The legitimate and shadow in organizations: An HRM-perspective on old, abandoned, and new spaces

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Abstract

We argue in line with a constructivist view, that social reality is constructed, and organizations are shaped through interpersonal dynamics. This perspective regards language and communication as fundamental components of the organizing processes. The interpersonal dynamics of language and communication develop within specific physical locations in organizations, transforming places into lived spaces imbued with significance, both when it comes to the legitimate theme and the shadow theme within workplaces.

Two concepts in approaching the construction of organizations thus becomes intriguing: *the meeting* and *space.* This paper focuses on what happens to the organization if space and meetings undergo radical changes. Does the old form of organizing and structuring the organization through meetings remain? If not, how is this process of organization re-shaped, and what kind of new organization emerges? Empirically, we draw on HR managers and their experiences during the pandemic and how various radical changes affected interpersonal processes. The most significant change was the adoption of digital meeting formats, which constructed an entirely different geographical structure of the organization.

We observed a shift in organizational dynamics; the trajectory of interpersonal interactions diverging, giving rise to new spatial configurations while closing off and overlooking others. For example, organizations' significant spaces in-between were rationalized away – the necessary tension between the legitimate theme and shadow theme within organizations changed in a way that enhanced the legitimate spaces and diminished the shadow spaces. This resulted in increased standardization and fewer opportunities to go beyond assumptions, rules, and routines in conjunction with others.

The HR-managers reported dilemmas that can be seen as an emerging paradox: While management recognizes the importance of the organization's shadow theme, they also see how new spaces and forms of meetings produce organizations that lack it. Attempts to preserve this informal side of the organization (e.g., the unexpected, narratives, gossip, inspirational accounts) and create conditions for it were made using available digital resources, such as coffee-breaks over Teams. However, instead

of fostering the shadow theme, these efforts further stimulated the legitimate theme of the organization and risked making it more ridged, and less open to change and innovation.

Innehåll

The legitimate and shadow in organizations: An HRM-perspective on old, abandoned, and new spaces

If social reality is constructed and organizing primarily is an interpersonal process, then language and communication are the most valuable tools in understanding organizations. Organizations are thus seen as constructed by actors using available materials (Czarniawska, 2006). Two central concepts in approaching this construction or making of organizations are *the meeting* (Schwartzmann, 1989) and *the space* (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). Meeting and space are in a way inseparable. The meeting always takes place somewhere, and the location influences the form and content of the meeting. For example, Goffman (1959) emphasizes in his seminal work the significance of the place in how individuals present themselves as social actors. His concepts of back-stage and front-stage aim to capture how individuals regulate the presentation of the self, depending on whether the context is more public (front-stage) or private (back-stage).

Several researchers have been inspired by this line of thought (see, among others, Collinson, 2003; Fineman, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Shortt, 2015; Visser et al, 2018) and have demonstrated the importance of space in understanding social action and organizations. Helene Schwartzman (1989) does not place space specifically at the center of her studies, although space and location are constantly present in her analyses; instead, she emphasizes the meeting as having the main role in constructing organizations. Schwartzman argues that the meeting should not primarily be seen as a tool for decision-making or "getting things done", but as a place and form for socially constructing the organization.

> ...meetings may become one - if not the - major social form that constitutes and reconstitutes the organization or community over time. ... once a meeting has been constructed, the event becomes a vehicle for the reading as well as validation of social relations within a cultural system. (Schwartzman, 1989, pp. 40-41).

So, what happens to the organization if space and meetings undergo radical changes? And what can we learn from experiencing such radical change? Does the old form of organizing and structuring the organization through meetings remain? If not, how is this process of organization re-shaped, and what kind of organization emerges?

Early in the pandemic, a discussion around how things would look afterwards, once everything settled, and we would return to a state of normalcy. But adjusting to the pandemic might have planted a seed of something new, where time and space would have the opportunity to expand, where flexibility and degrees of freedom would increase to shape new forms of organizing and organizations. New conversations and negotiations at workplaces revolved around: Where *could* work be performed? Where *should* work be performed? How can work be defined and de-lined from everyday life? What will the future of work look like? Is it "on-site," i.e., at the office, or "from anywhere" (as some companies promote)?

What had previously been something unusual and unattainable for most - a status marker, perhaps a privilege - became, through the pandemic, an everyday reality for large groups of the work force. The "new normal" came to be an expression of the post-pandemic way of working that would differ from how things were before the pandemic. That's where we are now, after, and with some distance from the pandemic. We therefore argue for the necessity of directing attention to new ways of understanding *meetings* and *space* within our post-pandemic work-life as a way of understanding this transformation. In order to do this, our perspective does not stop at exploring the formal spaces and meetings within organizations; instead, we intend to highlight the relevance of the organization's shadows, the spaces in-between – the informal and unscripted meetings that may shape the organization. This perspective, whilst innovative, might hold a key to a better understanding of organizational changes in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on how HR Managers have understood and narrated the re-organization of work during the pandemic; with their interpretations and statements analyzed through the lens of theories on the significance of space and the meeting in how the organization is re-produced through interpersonal processes. Thus, our point of departure will be HR Managers' reflections through narratives on what has been, what is, and what the future may hold. Mainly because the conversations during the pandemic largely revolved around how digitization and remote work affected the "human resources" as individuals and teams, not the construction of the organization itself. HR Managers are particularly interesting as they have significant influence over how human resources are organized, in other words, the organization of work and relationships between employees and between employees and managers. It is their (HR-managers) stories that we analyze, stories that reflect their thoughts on the future based on what has been and what is. We argue that this perspective becomes especially interesting considering that the analysis and interpretation conducted by the HR department will influence the future direction of the work organization, i.e., the actual content of the "new normal."

The article is structured as follows. First, we briefly describe the literature on space and the meeting and their respective significance for organizational processes. We will also discuss spaces and (informal) meetings that occur outside the legitimate, the formal, i.e., the spaces that lay "in-between" and constitutes the organization's shadow. Then, we present our methodology, participants, approach, and analysis. The result of the thematic analysis will then be presented, and followed by a deeper account of the participants' statements. We conclude with a theoretically informed discussion of the material, concluding remarks and considering implications for theory and practice.

