Duality of Informal Spaces in Organizations: Exploring Multiple Paradoxes

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Abstract

Office spaces in modern-day organizations are becoming an important aspect of employees' well-being (Pink et al., 2020). Office space now is not only limited to basic facilities related to the work domain but also incorporates places for recreational non-work activities (informal) such as wellness rooms, gyms, and breakout zones (Picard et al., 2020). These places provide an informal space for employees to come and share tacit and explicit knowledge, ideas and experiences involving their personal and professional lives. These places share some distinctions with liminal spaces; for the purpose of this study, we refer to them as informal (non-work) spaces. They are part of the employees' everyday lives and also seem to influence their perceived organizational experience (Pink et al., 2020). These places also facilitate interaction across and beyond formal hierarchical levels and transgress formal norms of practices and communication obligated by the bureaucratic structure of the organizations (Sapp et al., 2010).

The existing literature on spaces in organization management has predominantly focused on formal spaces and structures (Denison & Spreitzer, 1991; Raphaela & Simone, 2016); however, informal spaces evolving in modern-day organizations are not given sufficient attention by the existing research scholars. Companies around the world have started spending heavily to transform their existing command-and-control structure into fluid and flat structures (Kelly, 2021). The new structure also recognizes the need for informal culture and provides opportunities for employees to engage in the same (Taminiau et al., 2009). Despite its growing adoption in many organizations and market leaders, a lacuna still exists in the academic domain to further explore its effectiveness in improving employee connectedness and social bonding. And post covid world, where organizations are expecting employees to join back workspaces physically, the need for such spaces is more pronounced (ET NOW Digital, 2022)

The study uses a qualitative approach to investigate how employees use these informal spaces at work. Initial exploration with participants suggests that informal spaces give rise to two sets of activities within the organization- the first adds to the productivity of the organization and the individual and the second set of activities reduces the same. These two types of activities establish a paradox as they both are contradictory and yet are intertwined with each other (Schad et al., 2016). They are interdependent and related but produce diagonally opposite outcomes for the individuals and the organization. The literature in liminal and informal spaces has overlooked the blending and creation of paradoxes within them (Liu & Fan, 2022; Shortt, 2015).

Therefore, the primary focus of this paper is to explore different paradoxes that exist and foster within the informal spaces for cross-boundary (inter-team, inter-division, inter-business units) interactions among employees. While these spaces help individuals replenish their resources by disengaging them from cognitively involving tasks (Kim et al., 2017; Kühnel et al., 2017), they also seem to increase irregularity in work, such as delayed deadlines and suboptimum work outcomes.

We are conducting semi-structured interviews with people who use or have previously used informal spaces at work to take micro and macro breaks, meet colleagues from other teams, and seek career opportunities (learning a new skill, switching to better projects). However, participants also informed that informal spaces are used as means to deflect time from working, engagement in gossip, and knowledge hoarding. The preliminary analysis of eight semi-structured interviews displayed the following paradoxes in these informal spaces, which are seen to permeate further into the formal spaces.

1. Procrastination and proactive working

2. Engagement and disengagement from work

3. Intention to stay and intention to quit

4. Cynicism and trust

5. compassion and indifference

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