field as well as the organization research field and provide practical insights for practitioners such as managers, leaders and co-workers in virtual organizations.

Method
The present paper reports data from a study of a knowledge based firm in Sweden, with its headquarters in the United States. The firm designs and produces electronic devices for other industries. The focus in this paper is limited to managers and coworkers in the Swedish organization. A longitudinal case study has been carried out from March 2020 to March 2023. This study adopted a qualitative approach, with an interpretive persp ective which emphasizes individual’s role as social actors in a context (Klein and Myers, 1999). By applying this approach, the study appreciates that reality or individuals’ lifeworld’s are subjective and mentally constructed (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). Since it considers both social factors and the natural context, it can be helpful when trying to uncover individual experiences in an organizational context (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007). The empirical data was collected by semi-structured interviews with seven managers (four women and three men) in leadership positions and seven engineers (co-worker-s). In total, 37 interviews were conducted that were recorded and transcribed. Follow-up interviews were made on three occasions with all respondents, approximately four months apart. The respondents were selected for the present study because of their positions as managers with responsibility over departments and teams within the organizations. The engineers were chosen due to th
eir role as co-workers. A semi-structured interview method was chosen, led by an interviewer but with emphasis on allowing the interviewees to tell their narratives.

**Result**

As many other organizations, the case organization experienced a rapid digitalization and were forced to start working from home using during the pandemic. The data reveals that the lack of a common physical organizational office challenged work in several ways. First, the lack of office space created a need to “imitate” the physical work place in the virtual workplace. That is, practices that used to be performed in the physical office such as coffee breaks were introduced in the virtual workplace as well. Similarly, daily meetings were introduced where co-workers and leaders could “meet” and talk about their daily work. The leaders describe that they found it hard to spontaneously interact with their co-workers but also described that they felt insecure in their role. One of the leaders describe that he after a while started to email his co-workers to tell him what he was doing. He says: “When we were in the office they could all see me. See me go from my office, to meeting rooms, to the cafeteria etcetera. They saw me in action. But now I think my role is a bit vague. They are all doing fine, they deliver what they are supposed to and I am just checking in to see that they are doing ok. So, I started to email them every week, telling them what I was doing and what meetings I had and so on, just so that they could get an idea of what my role is when they don’t see me at the office.” This quote illustrates how the lack of common place has created a need to structure the common virtual work space and define ones different roles. Furthermore, the data reveals that the issue of trust between leaders and co-workers were disrupted. The leaders describe that they sometimes found it hard to control when their co-workers were working but also emphasized that most of their co-workers delivered on time. In order to maintain their relationship with their co-workers many leaders started to call or email more often. Third, the organizational culture were heavily disrupted by the lack of common workplace. The co-workers described that their teams created a close relationship in the virtual space and that they were sometimes “happy to be able to work alone” without the disruption in the workplace.

**Conclusions**

The present paper study how the practices of leadership and co-workership change in different spatial arrangements and how do the virtual workspaces shape leadership and co-workership. First, the study emphasizes that due to the lack of a common physical workspace, the structure, relationships, and hierarchies cannot be “led” by materiality, in the workplace, such as offices, corridors, meeting rooms and cafeteria. Second, the study emphasizes that the lack of materialism and its symbolism, such as hierarchies, access to certain places of the workplace etcetera created a need to rearrange and renegotiate organizational power relationships as well as the organizational. Also, the result reveals that the experience of virtual space is an individual experience and interpretation, rather
than a common one, as in the physical workplace. Third, the findings illustrates that the virtual workplace is paradoxical in its nature. On the one hand, it creates physical distance between people and as the same time creates a closeness that is not usual in the physical workplace, e.g., the possibility of being connected to digital platforms any time during the day and from anywhere. The present paper is still in its initial phase and we look forward to discuss the development of the paper.

References