Theoretical Framework

We argue - in line with Weick (1979; 1995) - that organizations are not objective entities; they are created and emerge through interpersonal processes. Language and communication are thus seen as foundations for organizing and the existence of organizations. When the conditions around communication change, it is reasonable to assume that the processes of organizing also change. Hence, we "get" something different.

The conditions that shaped the interpersonal processes during the pandemic were primarily related to a spatial change. The office was replaced with the home. The home, together with the digital space, became the place(s) where work was performed and where people met. Along with a spatial change, the form of interaction also changed – formal meetings shifted from physical and face-to-face to digital. Previous turn-taking was replaced by something else.

Informal meetings were also affected, not only in terms of a new form but perhaps mainly because they ceased to exist. The construction of social reality within workplaces consequently began to be reconfigured in a new way. Organizations were simply "made" in a different way than before. Perhaps the pandemic could have been seen as a temporary episode - a parenthesis from a work organizational perspective - but there is an impact, a shift in terms of our understanding where work should be performed. According to us, these questions will have consequences for interpersonal processes and thus for the becoming and being of organizations. In our theoretical framework, we therefore focus on the areas of space and interaction - with the aim of understanding the statements and analyses of HRM participants in the present study.

Turn to space

"The spatial turn" refers to a rediscovery of space and its significance in organizational research (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Taylor and Spicer, 2007). Considering space as significant is now more obvious and has grown stronger as an analytical lens over the past twenty years (Shortt, 2015). Taylor and Spicer (2007) explain that the approaches

and perspectives on space in social research vary, where the more obvious physical and measurable perspective on space has been accompanied by the space as lived experience and *meaning-making* (Shortt, 2015), as well as the space as a tool for power, control, and discipline (Foucault, 1995). We do not intend to disregard any of these approaches; rather, they are interconnected in intricate ways, especially when space becomes an analytical tool for a better understanding of the interpersonal dynamics in workplaces.

Space is rarely neutral; it is experienced, given meaning, and thus gains significance beyond its physical characteristics (Shortt, 2015; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Ericsson and Pettersson, 2020). Take, for example, the factory floor: even though both the organizational ethnographer and the machine operator work in the same space at the same time, the space is perceived differently, and they assign different meanings to it. Similarly, a student experiences the lecture hall differently from the teacher. The meaning of space and place also becomes clearer in relation to other spaces and places. Home and work are examples of such boundary drawing and arranging, where one obtains enhanced meaning in relation to the other (Nippert-Eng, 1996). As a social construction, space represents various values related to aspects such as inclusion, freedom and autonomy, trust, status, power, control, and governance.

Individuals can present themselves differently depending on the space they are in, for example whether the action is back-stage or front-stage (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1999). Since space sets both physical and social boundaries; creates categories; divides and separates, it is significant for the everyday ordering of the socially constructed flow of events (Bowker and Star, 2000). Ways of expression are included, others are excluded. Some individuals or groups are included, others are excluded. Therefore, space is also about belonging and identity. A workplace discussion, for example, on how often someone should be in the office or "have the opportunity" to work from home, is thus about much more than just the physical location of performing work.

The main focus of research on work and organizations has been on the workplace and life's more dominant and formal spaces (Shortt, 2015), especially in terms of how space should be controlled, influenced, and designed to achieve something (See Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). The meeting room (Schwartzman, 1989), the relationship between work and home (Nippert-Eng, 1996), office landscapes (Berthelsen et al, 2017), design and architecture (Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). The formal space is certainly central to our study, but we need a complement to capture the complex dynamics of organizing processes, and we find this complement in studies of the "in-between" spaces. Less focus has been directed towards the spaces that exist between the more dominant and formal spaces (Hulme and Turch, 2006).

The spaces in-between

People who find themselves in the spaces *in-between* are "temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure. This weakens them since they have no rights over others,

but also liberates them from "structural obligations." (Turner, 1982). Turner argues that despite the lack of rights, there is a potential in the in-between that cannot be cultivated in the formal or dominant space. The in-between spaces temporarily detach us from the normative, from control and surveillance.

Harriet Shortt (2015) demonstrates the significance of the spaces in-between in her study of hairdressers and how these spaces are made meaningful. Ericsson and Pettersson (2020) show how the spaces in-between, when made meaningful, have the potential to function as recovery from work. They also show that the spaces in-between in life and work are often viewed with skepticism because they do not represent productivity, efficiency, speed, visibility, and control. This often gives the in-between a reputation for being something that gets in the way or an imposed transition to get from A to B. In work organizations, there are often attempts to rationalize away these spaces in-between because they cannot be directly attributed to corporate space (Ericsson and Pettersson, 2020; Visser et al, 2018).

We argue that it is in the in-between that there is potential not only for recovery, as Ericsson and Pettersson (2020) suggest, but also for the development of community, creativity, and innovation. In other words, processes that cannot be governed and controlled but must be given space to grow under the radar or outside the box, as people in such a context - as Turner said - "liberates them from structural obligation." (Turner, 1982). Kornberger and Clegg (2004) argue that there is a paradox here that must be understood from an organization's strategic horizon, namely the need to loosen control and enable "non-corporate space" to have a place in the organization. This way, power may be unleashed that the formal space cannot achieve. Kornberger and Clegg (2004) refer to this as the "strategy of the void".

The meeting

"Meetings may become one - if not the - major social form that constitutes and reconstitutes the organization or community over time." (Schwartzman, 1989 p. 40). Just like space, the meeting has long been neglected as a research area. The obvious has obscured the fact that the meeting itself can be a subject of study, argues Schwartzman in her groundbreaking work "The Meeting." Traditionally, the meeting has been viewed as a tool for something else, but by turning our attention to the meeting as a social process, Schwartzman shows in her analysis that the organization is largely shaped in this context. Roles and hierarchies are confirmed here, social relationships, values, and norms are reinforced: "meeting may be the form that generates and maintains the organization as an entity..." (Schwartzman, 1989 p. 86).

