The rise of activity-based working is undeniable: offices around the globe are introducing this new way of working and organisations even go so far as to implement it as the new global standard. Although the concept of activity-based working has been around for approximately 30 years, the concept has become more popular for several reasons, the main ones are being to increase employee productivity and to reduce office costs. But what is it? And does it work? In this whitepaper, we will explore these questions and more.
WHAT IS ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING? (ABW)

We all know the traditional workplace model: employees work from the same office and desk, day in, day out. For generations, people have worked in this system, but in the past years, there has been a dramatic shift away from that ancient model. Activity Based Working puts a new spin on the office dynamic. Employees are not confined to a particular office or desk and are free to work from any available workstation in the workplace. That means employees can work in changing teams, across different locations and in different offices.

This provides employees with a setting that best supports each activity they perform. Different spaces are designed specifically for a particular task to facilitate productivity optimally. If you want to do teamwork, imagine a good enlightened room with a large whiteboard, and a presentation screen, while the spaces for high concentration work have proper isolated individual desks with a calm appearance.

Keep in mind that the often seen ‘open plan’ space strategy, where employees no longer have their own office but instead are seated together in one big open space is not the same as activity-based Working. The core of activity-based working is rooted in connecting activities to a work environment that supports or even enhances the task performed. That is not a prerequisite with open plan spaces, which are most often aimed at achieving higher efficiency of expensive real estate. Globalisation and digitalisation mean that we can perform activities in different physical locations or even time zones. That’s a fundamental change and needs guidance from management and support from the whole organisation.

![Graph 1. Change of office types across years](image-url)
DOES ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING WORK?

"If concentration and privacy suffer, why don’t the employees then move to fitting concentration areas?"

The efficacy of activity-based working is often debated. Some analysts believe it’s a workplace management game-changer. Others argue the disadvantages of activity-based working outweigh its potential benefits. As every organisation is different, the main activities also differ. The variety of tasks each employee performs during the day, gives quite some information whether activity-based working fits. The more variety, the more activity-based working fits within your organisation. Employees who perform singular tasks all they long. They don’t really feel the need to change places all day. But one could suggest that changing spaces during the day is beneficial as it gives you a new setting with a fresh mindset.

A recent systematic review showed that activity-based working has positive merits in areas of interaction, communication, control of time and space, and satisfaction with the workspace; however, it is unfavorable for concentration and privacy. If concentration and privacy suffer, why don’t the employees then move to fitting concentration areas? There could be two reasons for this, 1: there are too few concentration areas or 2: employees don’t use the concentration areas properly. These give us insights for proper implementation of activity-based working.

Sick employees lead to lost productivity

Another aspect which results in lost productivity is “presenteeism”, this is when employees are in the workplace but are not fully functioning due to illness or another condition. This not only has an effect on employee productivity but working while ill could possibly worsen their sickness or affect their quality of work. Additionally, because presenteeism isn’t something that is visible, the lost productivity and costs cannot be measured, however, according to Forbes, the cost of presenteeism is far more than illness-related absenteeism.
HOW TO IMPLEMENT ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING?

If you decided on switching to an activity-based working, only proper implementation will ensure its success. Based on the facts mentioned above, we’ll discuss the key factors.

The right amount of places

If concentration levels of employees suffer during the day -even in activity-based working environments- it could be that the amount of spaces for concentration is too low. You need to get the right proportion between spaces available and the activities performed in the organisation. But how do you know what your employees do exactly during the day? Via Habital® we gained the insights that there are organisations where employees work for 68% of the time on high concentration work, while in other organisations that level was just 18%.

The differences between organisations are thus significant. And unfortunately, guessing how much you need is difficult and dangerous. In our own research we saw that the amount of time employees expect on concentration work is way less than the actual time spent on concentration work (see graph below). Therefore, measuring the actual time spent per activity type is the best way to gather knowledge about the workplace type you need to what extent.

![Graph 2. Difference between expected vs. actual activity patterns](source: Measuremen Habital® in collaboration with Jan-Gerard Hoendervanger)
HOW TO IMPLEMENT
ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING?

Facilitating proper use of activity-based working

Concentration work could also suffer because employees are not using their activity-based working environment as it is designed to be used. Employees might remain to sit in an open space area even though they need a focus booth, but somehow they don’t move. This could have two reasons as well, the work environment should be designed properly, and employees should know how to use it. Good design with proper signing (like carpet coloring for focus zones), good communication about the strategy, and facilitating tools are conditional for proper use.

They all need to be successful in order for effective use. For example, if people need to focus and there is a beautiful focus booth somewhere, but it lacks a plug or the right monitor they might refuse to move. In a small pilot study, we nudged people who were sitting on the “wrong” place for their activity using Habital®. We asked them to move to the right place, and if they refused; why not. 10% of the participants were willing to move, while 36% “couldn’t” move because they were dependent on their facilities, while 34% preferred their place over the “fitting” place. This data shows that activity-based working was not properly implemented in this work environment.

Graph 3. Activity-based working reasons to move
HOW TO IMPLEMENT ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING?

Conclusions

Whether you should implement an activity-based working depends on the activities of your employees. Employees who have a variety of tasks benefit more from activity-based working. Based on the activities of your employees one should distribute the right amount of suiting workspaces. A second factor is the proper implementation of the workplace strategy in general. A large part is dependent on the management of the workplace: realising a good design, proper communication, and facilitating supporting desks and tools. But one shouldn’t forget the ones who will benefit from it; the employees. Instruments, like Habital®, could nudge and support employees in their activity switching behavior and make them more productive at work.

Habital®

Habital® makes your workplace more productive, efficient and engaged. Habital® captures data about your psychological needs, job characteristics and expected workplace preferences in order to show how you and your co-workers can work smarter and feel better. Through mini questionnaires during the day, Habital® measures the actual time spent on activities, and can support you to the right places for your activity to improve productivity and proper use of ABW-environment. With the gathered data, workplace managers get direct actionables on where to improve and/or change the workplace.

Who is Measuremen?

Founded in 2005 in the Netherlands, we are now operating in more than 40 countries worldwide. Our goal is to improve the work environment worldwide by measuring the use and performance of workplaces to offer insight to help managers build or improve their workplace strategy. If you want to implement a workplace strategy or need to revamp your current workplace strategy, visit our website or get in touch with us:

+31 20 370 47 34
info@measuremen.io