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Managing the workplace in a globalized world: The role of national culture in workplace management

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# Managing the workplace in a globalized world

## The role of national culture in workplace management

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to provide a better insight into the role of national cultures on the management and design of workplaces of multinationals in different countries.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This explorative study is based on an extensive literature review of dimensions of a national culture in connection to corporate real estate management, interviews with ten representatives of multinationals on corporate real estate strategies and workplace characteristics and a multiple case study of two multinational firms with site visits and observations at offices in The Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain.

**Findings** – Whereas all interviewed companies had their real estate portfolio to some extent aligned to the local national culture, none had a strict central policy about this issue. Differences in workplace characteristics were mainly caused by the involvement of local people in workplace design. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the case studies showed relationships between masculinity of a culture and the expression of status and between uncertainty avoidance and openness to innovation; however, no relationships were found related to differences in power distance and short-/long-term orientation.

**Research limitations/implications** – The case studies were conducted in three European Union countries. Due to practical reasons, most interviewees were Dutch. Additional empirical research including more different national cultures is needed to advance more unequivocal conclusions and to develop a clear set of guidelines for decision-making.

**Practical implications** – The findings stress the importance of finding a balance between aligning facilities to business purposes and meeting the needs of different (groups of) employees in multinational environments.

**Originality/value** – Although much has been written about national culture, not much research is yet available in connection to facilities management and corporate real estate management.

**Keywords** Decision-making, Corporate culture, National culture, Facilities, Corporate real estate management, Workplace characteristics

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

As the world globalizes fast and economies become increasingly more interdependent, companies find themselves managing extensive real estate portfolios in foreign countries. Real estate managers are confronted with choices concerning the design and management of the globalized workplace, where different national cultures coexist and interact with the corporate culture (Dewulf *et al.*, 2000). This raises an important question: should a workplace in Asia, South America or Australia be designed in a different way than a workplace in North America or in Europe? Also, what about



different countries within the European Union zone? One might expect the answer to be yes because people with different cultural backgrounds are likely to react differently to their working environment.

According to Van Wijngaarden:

[...] the optimal design for one person or group may not be the optimal design for the other. Ambient conditions, space and function, and signs and artefacts, as described by Bitner (1992, p. 64) might be perceived differently per individual, group, organization or national culture (van Wijngaarden, 2011, p. 15). Although different cultures seem to be converging in many ways due to internationalization, this convergence is mostly related to the practices of the culture; the way people dress, the films they watch and the sports they perform. These relatively superficial manifestations of culture are sometimes mistaken for all there is; the deeper, underlying values, which moreover determine the meaning of people's practices, are often overlooked. Studies on cultural values continue to show impressive differences between nations (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 285).

However, it is still unclear how cultural differences influence workplace characteristics of multinational firms. Frances Duffy questioned; "Which is stronger in this changing world, national or corporate culture?" (Dewulf *et al.*, 2000). Catherine Gall describes the importance of a national culture in relation to workplaces in her own way:

Time and time again we see companies try to use their home base workplace standards in another country and then wonder why they don't work. Workspace is like cuisine; it's all about the local culture (Steelcase, 2011).

On the other hand, Heeroma *et al.* (2012) argued that whereas the behavioural context is a crucial element to address in workplace strategies, especially for multilocation multinational organizations, the concept of culture as a predictor of success does not offer practical solutions.

A misfit between the design of workplaces and user's preferences and needs might have a negative impact on organizational performance. In addition to organizational characteristics, conditions of employment, quality of work and so on, employee satisfaction and labour productivity seem to be significantly affected by the location of facilities, office concept, interior design and quality of available facilities (van der Voordt and de Been, 2010; Mallory-Hill *et al.*, 2012; Finch, 2012). Employee satisfaction and productivity are determining factors for the success of any organization. As a consequence, it is of the utmost importance to align the work environment to the goals and objectives of an organization, and at the same time to search for the best possible match with the needs and preferences of employees.

