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NAVIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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INNOVATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: EVOLVING SOCIOMATERIAL PRACTICES THROUGH DESK SHARING IMPLEMENTATION

Research Idea

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of desk sharing within a traditionally rigid public administration context. While commonly adopted in private organizations to enhance efficiency and collaboration, desk sharing remains rare and underexplored in the public sector. Through a sociomaterial lens, the research examines how spatial flexibility reshapes work routines, social dynamics, and perceptions of belonging. The case focuses on a distinctive setup where enclosed offices are shared daily by rotating employee groupings, diverging from typical open-plan models. An interpretive ethnographic methodology, combining field observations, informal interactions, photographs, and survey data, captures the lived experience of this transformation. The study aims to understand how physical environments co-construct organizational life, offering insights for future workplace innovations across public institutions.

Keywords: Desk sharing, Public administration, Innovation, Acceptance, Appropriation

1 Introduction

Public Administration (PA) is facing increasing pressure to modernize, driven by citizens' expectations of greater efficiency, transparency, and flexibility. In response, many institutions are experimenting with organizational and technological innovations, topics increasingly more important in organizational studies. While such transformations are common in the private sector, their implementation in the public sphere remains limited and understudied, often due to entrenched institutional logics, rigid hierarchies, and spatial norms that resist disruption. As a result, the successful integration of technological and organizational innovations presents both opportunities and challenges.

In particular, this project will examine the introduction of the desk sharing practice, exploring how this spatial and organizational shift reshapes everyday work routines, and affects perceptions of productivity, collaboration, and belonging within the workplace.

Consequently, the originality of this research lies in the implementation of these practices, which have not yet been widely adopted in the public sector. Additionally, the study will analyze how public employees perceive and adapt to innovation through the lens of sociomateriality in order to develop case studies that can aid the implementation of similar future innovations in other contexts linked to the public administration.

2 Desk Sharing in the context of Public Administration

Desk sharing refers to a flexible workplace arrangement where employees do not have assigned desks but use available workstations daily. In private organizations, desk sharing is typically introduced as a means to reduce costs associated with leased office space by maximizing the use of available infrastructure (van der Voordt, 2004), to foster collaboration and cohesion among colleagues (Zerella et al., 2007), to promote innovation (De Croon et al., 2005; Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019), and to enhance performance (Gonsalves, 2003).

Despite these potential benefits, the application of desk sharing in public contexts remains underexplored, largely due to institutional inertia and deeply embedded spatial and organizational routines. The project aims to fill this gap by investigating the introduction of desk sharing in the PA. Traditionally, PAs are characterized by fixed workstations and a strong territoriality of office spaces. This is especially true in the case examined in this study, where employees have been assigned to private offices that housed one, two, or three of them. Furthermore, existing literature on desk sharing primarily examines transitions to open-plan environments, where boundaries between workers are minimized and physical layout is radically transformed. By contrast, this study examines a unique desk sharing arrangement in which enclosed offices are collectively used by rotating employees who form different groupings on a daily basis. These configurations shift based on attendance and spatial layout, allowing the investigation of how such flexible setups influence social relationships, workplace routines, and the sense of belonging in an environment

3 Theoretical framework

This study adopts a sociomaterial perspective (Orlikowski, 2007) combined with critical realism (Leonardi, 2013) to examine how material artifacts and social practices co-constitute each other. Sociomateriality posits that organizational practices emerge from the interplay between human agency and material elements, suggesting that both are inseparably intertwined in the enactment of organizational life. Critical realism perspective on sociomaterialism maintains that while material artifacts are socially constructed, they possess an ontological reality that exists independently of human perception (Leonardi, 2013). This approach allows for the analysis of how material elements influence and constrain action, while also being subject to human agency and reinterpretation.

One example of this vision is exemplified by the study of affordances: contingent opportunities for action determined by the characteristics of objects or environments that guide and constrain human behavior (Suchman, 1987; Norman, 2013). These affordances can only be fully understood through interaction with those who engage with the space or objects but they are still based on space and objects' characteristics such as layout, design, and functionality; e.g. a chair affords sitting because of it has a flat and elevated surface and a supportive structure, but that affordance only becomes relevant when a user recognizes and enacts it; at the same time, the same chair might afford different uses, such as standing on it to reach a shelf, depending on the user's intentions, experience, and the surrounding context.

The interaction between human action and materiality extends beyond direct use; objects can also suggest actions through cues that prime certain behaviors. A notable example is the "weapons effect" (Berkowitz & LePage, 1967), where the mere presence of a weapon in a given context increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

Lastly, Objects present in the workplace, such as furniture, plants, and photos, and the overall workspace layout carry symbolic values, aiding workers in constructing and expressing their identities and infer other's identities (Elsbach, 2003). Moreso, these physical markers serve not only as personal expressions tools but also as cues that others use to infer professional roles and hierarchies.

From the acknowledgement of the sociomaterial paradigm come the following research questions:

1) What sociomaterial configurations emerge as employees adapt to or resist the new desk sharing environment?

2) In what ways do changes in material workspace arrangements affect collaborative dynamics, informal interactions, and identity construction within the office?

4 Methodology

This study employs an interpretive ethnographic approach to examine how spatial and organizational change is experienced and enacted in everyday practices within a public administration undergoing the implementation of desk sharing. Ethnography allows for an in-depth exploration of how workers interact with and assign meaning to their material and social environments, emphasizing the situated nature of organizational life (Malinowski, 2013; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

To capture the sociomaterial dynamics at play, the fieldwork was conducted over a three month period during the experimental introduction of desk sharing. The researcher participated directly in the daily routines of the office, including rotating across different desks each day, in the same manner as the employees. This embodied engagement allowed for a deeper understanding of how workers adapt to flexible spatial arrangements and how shared spaces are used and negotiated in practice. In addition to observing formal and informal interactions, the researcher took part in informal moments of worklife such as coffee and lunch breaks, which offer rich insights into socialization, belonging, and the informal appropriation of space (Orlikowski, 2007; Suchman, 1987).

To complement fieldnotes and enable a more systematic observation of how desks are personalized or depersonalized, photographs were taken at two key moments of the workday: midday, to document how workspaces are actively used; and at the end of the day, to observe how they are left after the workday ends. These visual records help trace patterns of spatial adaptation and resistance, through the material environment.

Finally, to strengthen the depth and reliability of the findings, the ethnographic data is integrated with survey responses collected from both treatment and control groups over time. This combination of immersive qualitative insights and longitudinal quantitative data provides a comprehensive view of how organizational change unfolds in practice, and how material and social dimensions co-evolve in response to new spatial configurations (Bryman, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

5 Expected results

Although the analysis is still ongoing, preliminary findings reveal different behavioral patterns in employees' responses to the desk sharing initiative. Appropriation strategies vary widely: some workers actively explore new routines, by negotiating occupation of shared spaces with flexibility, while others display territorial habits, subtly or clearly reclaiming former desks. Furthermore, it is expected that employees will appropriate the practice through adaptations in work modalities, work material use, and emerging social routines. At the same time, the redistribution of space is anticipated to impact both interpersonal dynamics and task-related behaviors.

The study is expected to uncover how sociomaterial configurations emerge through everyday practices, revealing how individuals navigate shared environments via informal negotiations, strategic object placement, and collaborative interactions. Particular attention will be devoted to examining how spatial flexibility shapes expressions of identity and practices of privacy management.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research contributes to sociomateriality by evidencing how space and practice co-constitute each other in public administration contexts, offering grounded insight into the entanglement of human agency, material artifacts, and evolving cultural norms under organizational innovation.

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