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## La percepciones de los empleados a una reubicación a corta distancia- Un estudio longitudinal de un caso finlandés

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### RESÚMEN

El objetivo de este artículo (trabajo) es investigar los impactos sociales de la reubicación de oficinas a corta distancia individualmente, empleados, equipos y organización. El artículo estudia las experiencias de los empleados su compromiso cambio gestión de la comunicación según la percepción de los empleados durante el traslado. Los impactos sociales son identificados basados en las experiencias de aproximadamente el 15% (nueve empleados) de esta organización, dos meses antes, una semana antes y cuatro meses después de la reubicación. La recolección de datos cualitativos se lleva a cabo a través de entrevistas semi estructuradas diarios y investigación y búsqueda participativa.

La organización sujeta trasladada desde un entorno como de célula cerrada a un edificio nuevo con diseño de oficinas abiertas ubicadas en el mismo lugar e implementando una actividad basada en la política de trabajo. La reubicación fue planeada y bien comunicada dentro de la organización, incluyendo los empleados y haciéndoles partícipes ; de hecho algunos con experiencia en reubicación se fatigaron ya que consideraron que estaban siendo tratados como una ocasión mas grande que la vida. Por otra parte ciertos empleados resistieron la experiencia hacia el cambio.

Antes de la reubicación la sujeta organización se consideraron inadecuados. Aun así los empleados pensaban en el nuevo entorno de oficina abierta incluyendo preocupaciones sobre la adopción de nuevos métodos de trabajo. Por ejemplo después de la reubicación, adoptaron la práctica de ser menos dependientes del papel, mientras que algunos empleados seguían limitados a los desafíos relacionados con la ergonomía. Las experiencias de la mejora de la comunicación entre organizaciones fueron reportadas por la mayoría, mientras que otras experiencias fueron todo lo contrario. Desde las últimas entrevistas realizadas cuatro meses después de la mudanza, ciertas aplicaciones pos ocupación, posiblemente aun no hayan sido totalmente experimentadas.

En el documento se proporcionara información a cerca de los impactos sociales del proceso de reubicación de organización, ya que identifica las percepciones de los empleados durante el proceso de reubicación con la mínima influencia de cambio de ubicación. Por otra parte, el enfoque de la triple longitudinal investigación, permite el posible desarrollo de dependencia del tiempo del tiempo de adaptación al cambio y la percepción de los empleados a comparecer y ser analizados con mas detalle.

**Palabras-chave:** cambio, Corporate Real Estate, Finlandia, reubicación de organización, experiencia de empleados

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## Employee perceptions of short distance relocation – A longitudinal study of a Finnish case

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the social impacts of short distance office relocation on individual employees, teams and the organization. The paper studies the employee experiences, engagement and change management communication, as perceived by employees during relocation. The social impacts are identified based on the experiences of approximately 15% (nine employees) of the subject organization two months before, one week before and four months after the relocation. The qualitative data collection is conducted by semi-structured interviews, diaries and participatory action research.

The subject organization relocated from a closed cell-type office environment into a new building with open office layout located on the same site, implementing an activity-based working policy. The relocation was planned and communicated well ahead within the organization including employee involvement; in fact, some experienced relocation fatigue as they considered it was being treated as a “bigger-than-life” occasion. On the other hand, certain employees did experience resistance towards the change.

Before the relocation the subject organization’s old premises were considered inadequate. Still, employees had concerns about the new open office environment including the adoption of new ways of working. After the relocation, for example, less paper-dependent working practices were adopted, whereas challenges related to, for example, ergonomics were still constraints to some employees. Experiences of improved inter-organizational communication were reported by most while others experienced just the opposite. Since the last interviews were made four months after the move, certain post-occupancy implications were possibly not yet fully experienced.

The paper provides information on the social impacts of organizational relocation process as it identifies employee perceptions during a relocation process with minimal influence from location change. Moreover, the threefold longitudinal research approach enables possible time-dependent development of adaptation of change in employee perception to appear and to be analysed in more detail.