To improve our understanding of the complex role of a national culture in corporate real estate decision-making and its impact on the workplace characteristics of multinationals, a qualitative multiphased research was conducted. The first phase included a review of literature, which resulted in a theoretical framework on relationships between national culture and workplace characteristics (Section 2). The second phase included empirical research in two subphases: interviews and case studies. The main focus of the interviews was the role of national culture in corporate real estate decision-making, while the case studies mainly focused on the workplace characteristics in different working environments. Section 3 presents the research methods; Section 4 presents the main findings. In Section 5, the paper ends with conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 National culture

Several scholars have developed theories about national culture and many of them have proposed dimensions to allow for cross-cultural comparisons (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; House *et al.*, 2002; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, 2012; Schwartz, 2006; Minkov, 2007; World Values Survey, 2011).

The concept of culture used in this research is the theory of the renowned social scientist Geert Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), who has worked extensively with cross-cultural comparisons. Hofstede explains culture as “The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. The software of the mind (or mental program) is the pattern of thinking, feeling and acting. The sources of one’s mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences. According to Hofstede, there are different levels of culture. The three outer levels of culture are the practices; symbols, heroes and rituals. The core of culture is formed by values, which are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs to others. The values of a culture will only change slowly. National values should be taken as facts because they will not change easily (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 6).

As most people belong to different groups simultaneously, they carry several layers of mental programming within themselves. Layers of culture are, for instance, a national and a corporate culture. Differences between national and organizational cultures result from their different mix of values and practices. It is unlikely that an organizational culture will overrule a level of culture that is acquired earlier in life. This means that an employee can adopt the practices of an organization, but his feelings and interpretations about these practices are determined by his national culture.

Hofstede proposes five basic dimensions that explain what the author has identified as core cultural values (Table I). Based on these five dimensions, one can characterize a national culture.

### 2.2 The role of national culture in corporate real estate decision-making

An important strategic choice for multinationals is the extent to which they centralize or decentralize real estate management (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997).

In research dating from 1999, Krumm states that there are real estate organizations that coordinate design, construction and management of the real estate portfolio on a global scale. Yet, they cannot do so without strong local involvement because of legislative and economical differences between countries, as well as intangible factors like culture and values (Krumm, 1999). In more recent research Evans (2012) states that real estate management is becoming increasingly centralized to support businesses on a global scale, as ongoing globalization causes a greater need for global consistency in operations. Evans agrees with Krumm that although consistency is one of the key drivers of centralization, the need for local differences still needs to be recognized (Evans, 2012). Heisler and Sieben (2012) stated that although global standards will help to provide an efficient and uniform workplace, some flexibility in the standard would help to meet the demands of specific user groups.

So far, there is not much literature available on the role of national culture in corporate real estate decision-making. After interviewing five industry professionals, van Wijngaarden (2011) stated that other criteria are deemed more relevant to strategic

Dimension	Content
Small versus large power distance (PDI)	The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 46) Institutions are basic elements of society such as family, school and the community
Collectivism versus individualism (INV)	Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose; everyone is expected to look after him or herself and his or her immediate family. The opposite of individualism is collectivism, and it pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty throughout people's lifetimes (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 76)
Femininity versus masculinity (MAS)	A society is called masculine when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct; men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life. A society is called feminine when emotional gender roles overlap; both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 121)
Weak versus strong uncertainty avoidance (UAI)	The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 167)
Long-term versus short-term orientation (LTO)	Long-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole; short-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular respect for tradition, preservation of 'face' and fulfilling social obligations (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 210)

**Table I.**  
Cultural dimensions  
according to Hofstede  
(2005)

workplace decisions rather than national culture, such as corporate culture and functionality. According to van Wijngaarden, a national culture is taken into account in the design of the work environment, but subconsciously. How exactly this may work out to reflect the national culture in the physical work environment remains unclear (van Wijngaarden, 2011).

### *2.3 Relationship between national culture and workplace characteristics*

Several researchers addressed the relationship between national culture and workplace characteristics, yet all in their own particular ways (Hommels and Rakestraw, 1996; van Meel, 2000; Araghinavaz, 2003; van der Voordt *et al.*, 2003; Steelcase, 2009; Steelcase, 2011; Van Wijngaarden, 2011; Riratanaphong and van der Voordt, 2011). A comparative analysis of the outcomes of these studies showed that the relationship between national culture and workplace characteristics seems to be strongest for the Hofstede's dimensions of power distance and individualism.

