

WORKPLACE DESIGN AS A STRATEGIC RESOURCE—A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In these times of increasing global competition among firms and advancing technological innovation at work, firm resources have become more important than ever before. Workplace design is affected greatly by these new technologies. In this paper I draw upon the research in the management literature—specifically the Resource-Based View—to discuss the prerequisites of workplace design that can be leveraged for a sustainable competitive advantage.

Based on a qualitative approach with data from four cases, I develop a framework describing six interrelated characteristics of workplace design to enable sustainable competitive advantage: Value, Overlap with Firm Strategy, Inimitability, Complementarity, Versatility, and Expression.

To align the complex resource bundle of workplace design with firm strategy and to ensure its potential benefits, management should consider these characteristics during planning and implementation of workplaces. Further research is needed to understand the relevance and individual impact of these characteristics in different industries or cultures and over time.

Keywords: *Workplace Design; Resource Based View; Qualitative Research; Case Study Analysis; Strategy*

1. INTRODUCTION

New technologies are leading to an ever-connected world, increasing complexity, and more dynamic and competitive markets. Blurring industry boundaries, market entrants with new business models, the war for talents, and disruptive technologies require the building of new resources and capabilities to succeed (Wang and Ahmed, 2007; Barney, 1991; Prince, 2019).

One of these resources is workplace design (WPD). As work practices are becoming more and more digital, the physical WPD and related technologies are of increasing importance. Since WPD constitutes a major part of corporate assets, it deserves closer examination by management researchers (Sheikh et al., 13-16 Dec 2018; Parker and Grote, 2020; Kampschroer et al., 2007).

Until recently, firms have considered workplaces merely as a capital asset. During re-designing processes, cost saving potential and increased efficiency have been the main goals (Kampschroer et al., 2007; Wadu Mesthrige and Chiang, 2019; Grant, 1991; Mitchell-Ketzes, 2003), while management often neglects the link of WPD to long-term strategy and competitive advantages (Levin, 2005; Kämpf-Dern and Konkol, 2017). Due to the above-mentioned changes in technology and market dynamics, I argue that WPD holds greater potential—which is in line with the current research (Heeroma et al., 2012; Haynes, 2008; Sheikh et al., 13-16 Dec 2018; Kim, 2014). To support my arguments, I make use of one of the most prominent theories in strategic management research: The Resource-Based View of the firm (RBV). Several authors have already applied the concept to other non-market resources, such as identity, human resource management, or quality management (Acedo et al., 2006; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Rockwell, 2019; Frynas et al., 2017; Prince, 2019).

In this paper, I evaluate the current literature on the resource-based view and WPD to build a framework of crucial characteristics of WPD as a strategic resource that leads to sustainable competitive advantage. I show that integrating an explicit WPD strategy into a corporate strategy will turn company offices into resources that enable a sustained competitive advantage. My main research question is:

How can firms incorporate workplace design in their resource portfolio to achieve a sustained competitive advantage?