**Key-words:** change, corporate real estate, Finland, organizational relocation, user experience

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate Real Estate Management is a discipline responsible for a variety of different value-adding tasks within organizations. One of these tasks is relocation: from time to time, organizations are required to relocate as a consequence of change in their operating environment which forces the organization to reconsider their location and workspace requirements. Relocations can have a variety of different financial, social and environmental impacts to the relocating organization (see for example Christersson & Rothe 2012). Albeit there are several threats, challenges and risks (see for example Rasila & Nenonen 2008) related to relocation, organizations can also use it as an enabler or catalyst towards organizational change (Inalhan 2009); physical space can be taken as a crucial component of organizational change (Lindahl 2004).

From the social perspective (that is, through the employees' perceptions in this paper), relocation can be considered to be a major change for the organization. Usually relocations include at least three different types of physical change: location change, building change, workplace change and in addition often also changes in the ways of working. These changes tend to be interlinked and the success of the one is connected to the success of the other (Allard and Barber 2003). In relocations where the distance between the old and new premises is long enough for the employees to be required to move their homes to either make significant changes to their commuting or, the social impacts are arguably also significant from the employee perspective.

However, in short-distance relocations there can also be a variety of social impacts as the employees face changes in respect to new building, workplace layout and new ways of working, in addition to the change of location. Yet, the number of studies focusing on the short-distance relocation process from individual employee perspective is rather limited: most of the studies deal with workplace change or location change, with the rare exceptions of the findings reported by Rothe et al. (2015) in a post-relocation multiple case study, and Heywood et al. (2014) in a pre- and post-relocation single case study. This being the case, a deeper and further analysis of the relocation process is necessitated for improved understanding of social impacts of relocation in respect to change.

This paper aims to investigate the social impacts of short distance relocation process, as perceived by individual employees of a relocating case organization. The focus is set on employee perceptions towards the relocation in three aspects: firstly the process itself, secondly the engagement of the employees and thirdly the organizational change including and working culture and ways of working. The particular case in this study consisted of relocation to an adjoining building thus allowing a focus on the process and workplace change in a setting where the influence of changing location was diminished.

### 1.1. Literature review

It has been argued that of major change initiatives, 50 to 80 percent prove to be unsuccessful (Strebel 1996). Consequently, efficient change management has been suggested to be the key for successful relocation and new workplace accommodation implementation (LaFramboise et al. 2002). Further, the link between change management and internal communication has been recognized (Kitchen & Daly 2002); notably communication should also be set apart from one way delivery of information (Bull & Brown 2012). In the absence of accurate and formal information, unnecessary change resistance can occur, which can give room for unofficial

rumours and grapevine discussions (Frahm & Brown 2007). This being the case, one of the key factors of successful implementation and management of relocation and workplace change is change communication. Lack of clear communication strategy is suggested to decrease employee satisfaction towards alternative workplace strategies (Bull & Brown 2012). Change management should also include participation and the requirement for involving users is pinpointed to increase with the degree of change envisaged (Vischer 2011, p. 129). Hence, successful change management, including communication and participation, acts as a centrepiece when organizations aim to succeed in their relocation processes.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that employee resistance to change is something that is natural to most of the people and it is attributable to, for example, breaking the sense of belonging (Inalhan 2009, Inalhan & Finch 2004), cynicism (Abraham 2000, Andersson 1996) and fear. Resistance can take various forms: it can decrease work moral, increase stress and decrease employee productivity or increase absenteeism (Attwood 1996). Inalhan concludes that even though new work environment can promise greater comfort and functionality, it is not satisfactory enough for people to abandon what they already have and they are familiar with, and suggests that change management is required to understand how individuals adapt (Inalhan 2009). Individual differences have also been identified to be related to the acceptance of change (Wanberg & Banas 2000). Therefore, individual differences should be accounted for in the relocation change management processes.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND CASE DESCRIPTION**

This research employs the use of qualitative data in a single case study setting. Since this paper aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the short distance relocation process in respect to change as perceived by the organization's employees without testing of any already existing hypotheses, a longitudinal case study was selected as the most appropriate approach for the enquiry (Eisenhardt 1989). The selected case was an organizational relocation which had not commenced at the time of the initiation of the research, which allowed the researchers to obtain data of employee perceptions pre-relocation in addition to post-relocation observations. Since the relocation was to take place from an existing office building to an adjoining new built building, the influence of location and the distance of relocation were minimized, which both could be major contributors to the perceived change from the employee perspective. While the case study approach is not able to provide empirical generalization, it is often a justified option for proposals of new theoretical and hypotheses proposals (ibid., Creswell 2009).