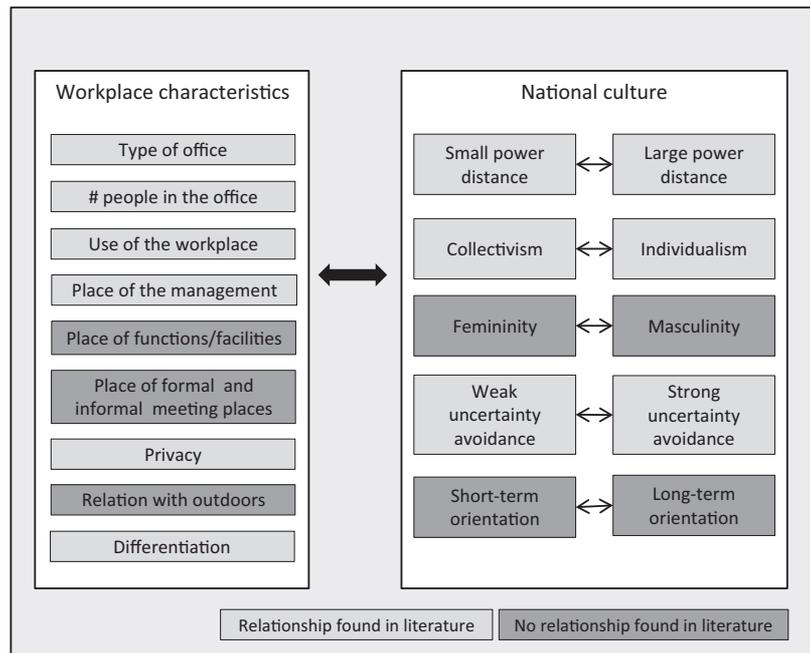
In case of a high power distance, it seems to be more likely that there is differentiation in workplace based on hierarchy; for instance, by providing workplaces with more

privacy and space for managers. The place of the management is more likely to be separated from other employees; for example, in a management-dedicated floor (Hommels and Rakestraw, 1996; van Meel, 2000). However, Steelcase states that in the past years, the impact of power distance is becoming less visible due to a shift to other – more transparent and flexible – workplace concepts (Steelcase, 2009).

Regarding the dimension individualism, Araghinavaz (2003) stated that in collective cultures people predictably prefer group offices, whereas individualistic cultures prefer cellular offices.

Although different researchers hypothesize relationships between the dimension “masculinity” and workplace characteristics – with a feminine culture being connected to cosiness and design – no relationship has been demonstrated in literature. The same accounts for the dimension of long-term orientation. There seems, however, to be a link between uncertainty avoidance of a society and the openness to workplace innovation, resulting in more flexible workplaces where cultures are more prone to accept uncertainty (Hommels and Rakestraw, 1996; Steelcase, 2009).

In conclusion, the research findings are inconsistent. As illustrated in Figure 1, most relationships between national culture and workplace characteristics that are discussed in literature focus on types of offices (lay-out i.e. open- versus more closed spaces, individual versus team rooms and open office plans), use of workplaces (personal desks versus non-territorial offices with shared activity-based workplaces), places of the management and differentiation in workplaces based on hierarchical structures. Information about issues such as places of informal and formal meeting spaces, place of the functions and indoor – outdoor relationships is mostly lacking.



**Figure 1.**  
Theoretical framework on cultural dimensions and workplace characteristics

### 3. Research methods

The empirical research included interviews with representatives of ten multinationals on how they cope with national and corporate culture in corporate real estate decision-making. In addition, site visits to  $2 \times 3$  offices – two multinationals, one office in The Netherlands, one in Germany and one in Great Britain per company – and walkthroughs made it possible to observe whether workplace characteristics differs in connection to different national contexts.