Schwartzman (1989) did not study meetings that took place in the digital space. Her analyses are based on the physical meeting, where bodies meet. In the past twenty years, physical meetings have been supplemented with various forms of digital communication, in some cases completely replacing the physical meeting (Sandler and Thedvall, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this changed communication pattern peaked. The digital meeting has facilitated people in several ways. Reduced travel time, more efficient and shorter meetings. Others would argue the opposite, that the simplicity of creating meetings has increased their frequency. Sandler and Thedvall (2017) also add that virtual communication is largely characterized by anti-communicative behavior (or at least the possibility of such behavior). People can temporarily leave, work on other things on their computers, being in different rooms that demand local attention, enabling more anti-communicative behavior than if everyone were in the same room. Through our theoretical lens, we will therefore, in addition to the formal meeting, include what we have chosen to call the improvised meeting. That is, the unplanned meeting that also does not materialize into a "formalized meeting" during that moment. It remains in the spaces in-between, partially liberated from the normative structure.

One way to integrate space and the meeting, while not being limited to formal and dominant contexts, is to use the concept pair *legitimate* and *shadow*. We will conclude our theoretical framework by developing this concept pair.

Social relationships in different spaces: the legitimate and shadow

Social relationships and community, according to Harari (2014), form the basis for human actions. Turkle (2017) describes conversation as central to human beings. Turkle argues that conversation is built upon social relationships within a context and a specific place where eye contact and body movement play a significant role. The COVID-19 pandemic and remote work from home have challenged the nature of social relationships, community, and conversation. As described above, the pandemic has contributed to a greater extent than before in organizing relationships with forms of social interaction among employees and between employees and managers, which differ from those that occur in an organization's physical location. Relationships in organizations, partially relocated through the spaces in one's home, are maintained through online connections via the internet and phone calls, creating a shared but not common space (Massey, 2005). The conclusion is that home and digital spaces likely create different types of social relationships than the relationships and conversations that occur in a specific workplace, context, and situation (Turkle, 2017).

According to Stacey and Mowles (2016), relationships between people maintain patterns of power, hierarchy, and status whilst these dimensions simultaneously organize the content of those relationships. One type of relationship patterns is formally organized, often within a specific place situated within the formal organization. Stacey and Mowles (2016) refer to as "the legitimate themes." This theme organizes what people consider reasonable or possible to talk about. However, what is considered reasonable and possible is limited by political correctness, politeness, and other similar social norms about what is legitimate to discuss or not in a specific context. For example,

formal meetings and conversations between managers and employees usually follow a pattern of the "legitimate theme," which organizes the content of those conversations. What we talk about and how we talk to each other are based on patterns of ideological and social norms that are considered legitimate. Formal meetings include scheduled gatherings between a relatively small number of individuals based on formal roles and responsibilities in the organization. Performance appraisals and planning meetings can be examples of such encounters. However, staff meetings, departmental meetings, and other gatherings involving larger groups of employees also fall under "the legitimate themes."

Contrary to "the legitimate themes," is what the authors refer to as "shadow themes". Shadow themes organizes relationships and conversations where people express things that may not always be legitimate within the organization. These relationships and their conversations often occur in places where encounters between people happen relatively spontaneously, such as at the coffee machine, in the break room, in the hallway, or other locations where people meet irregularly and informally. These meetings and relationships often follow a pattern of informality. Stacey and Mowles write that "shadow communications take the form of ordinary, everyday conversation, gossip, rumor, inspirational accounts, stories that express humor and the grotesque, tales that take the form of elaborate social fantasies or touching personal experiences." (2016 p. 425).

Thus, the shadow theme is more narrative than the legitimate theme. The authors contend that the current power relations within the organization are maintained within the intricate interplay between the 'legitimate' and 'shadow' themes. The intricate interplay between shadow and legitimate themes shapes the organizational experience and facilitates the emergence of new themes and meanings through this interaction. This dynamic complexity between these themes not only shapes organizational experiences but also generates novel meanings and experiences.

The framework that determines the actual content and what takes place in both the legitimate and shadow themes is governed by different ideologies, in terms of norms and values. These ideologies in both spheres can be official or unofficial. The content of the legitimate theme is closely related to bureaucracy. It includes rules, routines, division of labor, and authority structures maintained through rewards and punishments, as well as strategies, goals, formal control, monitoring, and measurements. Stacey (2007) also argues that power relations between those involved, i.e., what can be said to whom and in what situations, are regulated through ideology.

Social relationships and digital spaces

Both the legitimate and shadow themes have spatial significance where bodies meet within the confines of the same physical space. Digital communication provides a form of social community, albeit digitally and two-dimensional. When two people meet

online, relationships can be maintained through eye contact. However, when there are three or more individuals, eye contact takes on different forms. Turkle (2017) argues that if there are multiple individuals, it becomes more difficult or impossible to maintain the same level of eye contact as in face-to-face interactions in terms of time, context, and situations. On the screen with several participants, eye contact becomes a non-existent phenomenon. As a result, social presence is reduced when contact is made through the internet (Turkle, 2017), which leads to the fact that the social reality organized online takes on a different content in both the legitimate and shadow themes. Therefore, both the legitimate theme and shadow differ from what occurs in digital interactions/relationships. These two themes provide meaningful knowledge about the dynamics of organizations and offer an opportunity to interpret experiences of increased use of homes as workplaces from an HR perspective.

Against this backdrop and by using the pandemic as an extreme case (see Flyvberg, 2003) we will – through the lens of HR managers - close in on the patterns that emerge in workplace relationships when the home becomes the workplace and when these relationships are established and maintained digitally. Further on we will shed light on how HR navigate in this new setting and reflects on this transformation of relationship.

Method

Just over a year into the pandemic, expectations of a gradual return to the workplace in the autumn of 2021 were raised. At this time, many companies began collecting data on the effects and consequences of the Corona period for their operations and employees. Not least, the questions that started to be asked were about the effects and lessons learned from working remotely. The discussion was not only held in management groups. The conversation at this time was much more broadly anchored and extended throughout society. Not least, it made headlines in the media. In parallel, companies and public administrations initiated internal strategic work on what the workplace and organization of the future could or should look like.