The study's main data collection method was semi-structured interviews, addressed to the employees of the relocating case organization. The interviewed employees were selected purposefully with the consent from the organization and people involved in the process. The selected employees represented different genders, age profiles and they were from different teams within the case organization. Altogether, 25 interviews were made for nine employees (equivalent to 15 percent of the case organization's total headcount of 60). The interviews were made between March 2012 and September 2012. The interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes and they were made in Finnish. Altogether three waves of interviews were executed: the first wave two months before, the second one a week before and the last one four months after

the relocation. First and second waves of the interviews consisted of nine interviews while the third round consisted of seven interviews.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews were constructed on three different themes with a set of predefined questions prepared by the researchers. These themes were generated in order to observe the employees' perception of the process, where perception is defined as “[...] the user’s observation, opinion, and awareness of both the environment they are in, and the service they are receiving [...]” (Tucker & Smith 2008, p. 197).

The three themes were:

Theme 1: Employees’ views towards the *relocation process and change*

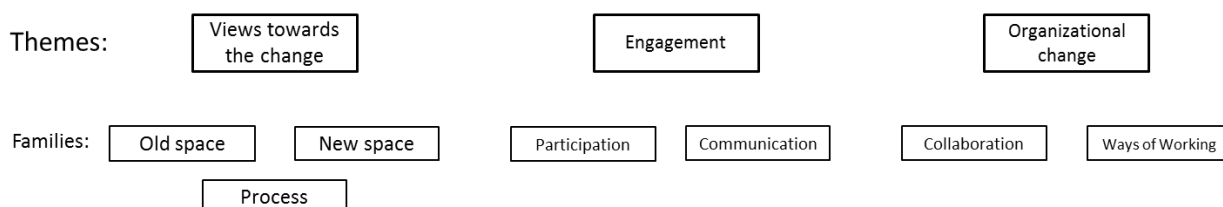
Theme 2: Employees’ *engagement* into the relocation process

Theme 3: *Organizational change, working culture and new ways of working*

These same themes were used in all of the interviews and further, the last wave post-relocation included questions regarding the actual moving day and post-occupancy experiences.

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then analyzed. The analysis of the interviews used qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The transcribed interviews were read, thematically coded and then grouped into families. The focus in the analysis was the employee perceptions towards the relocation process in respect to the changed space, change engagement and changed functioning of the organizational. The assigned codes were of descriptive nature entailing little interpretation (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 57). Eventually, 135 codes were used, which were categorized into seven code families which were then further connected to the three themes of the interviews. The families and themes are illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Themes and families of the qualitative analysis**



In addition to the interviews, the studied employees were requested to write down their considerations, thoughts and expectations during the relocation process by means of online diaries. In total, there were 41 supplementary diary remarks with the amount of remarks ranging from 0 to 19 per employee. Further, elements of participatory action research was used in the form of a workshop organized in the beginning of May 2012 (one month before the relocation), which was organized by the subject organization’s employees responsible for the relocation implementation in cooperation with the researchers. The purpose of the workshop was to prepare the employees for the coming change and relocation.

<sup>1</sup> One fixed-term employee had left the company and another was unable to participate to the last wave of interviews.

## 2.1. Case description

The case organization is a public specialist organization with a headcount of circa 60 at the time of relocation. The organization was occupying a 1970s-built office building in a medium sized city in Finland and it was about to relocate to a newly built adjoining office building. Most of the teams within the organization were accustomed to traditional ways of working in a closed office space with 1 to 4 person rooms. Also many of the employees had been working for the organization for many years though others had only 1 to 2 years working history with the organization.