#### 3.1 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with real estate managers of ten multinationals working in different industries. Eight of the ten respondents were Dutch managers. One was British and one was originally from Belgium and is currently working in Spain. The interviews were semi-structured. A standard questionnaire was used, yet there was also room to elaborate on certain aspects brought up by the interviewees. The interviews mainly focused on the role of national culture in corporate real estate management of the multinational in relation to centralized versus decentralized decision-making processes. Besides, actual differences in workplace characteristics were discussed to further explore the impact of national culture. In addition, five meetings with experts in this field of study were arranged to support the cross-interview analysis. The cross-interview analysis led to preliminary conclusions about the two main research themes, i.e. the role of national culture in corporate real estate decision-making and the relationship between national culture and workplace characteristics. The interviews helped to frame the problem and to connect the empirical data to the literature review in a structured way. They also helped triangulate conclusions, which are further elaborated in the last section.

#### 3.2 Case studies

The case studies were conducted in collaboration with two multinationals (in this article referred to as company X and Y for confidentiality). Company X is an industry leader in delivering software, operating in approximately 60 countries. Company Y is a world leader in healthcare, lifestyle and lighting, with offices in approximately 100 countries. The main focus of the case studies was to observe the relationship between national culture and workplace characteristics. Offices of both multinationals were visited in The Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain. The one to two-day visits included observations and interviews. The observations of workplace characteristics were structured by a predetermined list of workplace characteristics based on the research of [Araghinavaz \(2003\)](#) (Table II). Next to these particular workplace characteristics, the walkthroughs also included open-minded and less structured observations of differences and similarities.

To gain a better understanding about the users of the buildings, their ways of working, the decision-making processes and the workplace design, the site visits also included an interview with the local real estate or facility manager and, if available, the human resource manager. Interviews with employees provided insights in their ways of working, the local culture and their perception of the workplace.

In the cross-case analysis, differences and similarities in the workplace characteristics were analysed and possible relationships with intercultural differences

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Workplace characteristics

*Lay-out of the office*

Open plan office/cellular office/group office/combi-office

Number of people in the room

750

*Use of the office*

Shared/flexible/personal

*Place of the Management*

Close to each other versus close to their team

*Privacy*

Amount of privacy

*Relation with outdoors*

Daylight and outside view

**Table II.**

Workplace characteristics included in interviews and observations in situ

*Differentiation*

Differences between workplaces based on hierarchical structures

were reflected upon. Together with the information found in the literature and during the interviews, this led to the main conclusion of this research.

#### 4. Results of empirical research

##### *4.1 National culture and corporate real estate decision-making – findings from interviews and comparison with the literature review*

The level of centralization of the corporate real estate departments of the multinationals in this research is somewhere between a centralized and a decentralized structure. Nine of the ten interviewed real estate managers explained that the extent of centralization varies per specific subject. Aspects that have a direct effect on the results of the business, such as financial aspects and global standards for the use of space, are usually not open to local influences. Most multinationals allow for flexibility regarding the details of the workplace concept, like the colour scheme. The differences between the multinationals regarding the decision-making about the workplace concept can be illustrated by the following examples:

- One of the companies has a centrally decided and very detailed real estate strategy. The results of the implementation of the workplace concepts in different countries are almost equal. There are some differences in the colours that are used, caused by the input of the local architect.
- Another company has a global guideline regarding the amount of square meters per function. This multinational determines the amount of square meters per employee centrally, and as a consequence this is equal globally, whereas the layout and use of the workplace are not determined centrally and show significant differences; for instance, resulting in flexible, large workplaces in an office in The Netherlands versus small, private workplaces in an office in Hong Kong.

The role of the local national culture in corporate real estate decision-making varies for each multinational participating in this research. When the interviewees were asked if

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national culture was taken into account in their respective real estate strategies, 50 per cent of the respondents answered yes and 50 per cent answered no. However, by stating more in-depth questions, it became clear that none of the ten companies has a central policy on the alignment of the working environment to the national culture. Nevertheless, about half of the multinationals allows for flexibility in their real estate strategy to allow for national influences in the working environment. On the other hand, there are also companies that decide not to align their real estate to national culture. However, minor influences of national culture were still be visible in their offices, as the local culture is ingrained in the local office supply or in the case where the workplace is designed by a local architect.

