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## Office design

Workers at the project management office for the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands might be forgiven if they ask themselves where they want to go that day. They have options. Mexico maybe? No problem. Africa? Quite possible. Japan? The Sahara? It can be arranged.

The offices have been given an exotic touch by Gispen, the Amsterdam-based office supplier, part of the Danish Skandinavisk Group. One meeting room, called Out of Africa, has zebra-patterned curtains and earthenware African-style lamps. The Japanese office has rattan and white cotton muslin surrounds while the meeting room has a sloping awning to give the effect of a Bedouin tent.

Can any of this be dismissed as a fad? Peter Veer, Gispen's managing director, does not think so. "Let's be straight, we're in the business of selling furniture but we are finding that we have to respond to technical and social developments and some of the things we are looking at are emotional issues," he says.

The Utrecht office make-over arose from a desire to provide options for greater flexibility. The modem, the internet and the laptop computer allowing employees to be connected with their work in remote locations, coupled with pressures to save costs, led to a reassessment of the office space. At the Utrecht office only support staff such as secretaries have permanent desks. Other staff must look for what's available when they arrive. Each employee has an upright filing cabinet on wheels which can be taken to any desk.

The new arrangements did not come easily to some who wanted to work in the same place every day. The management wanted to avoid the experience of Interpolus, an Amsterdam insurance company that was one of the first Dutch employers to experiment with hot-desking, the 1990s fad for increasing employee-to-desk ratios.

At Interpolus it was possible to book desks in advance. What tended to happen was that every day the same employees would want to book the same desks.

The Utrecht office has experienced fewer problems because it has a high ratio of desks to employees. If "docking stations" - places where laptop computers can be connected - are included, most of the 40-strong establishment is covered by a workspace. In practice the busy days are Mondays and Thursdays. This is because for many Dutch workers these days, Thursday tends to be the end of the week.

"It's very much better in the new arrangement than the way things were before," says Annemarie Andriessan, the office manager. "People like to come here."

John Venneman, manager of Gispen's consulting arm, who was closely involved with the original designs, says: "The workplace is a living and changing environment. It's quite possible that in five years' time someone will say, can't we change it? That would be natural. But that doesn't mean we will have to get rid of all the fixings. It may be a question of redecorating, of looking at the details. Underneath the office has been designed to be practical. The desks are well designed and adjustable with power points where they need them."

Quite independently, employees at the Project Management offices for Amsterdam have won their own workplace redesign. These offices on four stories of an eight-storey office block have, if anything, an even warmer feel to them than those in Utrecht. There is no particular theme to the development beyond that of mixing social and work space.

Employees still have small offices around the periphery of the building but the designers have carved out a cafe-style meeting place with an upright piano in one corner surrounded by dozens of framed photographs of the office workers and their families. The tables are deliberately stained in different colours with differing styles and shades of chairs adding to the informal atmosphere.

There is something of the eccentric here with large floral patterns decorating one set of partitions, bold prints on one office wall with etched patterned glass elsewhere. One tiny office looks like a Victorian gentleman's parlour. The effect is homely, friendly and informal, all very unlike an office. Yet everything works. Behind the decor is a robust concern for function.

The makeover did not come cheap, about 11,000 euros per employee, compared to Euros 7,000 (£4,300) per employee to fit out a conventional office. Tom Stewart, the office manager, believes it was worth it although he admits it is difficult to make any cost-benefit analysis.

This "new romantic" office is unusual in the public sector. The touchy-feely office was pioneered in New York and the UK by the Chiat Day advertising agency - now renamed St Luke's in the UK after an employee buy-out.

But the Dutch planning system, designed around a holistic approach to integrated land use, transport, housing and environmental strategies, places a strong emphasis on social and environmental concerns.

There is far greater employee involvement in decision-making than in US, UK and many other European employment hierarchies.

Since 1991 the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Physical Planning and the Environment has pursued a policy of concentrating housing, workplace and shopping areas together to reduce journey times.

This new approach to the workplace is lending a different edge to the concept of working from home. Rather than taking work into the home it is bringing home comforts into the workplace.

Gone are the standardised cubicles and antiseptic colour schemes. You almost expect to find hanging on the wall a needlepoint picture saying "work sweet work".

Perhaps some workplaces will become the social environments they used to be early last century when office workers might have toasted crumpets by the fire, when a visit from the cake trolley was a morning ritual and when the odd glass of whisky did not go amiss.

Unfortunately, fire regulations, alcohol bans, cost-savings and the continuing obsession with productivity, are likely to suppress this nostalgic image. Somehow the water-cooler doesn't have quite the same appeal.

But the Dutch have shown that you can revive the social side of work with an upright piano, cafe-style tables and flowery wallpaper. It doesn't take much to change things, just a little imagination.

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