The organization set certain aims for the relocation beforehand: These four main aims were to:

- Implement efficient and distributed activity-based team working;
- Improve the information flows in the organization;
- Enhance the enjoyment of working; and
- Improve the organization's image.

The organization also invested time and efforts into change management and communication choosing to conduct the relocation with employee engagement and offering possibilities to participate. This was done, for instance, by allowing the employees to comment and suggest on the layout proposals, colours and names of meeting rooms. In addition, relocation information was communicated to the employees by, for example, email and intranet in briefing and workshop sessions during the relocation process. Also a workshop (involving the researchers) was organized one month before the relocation to prepare them for the upcoming relocation and the implementation of the new activity based working practices.

## 3. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Judging from the interviews, the relocation process of the case organization was considered to be success as a whole and the need for new space was understood by the employees, although the new ways of working did create some concerns in the beginning. Regarding the process, the amount of relocation communication in particular and the possibilities for participation were considered to be sufficient. Most of the employees did consider the relocation to have been a good episode for the organization and improved organizational culture was being reported to a certain extent. However, the actual move coordination as well as certain post-relocation readjustment actions was longed for and in the case of one of the teams, there was increased use of the organization's other location.

In the next sub sections, the studied three themes are presented in a chronological order starting from the first wave of interviews with illustrative quotes linked to the code families included in the corresponding tables.

### 3.1. First Wave

The first wave of interviews was conducted two months before the relocation date. At this time the employer had already announced over a year ago, that they would relocate. The employees had been engaged to the process by providing information and a possibility for commenting on different layout proposals, for instance.

**Theme 1:**

Perceptions towards the old space were unanimously negative and expectations towards the new space were high. There were also positive expectations for the process as a whole, although some change resistance was identified among the interviewees.

*Table 1: 1<sup>st</sup> Wave, Theme 1*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Old space</b>	<b>New space</b>	<b>Process</b>
“...comparing to this (old) space, almost anything is better (laughter).”	X		
“For sure, everybody is expecting, as this is the old, uncomfortable as a space, so everybody are definitely eagerly expecting the new space.”	X		
“Yes, I do think that it will be a positive change. Of course it will cause, as all changes, cause some sort of fear and resistance, but I do think that for the most part people are eagerly moving in there. Even though I myself say that I fear the open space, still if I had to choose between this (old one) and that (new one), I would choose the new one in any case.”	X	X	X

**Theme 2:**

Most of the interviewees perceived the amount of change communication and abilities to participate into the process to be sufficient or at a good level. These perceptions were also reflected in the diary remarks although not everyone had made remarks extensively. The participation in the process had so far included discussions and commenting on different proposals. There was some differences in the eagerness to participate but the possibilities were considered sufficient at this stage.

*Table 2: 1st Wave, Theme 2*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Participation</b>
“(There has been relocation communication) sufficiently. No doubt, sufficiently.”	X	
“Yes, we have had quite openly, on the coffee break room table even, (the new layouts) on display, so that everybody knows what there will be. To my understanding, there will be different working spaces, quiet rooms, project room...and a space where you are allowed to interrupt, where you can have discussions just like that. And then, there will be separate phone booths, and better coffee break areas”.	X	
“In the beginning, there was monthly information, and quarterly information, and there has always been a section which discusses the new space. So, in my opinion, quite good. It might be that somebody would have liked to receive even a bit more official or written or questionnaire, that perhaps it is easier for some to write their considerations down that way...”	X	

**Theme 3:**

Observing from the 1<sup>st</sup> wave’s interviewees, the old space was deemed to be inadequate by the employees. However, many of the employees had concerns and even fear towards the new space and new ways of working. For instance, ability to concentrate in the new open space and changing practices regarding usage of phone and meeting rooms were brought up.