The interviewees mentioned multiple reasons to align or not to align real estate to the national culture. Corporate real estate managers often relate to the main aim of the real estate department, i.e. to support the core-business. Consequently, the workplace ought to meet the demands of the core-business, not the demands of the national culture. In other words, if the main focus of the business is to reduce costs, this is generally also the main focus of the corporate real estate department.

Another reason not to align the working environment to the national culture is that the corporate real estate department has a stronger focus on the corporate culture rather than on the national culture. The corporate culture is what the people in the organization have in common and what drives them to achieve the results the company hires them for. This argument is especially significant in the case of multinationals (as opposed to local companies) because there are often people from different cultures working together in one office. As a result, it seems crucial to focus on the common grounds, i.e. the corporate culture, instead of the differences. Another reason to focus on the corporate culture instead of the national culture is that some corporations wish to have consistency in their real estate portfolio to show a global image to the world.

The objective to provide a pleasant workplace is a reason given by interviewees for aligning the workplace to national culture. Just as the focus on corporate culture, this is usually a way to support the core business. By allowing local management or employees to determine specific parts of the working environment themselves, it is more likely that they feel comfortable, which is likely to increase satisfaction, productivity and loyalty to the company. Multiple real estate managers stressed that they cannot just determine what a workplace will look like in a specific country beforehand because it is possible that people are not able to work in a pre-determined office layout due to cultural differences, which could hinder their success.

One can conclude that, although the literature review showed that national culture could influence the perception by employees of the optimal design of the workplace and as a result affect their satisfaction and productivity, the interviews showed that alignment to national culture is not an important issue in strategic decision-making processes regarding the workplaces of multinationals. Similar to findings in literature, the results of the empirical research show that the corporate culture and image are more important than the national culture. However, all companies in this research have their real estate portfolio to some extent aligned to the national culture. Based on the interviews, it seems that Van Wijngaarden's statement "national culture is taken into account, but subconsciously" (Van Wijngaarden, 2011) is only partly true. Some interviewees gave examples that clearly illustrated their awareness of the influence of national culture on workplace

characteristics. However, as observed, none of multinationals has a central policy about the alignment of their real estate to national culture. Nevertheless, about half of the multinationals made the *conscious* decision to allow for flexibility in their real estate strategy to allow for national influences in the working environment. Based on this research, one can conclude that the alignment of the working environment to national culture can be characterized as indirect, instead of subconscious, because the differences in the workplace characteristics that derive from the national culture are mainly caused by the fact that local people are involved in the process of workplace design.

#### *4.2 National culture and workplace characteristics – findings from the site visits in comparison with literature review*

*4.2.1 Cultural profiles of the case locations.* On a global scale, Germany, Great Britain and The Netherlands seem to have more similar than dissimilar cultural characteristics. Nevertheless, compared to each other, there are important differences according to the findings of Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), who used standardized questionnaires to measure national culture profiles on five dimensions. The scores on Hofstede's dimensions are included in Table III.

The dimension masculinity/femininity shows a large difference between The Netherlands (feminine) and Great Britain and Germany (masculine). This makes The Netherlands more cooperative and caring for the quality of life, whereas people in Great Britain and Germany are more competitive and strive for success. Another difference can be noticed for the dimension uncertainty avoidance. Great Britain is more tolerant to uncertainty than Germany and The Netherlands, resulting in fewer rules.

The Netherlands focuses more on the long term than Great Britain and Germany. This is reflected in more long-term planning and less focus on time management and personal organization for the Dutch. The societies of all three countries studied have a low power distance, resulting in mostly flat hierarchical organizations. Great Britain is amongst the highest scores concerning individualism, which makes the British highly individualistic and private people. The route to happiness is through personal fulfilment. With a slightly lower score on this dimension, the Dutch are also highly individualistic. This also accounts for Germany, although to a lesser degree (Steelcase, 2009; ITIM, 2012).

*4.2.2 Workplace characteristics of six offices in three different countries.* The main differences in the offices of organization X and Y are the workplace layout, the place of the management and the differentiation based on hierarchical structures, as well as the amount of privacy (Table III).

