

# **HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION**

## **CASE STUDY**

**Ministry of Transport and Communications; department of  
Facility Issues**



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### **Abstract**

This case study concerns a governmental department that changed from a bureaucratic structure toward a flexible innovative organisation, through the implementation of an innovative office-concept. Main obstacle for achieving success was found in lack of managerial support. Beneficial aspects concerned increased flexibility and autonomy of employees and more structure and transparency in their working processes, as well as a cost-reduction as a result of decreased occupation of office-space. The innovative office-design will probably be wider dispersed throughout the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water management.

# HI-RES Case Study: Ministry of Transport and Communications

## Sector

Government

## Key Words

Innovative office; flexible workspaces; tele-working; environmental issues

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Abstract

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## 1. Background Information

The activities of the department 'Facility Issues' (FI) of the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water management (MTPWW) concentrate on the acquirement of new buildings, the decoration of these buildings, and the actual moving of MTPWW departments. Other activities are the design of 'visions' and new office standards for these departments. The FI department consists of 128 employees, of which 62 are currently working in an innovative office-concept. This means for example working with an open-plan office, flexible workspaces, shared directories on the computer and a central archiving system, instead of using individual archives. This office-design facilitates and stimulates flexible, though structured working behaviour. In addition, the new design has led to a significant reduction of costs spent on office-space.

## 2. Drivers for Change

The first impulse for changing the traditional way of working was merger of several departments within the ministry of MTPWW, which led to an increase in travelling time for many employees. Tele-working was introduced in 1992 as a measure to reduce this, but its introduction was also inspired by the governmental character of this particular organisation, which reflects on itself as being a role model for other Dutch organisations in terms of saving the environment. Although the reduction in travelling time was not demonstrated, beneficial side effects gave way to several pilot projects on new ways of working, more specifically working within an innovative office-concept. These pilots were facilitated by the notion that nowadays the Dutch government (or at least the department of FI) does not believe any more in the fact that sitting behind the computer all day creates effective politics and policy. The 'dusty' bureaucratic civil-servant job does no longer exist. Mobility and interaction with others are necessary to come to effective results. This implies that workers need to be mobile. New demands in civil occupations (being customer-directed, more flexible and less bureaucratic) have led to the need for a new office concept. The other way around, the implementation of the new office concept has also increased the need for a new way of working. Organisational accommodation should be fitted into the organisational goals, meaning that if an organisation desires to be innovative, this should be supported by the design of housing of the organisation.

## 3. Characteristics and Process of Change

Three pilot studies were conducted on the interaction between innovative office-concepts and new forms of working. The main research question was 'what are the effects of accommodation on the working processes?' It was believed that a new office-design could support the working processes very well, so this was made the primary goal of the pilots. Reduction of costs, for example as a result of 'desk-hopping' was not set as a goal, in order not to endanger the supportive nature of the experiments. During the pilot, all aspects of working processes were measured (% meetings, % reading etc.). In these pilot studies, office-concepts of three departments of the ministry of MTPWW were adjusted to the working processes, among which the department of FI. All pilots were measured with a zero- (1998) and an effect-measurement (1999). Apart from the working processes, it was also measured how the employees were experiencing the new

office design and, for example, the number of contacts within the office. One of the three pilots did not succeed due to obstacles that will be discussed in paragraph 4. The other pilots were more successful. The office-concept of FI was slowly innovated in such a way that employees could adjust to the increasing flexibility. It appeared to be very important to make sure that changes in the working processes stayed parallel to the changes in the office design. In this way a symbiotic relation, that facilitates and stimulates both aspects, will be created. In addition, employees needed time to adjust to the new way of working. As the chief of Facility Advice en Coordination said: *'Working with an innovative office-design affects the work of everybody. If you do not take that into account, it might fail. Employees need to be 'trained' to work within the new environment'*.

#### **4. Obstacles to Change**

One of the pilot studies was not executed. The main reason for this was to be found in a lack of support from management. *'A negative attitude of the management or the CEO is the biggest obstacle concerning the innovative office-design'*, one of the implementers of the change process states.. *'The change process requires high commitment of all parties. This implies that the management should also participate in the new design'*. It seems very important that the management gives the proper example towards employees on how to deal with the new way of working. For instance, at the beginning many employees at FI had a negative attitude towards teleworking. It led to a decrease of flexibility in meetings, because people were not willing to adjust their teleworking schedules to the needs of the organisation. Currently, teleworking is applied flexible throughout the department.

#### **5. Risk Analysis**

Past experiences have shown that the manager should create the right conditions under which the concept of innovative office-design can flourish. At FI it appeared that there were employees who turned out not to fit into this new environment. Nobody was actually fired because of the new office design, however some people decided to leave voluntarily, partly because they just could not get adjusted to the new design. Also, the new way of working makes people who are not actively working, easily spotted for two reasons. Firstly, as a result of the new working processes, different outputs of different employees are more transparent, causing greater differences in quality and quantity of work. Secondly, the 'open-plan office' in which they work gives an easy overview of the activities of different people. The latter also affects the manager or CEO; he or she can no longer walk undisturbed through the office. The increased visibility results in many questions of employees whenever he or she is walking by. Other disadvantages can be found in the effects of the new office-design on the working conditions; for example, some people tend to get lost as a result of working at home, or outside the office a lot. Information overloading should also be warranted for (planning is the main antidote for this) and people have to put more structure into their work. Finally, there are fewer possibilities for engaging in private conversations, because everybody can overhear.

## 6. Benefits of Change

Due to the changes in office design, employees are more flexible and autonomous and feel more responsible for their job. They have also put more structure in their work to cope with this flexibility. Deadlines are more often met nowadays, and agreements more often acted upon. Also, there were many savings in costs, for example relating to the more efficient occupation of office space. The new way of working facilitates the steering of employees and their working processes, and there is more transparency in results. The social behaviour (helping each other) has increased. As a result of teleworking, employees can better concentrate, which may have led to an increase in productivity. A very important advantage is the reduction in the frequency of moving the department to another (larger) building due to possibilities in flexible space-solutions. The average MTPWW department moves every few years. The new office-design also attracts new employees, which are appealed to this flexible way of working. These positive experiences within FI have made that the issue of 'office-concept' comes standard nowadays with the total package of the tasks of the department of FI, meaning that other departments can also get better acquainted with it.

## 7. Conclusions

Clearly, working with an innovative office-concept is a long-term project which progresses slowly and needs careful monitoring. When these factors are taken into account, many benefits appear to result from it. It should be especially noted that the government is known for its cumbersome character and bureaucratic structure. This might mean that the implementation can be more speedily established in other sectors. The successful implementation shows however that the government can become more flexible, which underlines even more the beneficial effects of working with the new office-design.

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