*Table 3: 1st Wave, Theme 3*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Ways of Working</b>
”But the new situation, <b>new ways of working</b> and this, that is the thing which most likely will be the thing creating obstacles, if at all.”	X	X
“But there has been rather strong fear (among some) regarding the change, for real. Such as, ‘Well we do have to move, really?’, ‘Well it is nice to move (to the new space) with nice people, it is alright, but then I probably have to work from home in order to for me to be able to concentrate’. These are rather strong messages.”		X
“Well one thing that bothers me...as there are no dedicated workstations, and as there are these mobile units...so how will it function in practice then...When everybody are coming to work at different times so does it create hassle and fuzz when people pick up the mobile units...so is it possible to concentrate then? And these phone issues, when you receive a call do you need to run to some phone booth in order not to cause noise, so how does it function in practice? But I trust that common rules are agreed upon already before we move in, so that you know straight away that how it works then.”		X

### 3.2. Second Wave

At the time of the second wave of interviews, the organization had already started the moving practicalities such as packing personal belongings, archives and storage, as the move date was just one week ahead. The move coordination included external move company support and move teams into which employees were assigned. The different teams had different areas of responsibility (kitchen, archive, etc.). Also a relocation workshop for the employees had been organized four weeks before the second wave.

#### Theme 1:

Employees’ views towards the change of workplace was at this time already concentrated on more detailed questions regarding the coming relocation, such as schedule of the actual moving, collection and moving of the movable items, who is responsible for what etc. The perceptions towards the old space being inadequate remained similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> wave. Further, employees were eagerly expecting to get into the new office.

*Table 4: 2nd Wave, Theme 1*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Old space</b>	<b>New space</b>	<b>Process</b>
“Well, yes (the change), it is in its way significant, as our (old) working space, because there are four of us in a single room, for instance. So the new space as such, the air ventilation should work there and the workplace is totally different than here (in the old space).”	X		
“And somehow, I am expecting the new space, so one will get there.”		X	
“It still seems that most (of the employees) or everybody is expecting eagerly to get into the new space, as they are totally different than this (old) one here.”	X	X	X



**Theme 2:**

Similar to the 1<sup>st</sup> Wave, the amount of relocation related information was mostly considered to be sufficient or already even too much in some instances. The level of information also had become more detailed and focusing more on the moving practicalities and coordination. The assigned move teams were considered to be a method of participation in the process. Also the relocation workshop organized one month earlier was considered to be a positive occasion with opportunities to share thoughts and concerns with colleagues, and also to realize that people hold different views towards the relocation.

*Table 5: 2nd Wave, Theme 2*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Participation</b>
“...so I must say that it has been rather well communicated...Maybe there is sometimes even too much of (relocation related) messages as you start already ignore them thinking that this is again some move stuff, so perhaps you don’t remember to read all of them”	X	
“But then again, on the other hand, I feel that this is being made a bit too much of a, as, essentially, this is nothing more than moving of things. Okay, new ways of working and new space and so, but I believe that things will start rolling...The more this thing is brought up, the more it is being repeated, the more it feels that it becomes, a big thing. That is one of the risks there, if there is too much of (change related) communication.”	X	
“There has been good detailed information about what to write on the move boxes and everything...That there has not been too much but just good and clear facts, what you need to know, so in my opinion they have been clearly communicated.”	X	
“Well, every one of us is in some of the move teams...through the move teams you can participate (in the relocation process).”		X
“And yes, we have had discussions (about the relocation) and the workshop, in fact, was a good thing because you got to discuss move related topics with those people that you don’t normally discuss with.”		X

**Theme 3:**

At the time of the second wave of interviews, some of the employees had already started to implement new ways of working thus preparing for the coming change. For instance, there was a shift towards less paper-dependant working. The new instant messaging tool had been tested also a few times by some, whereas some reported that it did not yet function properly. The expectations for improved intra-team collaboration were mentioned by some and certain concerns regarding the implementation of new ways of working were brought up, too.