The layout of the offices visited in Germany is cellular (plate 1), with personal offices and different sizes of group offices. There are combi-offices with a mix of cellular offices and open plan workplaces in The Netherlands (plate 2). The office layout of Company Y in Great Britain is a large open plan area (plate 3), whereas the office of Company X in the same country is mainly open plan with some enclosed offices. As there are personal desks in all offices of the case studies, there is no difference in the use of workplaces. In this case study, the amount of privacy can be linked directly to the layout of the workplace; the cellular offices provide more privacy than large open plan offices.

Based on numbers of Company X, the average amount of square meters per employee in Great Britain is lower than in The Netherlands and Germany. However,

Culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005)	Germany		Great Britain		The Netherlands	
	Company X	Company Y	Company X	Company Y	Company X	Company Y
Power distance			35	35		38
Individualism/collectivism			67	89		80
Masculinity/femininity			66	66		14
Uncertainty avoidance			65	35		53
Short-/long-term orientation			31	25		44
Workplace characteristics	Company X	Germany	Company X	Great Britain	Company X	The Netherlands
Lay-out of the office	Mostly cellular offices for 1 or 2 persons, some group offices	Group and personal offices for 1 till 12 persons	Combi-office; open plan with some personal offices at the side	Large open space, three enclosed office	Combi-office with cellular offices (1-4 people) and open space (5-20 people)	Combi-office; personal offices, group office and open space
Use of the office/workplace	Almost everyone has a personal desk	Personal desks	Personal desks for full time employees, non-assigned desks for consultants and home workers	Personal desks	Everyone has personal desks, except for the consultants	Personal desks
Place of the management	Decentralized	Top management, top floor	Decentralized, close to their employees	Enclosed office for the manager	Some managers next to their teams, some managers sit close together	Higher management is centralized, team managers sit close to their team

*(continued)*

**Table III.**  
Workplace characteristics  
in three different countries

Table III.

Workplace characteristics	Germany		Great Britain		The Netherlands	
	Company X	Company Y	Company X	Company Y	Company X	Company Y
Amount of privacy	A lot of privacy due to cellular offices	Average	According to the employees sufficient	Little privacy in the open space	Differs per type of workplace, generally sufficient	Generally sufficient
Relation with outdoors: daylight and outside view	Everyone has direct access to daylight and outside view	Everyone has direct access to daylight and outside view	All floors and desks have daylight, but in the core of the building only a little	Access to daylight in the open space; due to depth of floor plan people sit far from window	Everyone has direct access to daylight and outside view	Everyone has direct access to daylight and outside view
Differentiation between workplaces based on function level	The general manager has a somewhat larger office	Management has larger, personal and modern offices	Management and directors have private offices; employees work in the open space	Every workplace in the open space is equal. The manager has an own office	Most managers sit close together, some next to their teams. Personal offices are larger than open space desks	Most managers have private and slightly larger offices than the employees



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**Plate 1.**  
Cellular office in Germany

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these numbers are influenced by internal vacancy. There are also differences among the offices regarding the place of the management and the differentiation in the workplace based on function level. In the German office of Company Y, there is a specific top floor for the management, which is not observed in offices of Company X and Company Y in the other countries. Most offices have a central area for visitors, where large, formal meeting rooms are located. Smaller meeting rooms and breakout areas are located more decentralized in the floor plan, close to the workplaces.

There is a small difference regarding the relationship with outdoors between the offices in Great Britain on one hand and The Netherlands and Germany on the other. In

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**Plate 2.**  
Combi-offices in The  
Netherlands

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**Plate 3.**  
Open plan area in Great  
Britain

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the last two countries, floor plans are narrow and everyone has direct access to daylight and outside view. In Great Britain the floor plans are deeper. Although there are windows in every room, people might be seated further from direct daylight and view.

Finally, the atmosphere of the offices shows some remarkable differences between the countries studied. Whereas the offices in Germany are fairly colourless and outdated, the offices in Great Britain are new, fresh and colourful. The offices in The Netherlands are in the middle of the way regarding this aspect.