Against the backdrop of our purpose, we see this as a window of opportunity opened as organizations conducted analyses and interpretations of their own organization while also starting to ask questions about the future workplace and work organization as a kind of natural experiment. Regardless of what these processes will lead to or have led to, a significant part of the working life was mobilized for a similar conversation and reflection during a short window of time. It was this explicit awareness and reflection on the organization of work that we wanted to engage with to give our research question and curiosity a silhouette.

The empirical contribution in this study is based on seven interviews with HR directors in major Swedish companies across different industries. All participants played an active role in analyzing the effects of the pandemic and the strategic work within their respective organizations. The interview material should not be regarded as a basis for in-depth exploratory empirical analysis but as excerpts to construct a dynamic discourse between theory and empirical examples (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017).

Participants and procedure

Seven HR managers and directors were selected for the interviews (six women and one man). Four of them described their role as purely strategic. Three of the participants described themselves as working both operationally and strategically. Company size was in this case a dividing factor, i.e., if there were sub-levels within HR or not. The

participants were recruited directly through email inquiries. Ten HR managers were approached, one did not have time, and two never responded.

Although the participant group was quite heterogeneous (especially in terms of industry and size), we had a few inclusion criteria. (i) The participants should have a significant role in the organization during the pandemic in terms of managing the employees' situation. (ii) They should also be involved in the strategic work on what to do with the experiences of the pandemic towards the future workplace. (iii) The organization they operated in should also have a significant number of white-collar employees since the interviews would focus on personnel working from home. Although all companies had either a production department or a larger sales department (with customer interactions), all participating organizations were large enough to also have a significant proportion of administrative and service personnel.

After the participants showed interest in the study and agreed to participate in an interview, an information letter was sent to all of them. The information letter described the purpose and format of the interview, as well as how the material would be handled and used. Informed consent was obtained when the participants responded and accepted to participate in an interview. The question was reiterated once again during the actual interview.

Interviews and analysis

Since the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2021 when large parts of the workforce and society were still under restrictions, the interviews were conducted digitally. The interviews mainly focused on the participants' experiences during a period of approximately 1.5 years during which parts of the workforce had been working remotely (involuntarily), how this period was interpreted from an HR perspective, the analyses that were made, and the strategic questions that have emerged from these analyses, i.e., how HR wants to influence organizational processes and in what direction.

The recurring themes evident across all interviews were partly planned but largely emerged through conversational exchange. The overarching theme of the interviews revolved around *change and the nature of spatial and meeting arrangements* (from physical to digital), complemented by considerations such as *work environment and work-life balance; culture and creativity; operations, productivity, and control; flexibility, and leadership*.

Although the interview guide was structured around these themes, the more specific areas arose from the participants' initial narratives in response to open-ended questions about their experiences during the pandemic in relation to their professional roles.

Although the interview protocol delineated these thematic contours, the delineation of more granular topics stemmed from the participants' initial narratives, elicited by open-ended inquiries regarding their experiences during the pandemic vis-à-vis their professional responsibilities.

The researcher's role was to let the participant tell their story, ask questions for clarification and concrete examples, identify areas to delve into. Six interviews were conducted by the first author and one by the second author.

Each interview lasted slightly over an hour, and all sessions were meticulously recorded and transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough analysis. The data underwent coding and thematic analysis in accordance with the methodology outlined by Braun and Clarke (2004). Following transcription, all authors meticulously reviewed the material multiple times. Initial coding aimed at identifying units of meaning relevant to the study's objectives. This process was followed by collaborative discussions among the authors to discern connections between different units of meaning. While maintaining curiosity and an open-minded approach, the analysis was inevitably influenced by theoretical perspectives, which played a significant role in shaping interpretation. The finalized themes were labeled using our theoretical framework as a guiding lens: *No thresholds – means no space in-between; More information and less small talk; Competing spaces – what could/should the workplace offer?"; Losing control and strategy of the void.*

Inside the HR mindset

The descriptions of HR managers oscillated between optimism and concern. They were optimistic about a future that hopefully capitalized on technological advancements, providing individuals with more freedom and flexibility, as well as faster and more efficient processes for the organization. However, they were also concerned that people's fundamental needs would no longer be met through work, while the organization would miss out on the positive outcomes that arise from the spark that can only be ignited in real human interactions. HR managers primarily viewed humans not solely as resources but as social beings. But if the social infrastructure shifted from being based on physical meetings to being moved to digital spaces, what would happen to the human? To the organization?

Throughout the data, HR managers consistently navigate between opposing perspectives: *on one hand... on the other hand...* They resist succumbing to simplistic solutions. It is within these contradictions and paradoxes that the results presentation will pivot and explore further.

No thresholds – means no space in-between

HR managers unanimously agreed that the greatest advantage brought about by digital platforms was speed and efficiency. The ability to move around without changing physical locations created new opportunities. This applied to both how work was performed and the relationship between work and other aspects of life, or rather, the balance (or imbalance) between them. The absence of commuting time and travel time between meetings provided opportunities to engage in activities related to family. Instead of stepping out of the office, heading to the train or car, and then going home, one could now conclude a meeting and immediately step into family life. Without thresholds. Completely seamless.

> Many have achieved a better work-life balance. I can only speak for myself, having commuted for the past twenty years. Now, you go from the kitchen table to the office. You get an extra hour of sleep every morning, and the time spent with the children... It creates much more for me; I am now much more

> present with my family. That's probably what many experience because we have a lot of commuters... A gain of three hours per day makes a significant difference... (HR-manager, Service)

From the perspective of time and place, transportation frequently appeared in the HR managers' narratives. When discussing the possibilities afforded by digital organization, the focus was primarily on what could be done instead. Instead of spending more time commuting, one could spend time with family or allocate more hours to work. The choice often depended on how life outside of work was organized.

> Since we have a lot of commuters, they have become incredibly efficient. (HR Manager, Retail)

> Digitalization has been positive for many, well, for most people, precisely because of this flexibility. I can go for a walk whenever I want, basically. I can pick up my children. I don't have to sit in long queues, traffic, and all that. For some, work-life balance seems to have improved. (HR Manager, Food production)

Digital organization also facilitated more meetings throughout the workday. With just a click away to the next meeting, a significantly greater number of meetings could be conducted with colleagues locally, but it also resulted in more meetings with colleagues or clients located farther away. Because it was possible.