*Table 6: 2nd Wave, Theme 3*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Ways of Working</b>
”But the new situation, new ways of working and this, that is the thing which most likely will be the thing creating obstacles, if at all.”	X	
“I am expecting that the teams would open up more, that the skills and knowledge of different people would be (better) utilized more”	X	
“That if rules are agreed upon, so does everybody understand that they are meant for everybody. As there are different kinds of people, strong characters and really – how would I put it – we have in the same space all different functions starting from administration...and then there are more creative (people) and action people, so, who will these (different kinds of) people fit into the same space without collisions?”	X	
“Well, I am not afraid of anything, but (I have doubts) of meeting rooms...as they will not be bookable, that how it is going to work. And the phone booths, have they will function?”		X
”I am now longer collecting paper on my work desk but instead I put them in a folder straight away, so that I have a new system...”		X

### 3.3. Third Wave

#### Theme 1:

At the time of the last wave of interviews most of the employees had already adapted to the changes and the new space. However, the adaptation process was still partially ongoing by some employees. Regarding the new space itself, the quiet space was considered not suiting its purpose currently. It was suggested to be made smaller and the guidelines for using it to be revised. There were also hopes for other readjustments to the space and practices based on employee feedback. Poor ergonomics, cold indoor air were mentioned by some. The organization had taken action based on the feedback and created a development team to plan readjustment actions and finalize the change process, but changes had not yet, however, been implemented.

*Table 7: 3rd Wave, Theme 1*

Illustrative quotes	Old space	New space	Process
“Despite my own fears, I have noticed that, in fact, I did adapt surprisingly well, after all.”		X	X
“In the beginning I had anxiety since this (new space) was such a horrible mess...”		X	
“...people have adapted in here (to the new space) much easier than initially anticipated.”		X	
“The space itself is just excellent, but it is still partially seeking its (final) form. The quiet space is in the wrong place.”		X	
“And on the other hand, I believe that this (relocation) has had a positive influence on the working atmosphere as well, when the whole organization is concerned. This has not been a bad thing at all.”			X
“And this was really made a ‘big thing’, allowing for people to little bit ‘ache’ with the relocation and change. After all, this is a big change towards better compared to the old space.”		X	X
“Sometimes there is trouble, but in my opinion in rather small scale, after all. Working ergonomics is really bad. It is extremely bad even though you adjust these chairs... ..it is extremely cold here. In the summer it was really cold in here. It still is really cold in here.”		X	
“The (new) space could be improved, of course, regarding the phone booths that in case you receive a call and you need to speak in a tranquil place, but then you realize that there is no free space... We do not have conference phones in these (phone booths)”		X	
“Well, it was a little bit of chaos, that nobody really took control of it, that what will be moved and where to... So perhaps I would have hoped that someone would have been there and said that ‘you, do that, and you do this’... But, at the end of the day, it did go surprisingly well.”			X

Regarding the actual move process, certain frustrations were reported by some of the interviewees and expressions of disappointment towards especially the coordination and move of the storage room material were observed. Although the external move assistance was described as efficient, the responsibilities for preparations were hoped to be more evenly distributed by some of the employees.

**Theme 2:**

Opposite to the amount of pre-relocation communication, some interviewees reported that there should have been perhaps a bit more communication and collection of feedback after the relocation and more detailed information during the move process itself. Certain employees felt that there was a lack of clear guidelines for the move coordination during the move day and partly lack of taking initiative towards the moving practicalities.

*Table 8: 3rd Wave, Theme 2*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Participation</b>
“...before the move there was good amount of (relocation) communication. During the move day there was communication too, but then on the other hand, it felt that immediately after the move, (relocation related) communication disappeared just like that... ..we were put in here, and now we are here, and so what next. Something I would hope for, that there would have been a bit more efficient communication“	X	
“Well, organizing of the move was not apparently that well communicated, that there was no exact time that when we get to move here (into the new space), who is allowed to come. There had been people in here in the morning already and we came then somewhere in the afternoon... There were these information blockages... But I don’t know which caused them.”	X	
“We have been asked... ..by email, about the quiet space as some speak on the phone there and it is not permitted at all, and similar issues, but to my understanding feedback has been collected on that. Some emails have been sent related to the quiet space and other meeting room practices. Yes, there has been some discussion about it.”	X	X
“...we have had a feedback questionnaire and there has been a lot of open discussion around it. Because the thing is that different people experience different issues as problems.”		X

**Theme 3:**

Regarding the inter-team collaboration the perceptions were divided: some experienced certain “silos” as still existing and feeling like an “outsider” whereas other reported an improved sense of community compared to the old situation. Some of the interviewees reported that they now do less printing of papers. Also most people had started using the new instant messaging tool which was implemented as a part of the relocation process.

