



You don't deserve a designated desk if you're hardly in the office, says **Nigel Oseland** – consider your own environmental impact

I used to work for an architecture practice and in 2006 we hired a cinema theatre for our own private viewing of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. At the time my workplace consulting colleagues and I were implementing flexible working, now termed agile or activity-based working, across large corporates throughout Europe.

We promoted the various benefits of implementing desk sharing (aka unallocated desks or hot-desking) including:

- Space efficiency;
- Cost savings;
- Enhanced productivity;
- Better work-life balance;
- Business continuity;
- Attractiveness; and
- Sustainability.

At the time our utilisation studies showed that typically only 50% of office desks were used at the same time across the working week. Increasing the utilisation by implementing desk sharing would release space in an existing office, which could be used to accommodate more people, or mean that less space is required if moving to a new office.

Less space means less energy

Less space used by an organisation will result in less embodied energy when putting up and fitting out an office building and less operational energy for heating, cooling, lighting, servicing and maintenance. In some cases, the released desk space might be used to improve the working conditions, but space can usually be reduced by at least one-third.

In those days, knowledge workers not attending the office may have been travelling, visiting client sites or occasionally working from home. 15 years later and the workplace has changed. Post-pandemic use rates have dropped across the working week with reports showing it as low as 33%. More people are working from home, using their own increasingly more expensive energy.

Utilisation levels may bounce back to 50% over time but the current trend for coming into the office on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday potentially means that offices are empty for four days per week (including weekends) with the complication of mid-week peaks reaching 60% to 80%.

Finding the solution

The solution is to:

- 1 Plan ahead;
- 2 Monitor or calculate the desk utilisation;
- 3 Implement agile working;
- 4 Balance occupancy levels across the whole week; and
- 5 Size the office accordingly.

There is resistance to desk-sharing and some of it is genuine. For example:

- Certain personality profiles do not cope well with it;
- Some roles require the employees to be in the office daily; and
- Some feel a little insecure and believe desk ownership provides more sense of belonging and being more valued by their employer.

Nevertheless, the main barrier to unallocated desking that I repeatedly hear is inconvenience. From the management perspective it is the hassle of working out when teams are in the office – I suggest team days at least once a week including Mondays and Fridays. From the individual perspective it is the time and irritation of finding a desk and the aggravation of setting up each day.

A conspicuous analogy

It seems to me that this daily inconvenience is analogous to broader environmental issues. It's just too inconvenient, for many, to be greener – and it doesn't directly or immediately affect them.

However, it's time now for us all to take responsibility and anticipate such minor inconveniences at work. In a world of agile working, employees should not expect an allocated (serviced, heated, cooled, lit) space in an office if they are only present half of the week.

The analogy to hotels, and to some extent travel, has been long-standing – no one expects a room or seat to be set aside and left vacant for them when they only use it occasionally. We all need to accept the inconvenience and do our bit in the way we plan, manage and use office space. 🌱



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