The terms "more" and "increased" were frequently used to explain the situation. The emphasis was consistently on quantity when HR managers discussed how the transition had unfolded: "I actually think we have been more productive" was a recurring reflection from HR managers. While *more, increased, faster, and more efficient* became rallying cries for HR managers, they could, in the next breath, paint a contradictory picture. The possibility of never having to pause, of always being on the go, had its downsides, which most had recognized; for some, it was seen as a temporary deviation, while for others, it was a pattern that needed to be broken.

> People have almost worked even more. There hasn't been any commuting time at all. It's a large building, just moving between meetings took time. Before, everyone would gather, then grab coffee, maybe stop by a coffee machine or something. There have been a lot of end-to-end and back-to-back meetings. Then we have everyone who has been able to work undisturbed, just sitting at home and producing. All the matrices, they have been able to sit there and send out documents and policy processes. People have really been working, but maybe it's the other side we're worried about. High workload, and people are exhausted. (HR Manager, Retail)

> Before, no one expected you to magically teleport from one place to another. Now, there is less tolerance for people needing to stretch their legs, get coffee,

> or go to the bathroom or anything. You just have to click between things. We have faced significant challenges with people clicking between meetings all day and using the nights to read emails. In the past, there was slack. If they had a quarter-hour, they would book it. We have had to train employees to block time for lunch, for a break. You have to block that timeslot, so people don't think you're free. It's okay, plus you have to move your body around a bit. (HR Manager, Logistics and Distribution)

The removal of barriers between different spaces generated a force that HR managers had not anticipated. It became an organization on steroids. More (paper) production, more meetings, more hours, more accomplished. However, nothing was mentioned about increased quality, value creation, and meaningfulness. The seamless work life (and life itself) focused on transactions, instrumentality, speed, and rationality.

More information and less small talk

As stated in the previous section, a large part of the HR managers' descriptions focused on how the format of the meeting made them more efficient than before. All the talking between agenda points (sometimes during) disappeared with the digital format. Everything was discussed point by point, and rarely did anyone interrupt someone else's presentation. People waited for their turn. Often, by the time the opportunity arose, a potential comment or reaction had already passed. Here, the HR managers presented two sides: on one hand, meetings were conducted faster, especially those with an informative nature. Instead of a drawn-out process, things moved much more quickly. On the other hand, there was rarely any depth or reflection at the group level. When no one interrupted with a question or commented in the moment, the information also didn't change direction or bend—it simply remained unchanged. Meeting in the digital space, in one's own separate cell somewhere on the screen, also meant that no informal chance encounters were arranged. Increased focus on one-way communication and information enhanced efficiency, speed, and density, but it could be difficult to sort and evaluate what to take away or not.

The rational approach to meetings and each other spilled over into unplanned and agenda-free meetings as well. The threshold for meeting up or contacting someone was higher compared to how it used to be at the office. Previously, half-formed ideas or thoughts could be reason enough to approach a colleague and start talking (and testing). However, such meetings quickly disappeared. The digital life demanded a plan and clarity. Without those, people avoided making contact. The distancing became noticeable, according to the HR managers.

> People distance themselves; it takes a lot for them to seek each other out. I need to be on solid ground, no half-formed ideas... (HR-manager, Engineering Industry)

> The importance of communication should never be underestimated, but it becomes very clear that one has to actively make different contacts to anchor various issues and get input on different matters. It requires a different level of commitment than if everyone were sitting in the same place; then, you could just step over to someone. "Do you have five minutes?" and you could quickly solve it. Now, you have to schedule a meeting or make a phone call. Communicating in a more conscious way. There's a time aspect that makes a difference. (HR-manager, Service)

Competing spaces – what could/should the workplace offer?

Being able to be in two places at once, the digital and a physical space at home, also created a situation where one didn't have to choose one over the other. It was possible to be here and there simultaneously. This became everyday life, especially for employees with children at home. Working while being at home with a sick child became the norm, something that no one found strange, and it was not something the employers tried to change.

> ...you can hear it on some Teams meetings, when someone unmutes themselves, you hear children screaming in the background. So for some who work from home, it can be double duty. But I think that flexibility is something that is highly appreciated today. The balance between home and work at home... (HR-manager, Engineering Industry)

At the same time, both the format of the meeting and the competition between multiple worlds that could co-exist in the home provided a significant reason for considering the office as an important place. The HR managers themselves noticed how they dealt with remote work during the pandemic. They saw both sides of the coin and found it difficult to give definitive values or one-sided perspectives.

The work at all levels flowed as if almost nothing had happened, and in some respects, more was produced. Additionally, the puzzle of life for many in the organizations finally came together when the thresholds were lowered, and the boundaries overlapped. These circumstances prompted several HR managers to ask: What do we need the workplace for? What should the workplace offer? Their own reflections on these questions were in their infancy, but the HR managers still argued that the fact that the office norm has been broken due to a pandemic will have consequences for the future. Going back to how it was before would not be possible. New solutions, new requirements, and expectations are something that all companies must contend with going forward.

However, the HR managers agreed that something is lost when people don't meet in the physical space. Everyday innovations and creative elements rarely arise in front of a computer, according to the HR managers. Such things happen when people meet, especially in places where work doesn't seem to be happening; in the corridor, by the coffee machine, in the break room, in the parking lot, or other similar places a little away from the formal setting. Among the HR managers, there was a certain fear that an over-rational organization would not leave room for new thinking and challenging ideas. The absence of human interaction also sparked concerns regarding the company's culture or "spirit," as most referred to it. This spirit or culture was fostered through interpersonal interaction.

What happens if we no longer meet? What kind of culture will be cultivated then? This was a rhetorical question posed by the HR managers. At the time of the interviews, they could already observe the issues related to new hires. The onboarding process, which is not only meant to provide a brief introduction but also to influence the new employee with a "spirit," had suffered setbacks.