*Table 9: 3rd Wave, Theme 3*

<b>Illustrative quotes</b>	<b>Collaboration</b>	<b>Ways of Working</b>
”...It can be said that the flow and exchange of information (between teams) has improved clearly.”		
“...Another thing is that the accessibility to colleagues is better. If they are there in the active space, usually they can be seen easily. And in my opinion, there is more inter team discussion and collaboration and such. But of course if you are in the quiet space... there are certain employees who have been all the time there. So regarding them, you don’t reach them easier than in the old space.”	X	
”There is a different kind of a community now”	X	
“And yes, that quiet space feels like a bit library like, that the people who work there just know their colleagues who work in there. But for me, I do not even always know the names of everybody who are working there. As the identification due to the walls not existing anymore, it makes it more challenging to identify people.”	X	
“In the beginning (after moving to the new space) there was some, when there was even new people and new ways of working and all that... but I do like this system (of working) much more than in the old system.		X
“Well of course now, you cannot leave papers on your working desk. Personally, I don’t unnecessarily print emails anymore... Also with the mobile unit, I had some attitude problems in the beginning”		X

## 4. FINDINGS

The main findings of this particular relocation case are summed up as the following observations in the following sub sections grouped theme by theme.

### 4.1. Theme 1: Relocation process and change

- There appeared to be an almost unified common view among the employees towards the old premises that they are out-dated, inadequate and inappropriate for the organization, due to poor indoor air, for instance. Yet, some resistance, concerns and fears towards the change could still be observed along the course of the relocation process.
- Although some of the employees had been working for the organization for several years thus suggesting strong attachments to the space and ways of working, the relocation decision to the new premises was accepted *per se* without any major resistance.
- The time it takes for individuals to accept and adapt to the change appears to vary from one person to another, which the findings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of interviews suggested.
- Based on the employees' perceptions, the organization had already implemented activity-based working procedures at the time of the third interview wave. However, the change process was still at least partially on-going, judging from the interviews. Some employees had not yet fully adapted to the change.
- In the case of one of the teams, the working was mainly performed from other places including premises that the organization occupied nearby the main location, which was perhaps not ideal for collaboration in respect to the inter-team working improvement aims of the relocation. This shift initially was perhaps not the intention of the organization but it happened in a more organic way.

### 4.2. Theme 2: Engagement

- Nearly all of the interviewees considered that they had received enough information related to the relocation before it took place and during the relocation. This was also supported by the interviewees' diary remarks to some extent. However, after the relocation some reported that they would have liked to continue to receive information and have possibly a post-occupancy evaluation survey, for instance. In addition, some noted that they would have liked to receive more detailed information and guidelines regarding the actual move process and actions. On the other hand, some experienced that there was perhaps even too much change information and engagement at times, which in some instances might work against its original change adaptation and acceptance purposes.
- The possibility to participate and engage in the relocation-related issues was perceived notably differently by different employees. All of the interviewees considered that engagement and possibility to participate is important in such a major change. Although most people initially had positive perceptions of engagement and participation possibilities, in some instances the efforts were considered to be partially in vain as the final chosen solution did not eventually reflect all of the solutions which were preferred

by some employees. Further, the eagerness to participate varied from a person to another: while some proactively suggested, commented and participated, others were more passive in this respect.

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Organizational change, working culture and ways of working**

- Some interviewees had perceptions of improved organizational culture. For instance, *better flow of information, better collaboration and a better sense of community* were being observed within the new space by most. However, in some instances the quiet area was considered to be inhibiting collaboration if people were mainly working there as opposite to working in the open space. Further, there were differences between the experiences of different teams; some considered that the situation at the moment was not necessary an improvement compared to earlier situation stemming from one team working mainly from another location. In this respect, the relocation was not necessary a success to everybody.
- Some of the interviewees reported that they had started to do less printing of papers after relocating into the new space. Also most people had started to use the new instant messaging tool which was implemented as a part of the relocation process and new kinds of meeting practices had been implemented.