*4.2.3 Comparison findings case studies and literature review.* The case studies did not confirm a link between power distance and the workplace characteristics. On the one hand, this might be caused by the fact that the power distance index in the three countries is almost identical. On the other hand, literature often relates this dimension to the hierarchy in the office. The expression of status is often linked to the dimension of power distance, but this does not seem to be correct. This dimension focuses on the extent to which the less powerful members of a group expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. The expression of status, however, is a characteristic of a masculine culture. This was confirmed by the case studies in Germany and The Netherlands; the German offices show more differences between workplaces based on hierarchical structures than The Netherlands, which matches with the masculine German culture.

With most openness found in the offices in Great Britain – a highly individualistic country – and most privacy found in Germany – which scores the lowest on individualism – the expected connection between individualistic cultures and private offices was not confirmed in the case studies. Probably, individualism in the British office is expressed by rules of behaviour rather than by space itself. It is unclear whether this is also the case in other countries.

Corresponding with the results of former research, the case studies show a relationship between the openness to innovation and the cultural dimension “uncertainty avoidance”. The offices in Great Britain – being more tolerant to uncertainty than Germany and The Netherlands – show the most innovative office designs. In this case study, the German culture is the most uncertainty avoidant, whereas the offices with cellular structures are the most traditional.

Neither literature, nor empirical research show a relationship between the workplace characteristics and the last cultural dimension; short-/long-term orientation.

Matching the conclusion of the theoretical framework, the case studies confirmed that the workplace characteristics that seem to be the most influenced by national culture are the types of offices, the number of people in the office, privacy, the place of the management and the differentiation in the workplace based on function level.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Workplace management of multinationals

Because there are many factors that influence the demand of organizations, there is not one single best practice or solution for the workplace management of multinationals regarding national cultures. Managing the workplace in an international setting requires a balance in meeting the needs and requirements of the organization and different (groups of) employees. One should take into account both organizational and individual needs, as well as national culture and corporate culture. How this affects the optimal working environment, depends on many factors like the structure and the

activities of a company. However, based on the research findings, every multinational is advised to make a conscious choice between a primacy of the corporate culture and organizational objectives as opposed to a primacy of national culture in decision-making processes concerning corporate real estate.

Based on the research outcomes, it is advised to let local management or employees decide about the workplace characteristics that do not directly influence the results of the business or that do not interfere directly with the image the corporation wants to convey to the public. When people who are ingrained in the local culture are allowed to make decisions about the workplace, it is more likely that this workplace will suit the needs of individual employees. However, these processes should be strictly managed to avoid an inconsistent workplace concept that does not support the ways of working proper to each company.

Most offices of multinationals accommodate multicultural teams. For this reason, simply aligning a German office to the characteristics of the German culture will probably not lead to the optimal workplace. Involving the individual employees in the design process may help to find out the needs of a specific user group, yet this is a time-consuming process. It can be helpful to understand how a specific team works together and how this affects space needs. Because sound communication is crucial for productive teamwork, it is important that the working environment promotes communication between employees. A certain variety in workplaces can be helpful. When different kinds of workplaces are provided – as is the case in activity-based working – people can choose a workplace in which they feel most comfortable.

### *5.2 Further research*

This research provided insight into the role of national culture in corporate real estate decision-making and choices regarding workplace characteristics of multinationals. On a global scale, Germany, Great Britain and The Netherlands seem to have more similar than dissimilar cultures, though there are important differences as well. Additional research comparing cultures that do differ more can provide new insights. In addition, the role of subcultures – e.g. differences between Generations X, Y and Z or people with different working styles – is an interesting topic for further research as well.

Triangulation by linking the results from an extensive literature review to findings from interviews with ten representatives of multinationals and site visits to offices of two multinationals in The Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain seems to be sufficient for an explorative study. However, follow-up research should preferably include interviews with different stakeholders such as chief executive officers, Human resource management managers and employees themselves and an analysis of documents such as corporate websites, vision and mission of companies, corporate and corporate real estate strategies and accommodation plans.

New workplace concepts are being introduced all over the world, including activity-based workplaces and flexible desks. Research about how this may work in different cultures can improve concepts and implementation. Finally, more in-depth research regarding specific dimensions of culture, like individualism and the expression of status, will be helpful to better understand the impact of culture on the working environment.

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