As mentioned, the HR managers highlighted the importance of the workplace by linking it to the need for interpersonal interaction. This brought up another issue related to control and governance. The need to control the random and invisible was simultaneously made apparent. Some of the HR managers explored the idea of meeting the "new normal" with designated and scheduled office days. Tuesdays and Thursdays at the office, and three days where the employee could choose where to work from, was one example. Other HR managers were more hesitant about mandates and instead tried to reason in terms of influencing the employee to want to be present. "What can the workplace offer that home can't?" The workplace has:

> ...no neighbors renovating or children screaming. There can be many different things that affect performance. That brings us back to the aspect of silence. In an ideal case, there is an opportunity for silence at home. You can control it, so you don't share it with your colleagues, but you might share it with your family or teenage children who are streaming something during the day, which disrupts your network. Or a hundred different things. (HR-manager, R&D)

The purpose and offerings of the workplace opened up further reflections on governance and control over those intangible aspects.

Losing control and strategy of the void

Quite quickly, the HR managers realized that something was lost when everyone was working from home and meeting digitally. In various ways, the HR managers tried to solve this issue. Together with the respective managers of the organization, they all tried to stimulate informal conversations through various forms of informal morning

meetings or "check-ins." Such meetings had been established in all operations, but with different frequencies. Some wanted them every day, while others were satisfied with just Friday mornings. As mentioned above, there was a distancing effect associated with unfinished thoughts and ideas. It felt uncomfortable to reach out unless there was a clear agenda. The incompleteness created too much resistance, explained the HR managers. As a consequence, some individuals tried to create digital chat rooms where unfinished thoughts could be presented in the hope that someone would respond, provide energy, and maybe even take the idea further. Such rooms were also meant for quick short questions that didn't belong in scheduled Teams or Zoom meetings.

> ...I have tried to create such digital chat forums. ...The physical meeting, that's what has been missing and is the foundation of everything. Nothing can replace the physical meeting. (HR-manager, Service)

The chance encounter was identified as significant. Most people stopped at trying to recreate these through check-ins or chat rooms. However, one of the HR managers had tried to find digital forms for the unexpected meeting at the coffee machine.

> ...We have had various experiments; something that everyone misses, or most people miss, is the spontaneity at the coffee machine. Morning coffee, it can take on different forms, but you and I meet and say, "Hey, we can talk about this now that I see you anyway," which doesn't really happen when you sit in Teams meetings all day. So, we have created a tool called "coffee randomness" or "coffee lottery" (kaffeslumpen); I think the idea comes from Microsoft, I'm not sure. It allows you to connect for a random digital coffee in the morning. (HR-manager, R&D)

Although the situation during the pandemic was extreme, the HR managers believed that it is not possible to erase what has happened or turn back time. Of course, the requirements of the organization should guide the decisions, but nothing works well if the individual's conditions and needs are not met, explained the HR managers. Everyone has started to get used to the future, and there is no real way back. Suddenly, middle-aged men and women managed to combine their lives. Even though it won't look exactly the same as it does now, said the HR managers, most people will want employers to offer increased flexibility and freedom.

The downside of freedom and increased flexibility for employees was that certain things ended up out of sight, control, and management. Chance encounters were the source of creativity and innovation. But a chance encounter requires people to be present and be able to meet by chance. The HR managers reasoned the same way about culture; it can only be nurtured if there are people present. All HR managers also considered their specific organizational culture (or spirit) as both unique and a success factor. Health was a third concern based on the newly formed lack of control. Although most employees could handle increased freedom, there were enough employees who couldn't set their own boundaries, couldn't handle the absence of daily feedback, explained the

HR managers. The concept used was self-leadership, which was a prerequisite for the new way of organizing. The problem, which has also appeared in other themes, was not that individuals were working less but that they lacked the ability to set boundaries.

The HR managers didn't have any specific examples of how these more intangible dimensions of the organization's world were previously managed when everyone worked on-site. But now, it had become something that was on everyone's plate and crucial for what will actually emerge from the new normal. Exactly how the new management of randomness and the unforeseen, the spirit and health, would look like was not clear.

Reflecting the HR mindset: Space and the dynamics between legitimate and shadow

Organizations are shaped through interpersonal dynamics, with language and communication serving as fundamental components of the organizing process (Weick, 1979; 1995). These interpersonal dynamics unfold within specific physical locations, transforming various places into lived spaces imbued with significance (Shortt, 2015). By examining the pandemic as an extreme scenario (Flyvbjerg, 2003), we observe shifts in organizational dynamics; the trajectory of interpersonal interactions diverges, giving rise to new spatial configurations while closing off others and overlooking some. By listening to the experiences of HR managers within their organizations and their visions for the future, it becomes apparent that space holds a central role in their comprehension. The way space is perceived, constructed, regulated, and administered is pivotal to the potential becoming of the organization.

"I do actually think we've been more productive?" With some surprise, the HR managers explained that those who worked from home during the pandemic were not less productive. On the contrary, more work was being done. Meetings were being held more frequently than ever before. The ability to conduct meetings without the need for physical movement did however not create space for reflection or recovery. Instead, it accelerated the number of meetings. Just two clicks: Leave meeting - and then - Join meeting. This became the everyday reality for the HR managers. It also became the reality for employees in their organizations. The boundaries in the worlds described by HR managers had not only become blurred but, to a large extent, had disappeared. This involved both the boundaries between work and home and the boundaries between different activities during working hours, particularly between meetings.

Living the seamless life

The most striking aspect of the HR managers' narratives is the dissolution of boundaries unfolding before their eyes, and it is this dissolution they are attempting to articulate.

Of course, we do not know what happens when the screen is turned off. HR managers do not have access to this space (and cannot inform us). These limitations frustrate them. They employ various strategies to cope with this (and encourage/coach the line managers to do the same); they create meetings, digital coffee breaks, check-ins, etc. All in an effort to somehow access – or support managers to access - the space in the "new normal". The inability of employers to physically breach the digital barrier could be perceived as granting employees greater autonomy. However, the signal to HR was that many were tired of living in exile, which could also explain why the production of various things skyrocketed. We are no longer affirmed, we have no one to compare ourselves to, etc.