### **5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

The previous research on the social impacts of relocations has usually focused on either change of location or workplace change, not that much on the relocation process itself. Acknowledging that relocation process is, in fact, often a major change for the organization, the literature on change management has predominantly identified communication and employee participation to be crucial in order to improve the possibilities to succeed in overcoming the change resistance.

Using longitudinal approach, this study provides information on the social impacts of an organizational relocation process as it captures employee perceptions throughout the process with minimal influence from location change. In this particular case, the relocating organization invested both time and money into the communication and engagement of employees into the process. Thus, it could be argued that the organization did consider the relocation to be a major change. It is possible that this had an influence on the perceptions of the employees in enabling them to better adapt to the change. It is notable, that different employees experienced the same relocation in different ways and raised different concerns: some considered it to be an improvement for the organization and their working whereas some expressed a tendency to sometimes avoiding coming to the new space if they could work elsewhere. Also differences in the adaptation to change were observed.

Despite the change of location being practically non-existent, the employees did go through the relocation process including the actual move as well as the change process in terms of workplace change and changed ways of working. As suggested by earlier research, resistance to change could be observed albeit the change of space was considered to be an improvement and the change of location hardly influenced the employee perceptions. While some of the employees had stayed within the organization for a rather long time and accustomed both to the old space and old ways of working, the resistance to change might have come even more naturally as the employees had perhaps developed strong attachments to the old office surroundings and routines.

## 5.1. Practical implications

The key practical implications of this paper originate from change management. It is of very essence for the corporate real estate managers and the people responsible for relocations to understand the importance of change management and the various levels that the change resistance could take. Further, as this paper's findings demonstrate, although the organization did invest resources into the employee participation and change communication, some resistance is likely to occur no matter what, although the old premises were in this case considered inadequate.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that people experience the same relocation process from their own personal perspectives and people's different nature may influence these perceptions, as well as their backgrounds, history and roles within the organization. Therefore, efficient relocation change management should realize these individual differences and the existence of change adaption and resistance in order to benefit the most from short distance relocations.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper was set to analyse the social impacts of relocation through perceptions of employees of a relocating organization with a minimal influence of the location change. The study focused on three themes: relocation process and change, employee engagement and the organization's changing working culture and ways of working. The paper adds to the knowledge of the impacts of relocation process in Corporate Real Estate, especially to the change management actions in respect to relocation. Indeed, relocation process and implementation of new workplace and ways of working are usually a significant change to the organization *per se*.

The case presented in this paper highlights the importance of change management in a relocation process. Although the old space was almost universally considered inadequate, still there was certain resistance and elements of adaptation involved especially regarding the new ways of working. This suggests that the change of space should be separated from the change of ways of working, accepting that relocation process usually constitutes of both of the aforementioned elements of change in addition to the location change. Further, although the investigated relocation case did not include significant change of location, the employees did go through the relocation process including the actual physical move.

This paper has certain strengths and limitations. One of the strengths is the in-depth nature of the research by using three waves of interviews which were complemented by diary remarks and participatory action research. In addition, the influence of the location change was diminished which enabled focusing on the change in respect to the relocation process. The limitations of this study arise mainly from the ability to generalize on the basis of a single case study which this paper represents. Although qualitative designs often lag behind quantitative designs in reliability, the thematic coding process was performed systematically by using dedicated qualitative analysis software, which should improve the reliability. The interview questions also started eventually yield similar answers and thus, a certain level of data saturation was achieved as less and less new insights came about the longer the analysis progressed.

Future research possibilities could employ other research methods and the use of multiple cases as this study investigated a single case study design. Further, based on the findings of this research, more comprehensive approaches incorporating also the perceptions of the people responsible for the change management could be developed.

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