Nevertheless, HR managers offer insights into the dissolution of boundaries between different spheres. Primarily, it is the boundary between home and work that tends to blur the most. Similarly, there is noted dissolution of boundaries between different meeting formats. The HR managers explain that the organization, in a 'back to back' trend, has experienced an increase in continuous meetings. For some individuals, this practically equates to an ongoing meeting, with transitions occurring seamlessly. The seamless life may initially appear as a positive rationalization, where everything perceived to be in the way of moving from point A to B is eliminated. However, a consequence of this is the disappearance of the spaces in between – the spaces typically constructed between more formal contexts.

When boundaries dissolve, places merge or become the same, there is no longer any space for the in-between moments of life. The in-between space is the place where Turner argues that we exist: "temporarily undefined, beyond the normative social structure…" (Turner, 1982). The disappearance of this "in-between" affects the organization. The places where we can fly under the radar - just for ourselves or together with someone else, converse without the limitations of structure - cease to exist, and everything begins to belong to the formal organization. Everything becomes corporate space. Perhaps new forms of in-between are being constructed. However, due to the geographical division digital relations create, such in-betweens cannot be shared with anyone else. The remaining social relationships in the organization exist only in what Stacey (2001) calls the legitimate domain. The complete dominance of the formal and legitimate side became evident in the statements of HR managers about increased productivity and efficiency. "More and more". But at what cost? The legitimate side needs a counterpart, something that disarms over-rationalization and contributes with energy, critique, renegotiation, and creativity. The legitimate side needs a shadow as lubrication for an organization to function, "the buzz around the coffee machine must be allowed to continue."

Legitimate and shadow

The narratives of HR managers largely revolve around the loss of shadow/informal encounters, which play a pivotal role in workplace dynamics. These casual encounters, whether over coffee, in the hallway, parking lot, writing room, or staircase, serve as fertile ground for meaningful dialogue. What's lost in this shift are the nuanced narratives that these encounters bring to light.

And it is the themes of the shadow that are more narrative in nature (Harari, 2014) than the contexts and situations surrounded by the legitimate. The stories and gossip that, according to Stacey and Mowles (2016), create cohesion and community are diminished when the legitimate takes on too dominant a role. From the perspective of HR managers and from an operational perspective, aspects such as "spirit," collective learning, and impromptu innovations are compromised.

Stacey (2001) have developed this idea and argue that the interplay between the legitimate and the shadow is what constitutes an organization. The shadow prepares thoughts and proposals before they manifest in the legitimate, and the legitimate enables and/or limits the content of the shadow. It is like ongoing processes of negotiation, influence, and resistance that, in their overall expression, form the organization itself. "The complex interplay between shadow and legitimate themes organizing experience in an organization and how new themes, new meaning, can emerge in this interplay" (Stacey and Mowles, 2016).

Relationships between people maintain patterns of power, hierarchy, and status in different contexts and situations while also shaping the content of relationships. The content of relationships varies depending on whether they occur within the shadow or the legitimate. The shadow and the legitimate need each other; they nourish each other. However, if the legitimate takes up all the space, there is a risk of increased standardization, rules, and routines, which entails more formalized relationships between managers and employees. Standardization of actions and results simplifies and increases control to some extent, but on the other hand, it reduces freedom of action, creativity, and development. Strong bureaucracies do not appreciate surprises; as Hagelsteen and Becker (2019, p. 5) argue: "On a more fundamental level, bureaucracies do not like to respond to the local context since it results in a lot of uncertainty."

Back to the conversation

From the interviews, stories emerge about how the legitimate theme has increasingly taken over in organizations for some time (Bornemark, 2018; Ericsson and Pettersson, 2020), this movement has been about a general renaissance of a new sort of standardization. However, much of the perspective and interpretation of HR managers regarding current and future developments is influenced by technology and digitalization. The narratives of HR managers are reinforced by the digital space. Turkle (2017) argues that

digital encounters have different effects on us compared to face-to-face encounters. She highlights differences in the functioning and reactions of mirror neurons in a digital meeting compared to an in-person meeting:

The shape of a smile or a furrowed brow triggers certain substances in humans that affect our mental state. Our mirror neurons are activated both when we ourselves act and when we see others act. We *feel what we see in others' faces.* (Turkle, 2017, p. 419).

In the digital meeting, she argues, this very possibility is diminished. Digital meetings are only two-dimensional. One of her informants describes their reality - not unlike the HR managers in this study as follows: "Technology makes me more productive, but I know the quality of my thinking suffers." The HR managers described how the staff members produced more, had more meetings, worked more hours, produced more documents, and so on. But no one mentioned improved quality, increased value, meaning, learning or depth.

Meeting in in same physical space, whether in the legitimate or shadow realm, contains more information to support interpretation and exchange than digital meetings do (Turkle, 2017). All this is disturbed in digital space (Turkle, 2017). A digital meeting is likely to elicit different responses than meetings that occur in physical space. If certain meetings and exchanges of meaning are entirely diminished in the shadow, an important aspect and function in an organization's organizing is likely lost, which can have devastating consequences in the long run.

The digital space, standardization, and organization

We argue that a relationship exists between bodies situated within a context consisting of situations with connections to other people. Patterns of power, hierarchy, and status appear differently depending on whether the relationships exist within legitimate contexts such as formal meetings and similar situations, or in what is known as the shadow, which has a more self-organizing nature. The shadow thus encompasses, for example, three colleagues bumping into each other in the hallway and starting a confidential conversation, or the most famous meeting at the coffee machine where intimate matters are discussed between people who trust each other. On the other hand, how often have we been in meetings (the legitimate ones) where we have had a different feeling or opinion but yielded to the general consensus? It takes courage to go against the organization and its established norms. According to Stacey and Mowles (2016) and Harari (2014), stories and gossip are important elements within the shadow, while in the legitimate realm, upholding given values and political correctness are crucial.
What happens to the dynamic complexity between the legitimate and the shadow when a large portion of work is organized temporally and digitally from home?[1] One

1 There is a resemblance to the old Eastern Bloc countries. There, the lubricant of society was maintained by people who acquired things, did things that weren't entirely legitimate, and yet the Eastern Bloc countries, despite strong centralization and planning, were able to function. In other words, similar to the shadow that maintains a form of lubricant, or what Stacey refers to as the gap, the legitimate and the shadow. What would have happened if the rulers

important interpretation of HR managers' way of talking about pandemic organization and their view of the future is that the relationship between the legitimate and the shadow may shift in favor of the legitimate, at the expense of the shadow. When the lubricant (the shadow) occupies less space and the content of relationships becomes more about legitimate power, hierarchy, and status, something happens to the organization. It is no longer the same as before. It is being remade, produced in a new way, into something else. As HR managers interpret the use of digital advancements, a pattern emerges where standardization, rules, and routines are expected to continue along the established path and further increase within the organization. At least significant parts of the organization will be occupied by the continued growth of these phenomena.

Concluding thoughts

We have viewed the period during the pandemic as an extreme case (Flyvberg 2003) where things that are not usually visible become momentarily apparent and exposed. Such extreme situations can provide us with clues to understanding everyday organizing processes on a deeper level. In this case, we have been interested in narratives about how meetings and physical spaces construct the organization, and especially exploring what kind of organization is produced when the way of meeting and the locations where people meet are radically altered. These changes have stimulated exciting new relationships and contributed to the construction of new spaces. The digital realm has challenged a geographical structure that was previously taken for granted. Such an opportunity can lead to increased inclusion and a wider range of affiliations (especially for those who were not previously located at the company's headquarters). It is - as HR managers mention - also an opportunity to seek collaboration with individuals who were previously considered unreachable. By listening to HR managers narratives, it becomes evident that technology has largely outpaced the skepticism and criticism that Forrester (1988) directed towards futurists' visions of functional remote work. However, in the 2020s, remote work seemed to function quite well. On the other hand, if something works doesn't necessary mean that it does so without limitations and tensions. In accordance with the HR-managers interpretations the kind of organization that is being produced seems to stimulate an already ongoing movement of increased standardization, together with speed and efficiency. The increased degrees of freedom for the individual create a flexibility related to the boundaries between work and home, however relationships at work, engagement and way of meeting up seems to become more agenda driven, "squared" and bureaucratic.

It is likely to be expected that work will increasingly be performed in places other than the office. HR managers also believe that this will be a future demand from

in the Eastern Bloc countries had not turned a blind eye to this sector? (conversation with a friend who has lived in Berlin for 20 years).

individuals seeking employment and that it will be a matter of what they can offer as employers, both in terms of opportunities to work from elsewhere and what the physical workplace can provide. The work situation during the pandemic even made HR managers reflect on the question: why should anyone come to the office? They are not alone in this consideration; all employees in their respective organizations have probably asked themselves the same question one or more times. As the barriers between home and work disappeared during the pandemic, the present and future barriers to coming to the office are also raised. Is there a good reason? What needs to be done? Can I get things done faster at home? Can I be more productive at home? Who will be there? Do I need my colleagues to accomplish tasks? These are questions that were rarely asked before the pandemic but that HR managers are convinced will shape the future contract between the workplace and the employee.

Based on the HR managers' reasoning, it is primarily the social meetings in what Stacey and Mowles refer to as "the shadow" that the workplace can offer. This is not unlike what Goffman called the "back-stage." When we work from home, we are often back-stage, but rarely are we back-stage *together* with one or more colleagues. If we are not visible at the front of the stage (the digital stage), we are usually alone. Paradoxically, the workplace has the potential to cultivate collective spaces that are not corporate space. The workplace can cultivate spaces in the shadow or backstage. It is also these places and contexts that HR managers describe as a source of power, not from the legitimate parts of the organization, but "Positive power" as Kornberger and Clegg (2004) would call it. It is in the shadow that "spirit" is cultivated, and it is in the shadow that opportunities to think outside the box and the potential for creativity can be found. It can be expressed as it is in the margins that organizations change, where the official ideology (the legitimate) is challenged. Here, we also see a theoretical connection between "the in-between" and "the shadow." What has been referred to in recent years as the workplace (or life's) spaces in-between is somewhere between more formal and dominant spaces – and made meaningful by people. These spaces in-between do not belong to the legitimate sphere. They can be maintained by a sole individual, but they can also be filled with social relations, becoming part of the organization's shadow. Just beyond the normative structure and characterized by a narrative dimension. Importantly, this part of the organization is self-organizing. HR managers are aware of this, but since the existence of these spaces - sometimes filled with content that gives life to the legitimate - has become so evident to them, they cannot refrain from wanting to influence or even control these places. This poses a future challenge for the HR managers in this study and for HR in general: how can they balance this paradox between the legitimate and shadow? How can they encourage without interfering? If

HR starts consciously and strategically involving itself in the shadow (its content, and its place), by opening up and engaging in encounters between employees that are not intended to be formal meetings (the legitimacy). The context will quickly transition to being part of the legitimate and the positive power is therefore lost. There is a fragility that must be taken into account. From HR's perspective, it is undoubtedly a potential that must be allowed, fostered, and provided conditions for. But to what extent? With what means? How close? Perhaps it is this dilemma that Kornberger and Clegg attempt to address with their introduction of the (work-) place as generative architecture and what they refer to as the "strategy of the void" in this context.

By using the expression "Strategy of the void," which Kornberg and Clegg employ in organizational contexts, a paradox emerges that organizations must confront. The formal, structural, bureaucratic, regulatory, goal-oriented, routine aspects, along with the "strategy of the void," should be regarded as a paradox.

The void becomes a catalyst for creativity and innovation, enabling a broad range of possibilities for development and the creation of positive power, encapsulated in the concept of Shadow. Self-organization takes center stage in his architecture, where interpersonal processes are fundamental. Self-organization provides a structure to the processes of social practices.

By emphasizing the Strategy of the Void, the organizational perspective leads to the conclusion that the formal, structural, regulatory, goal-oriented, and routine aspects, along with the strategy of the void, should be viewed as a paradox – a paradox that we must contend with in organizations (Czarniawska, 2005). It's not possible to reduce one aspect at the expense of the other; both must coexist within organizations. However, with increased digitalization, there's a risk that one side of the paradox receives excessive attention in the form of the formal aspects, etc., while the other side, life, is neglected (Czarniawska, 2005; Stacey, 2007; Turkle, 2017). The legitimate and the shadow are paradoxes that both need to be managed for an organization to function.

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