

**WORK/LIFE RHYTHMS OF
EMPLOYEES IN A 'NEW
WORLD OF WORK' COMPANY:
A DUTCH CASE**

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The Netherlands are one of the forerunners in the introduction of the new world of work (NWW). This concept, introduced into his company in 2005 by former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, is related to the present-day IT-term 'work shifting', which refers to 'the ability of being part of a distributed workforce, working from outside of the office and shifting one's work habits to achieve a better work-life balance' (Citrix 2012). In this new world of work, employees are usually managed on their output rather than on working hours or presence at the office.

In 2010, NWW was introduced into about 16 percent of the companies in the Netherlands (CBS, 2012). Although Dutch companies are not on top of the lists of work shifting (Citrix, 2012), the concept of NWW can be labelled as Dutch: the Dutch headquarters of Microsoft was one of the first to introduce it (Bijl, 2007). This NWW differs from the longer existing phenomenon of teleworking as the aspects of 'time-flexibility' and 'new methods of management' are additional to the concept of teleworking. About seven years after the start of NWW at Microsoft, we have initiated a study on how the employees' freedom to work anytime/anywhere affects their work and life rhythms. Microsoft's management had the impression that most employees kept working in a traditional rhythm, mostly from 9am to 5pm, and wondered whether that impression was correct. Do employees working in an environment where NWW has been implemented, stick to a 9 to 5 schedule? And if so, how to explain that employees do not fully take advantage of their freedom to work whenever they want? What factors affect the employees' work rhythms and their work/life balance? What role do human factors, such as health and the wish to be connected, play in how employees organise their time?

In this article we present the results of a case study on temporal effects in a NWW environment, performed at Microsoft Netherlands. Via quantitative and qualitative data we provide insight in the work-life rhythms of employees at this company. We provide a theoretical background, recent observations and insights about life and work rhythms, an overview of traditional working rhythms in the Netherlands and an analysis of the differences between the NWW and teleworking. The explanation of the methods used is followed by the results of the quantitative part of the study (29 respondents). These results are used as input for the qualitative part of the study in which 12 Microsoft employees have been interviewed. We conclude that the majority of the employees do indeed maintain a traditional working rhythm. They use their freedom at the borders of the work day: starting and finishing a bit earlier or

Samenvatting

Het Nieuwe Werken concept (HNW) kenmerkt zich onder andere door de grote mate van vrijheid voor medewerkers om tijd- en plaatsafhankelijk te werken. Microsoft Nederland was in 2007 één van de eerste organisaties die dit concept vergaand doorvoerde. Zeven jaar na dato hebben wij onderzoek gedaan naar de mate waarin de vrijheid ten aanzien van werktijden het leef- en werkritme van de medewerkers heeft beïnvloed. Als eerste hebben we een klein kwantitatief onderzoek uitgevoerd om na te gaan in hoeverre medewerkers er nieuwe ritmes op nahielden. Daaruit bleek onder andere dat er op dit gebied geen grote veranderingen hebben plaatsgevonden. Naar aanleiding hiervan hebben we interviews gehouden om te achterhalen welke motieven er spelen bij het vasthouden aan traditionele werktijden. Uit het onderzoek bleek dat medewerkers weliswaar zeer tevreden zijn met de geboden vrijheid, maar dat verbindende factoren als familie, klanten en collega's belangrijke factoren zijn bij het handhaven van een traditioneel leef- en werkritme.

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later when needed. Although most employees describe themselves as 'being in charge of their rhythms', external factors appear to be imperative in sticking to traditional working schedules. The question is if these external factors give employees the feeling that they are limited in their rhythm as some of the external factors are also a result of own choices and needs (e.g. having children or joining a sports team). Our research is innovative in the sense that no studies are known about the motives that influence employees' choices when making use of the flexibility in working time. The qualitative aspect of our research is distinctive from research done by both Verhagen, Steyaert and Ballings (2009), and the Dutch Time Use Survey (SCP, 2013), which are purely quantitative and do not focus on motives of employees.

Life and work rhythms

'Rhythm' refers to an ancient time pattern that combines two seemingly contrasting elements: repetition and renewal. Contrary to 'measure', which refers to similar repetitions such as repetitive beats or repetitive tasks, rhythm indicates a repetition in which something new is introduced (Lefebvre 2004; Huijjer 2011). These two elements, repetition and renewal, are supplemented with a third one: rhythm is always polyrhythmic and/or part of a polyrhythmic constellation. The heart rhythm, for example, is built up by rhythms of the heart muscles, cells and blood vessels and is simultaneously surrounded by a multitude of other bodily, social and physical rhythms.

Rhythm is a vital principle for human bonding as various studies have shown (McNeill, 1995; Adam, 1990; Elias, 1984; Zerubavel, 1981). The periodical recurrence in time and space of shared activities, guaranteed by rhythms, is a necessary precondition to sustain trust, cohesion and collaboration among organisations and communities. Jackson, Ribes, Buyuktur and Bowker (2011) call this bonding aspect of rhythms 'temporal alignment' and argue that it is a 'neglected but crucial element underpinning distributed collective practice in the sciences (and other spheres of collective activity)'. So within the polyrhythmicity, some rhythms need to be in line with each other during a period in order to achieve a certain goal.

Rhythm, conceptualised as a combination of repetition, renewal and polyrhythmicity, is also central to human health. Due to biological and social rhythms resulting from (biological and social) evolutionary processes, the human body and brain cannot survive without any rhythm (Lefebvre 2009; Huijjer, 2011). Various studies exploring life rhythms in modern times stress that too much differentiation of time patterns has negative effects on our wellbeing (Pavalko and Smith, 1999; Jett and George, 2003; Verhagen, Steyaert and Ballings, 2009).

What we see today, however, is that rhythm is conceived in a much narrower sense. It is now understood to be a fixed, collective time pattern facilitating the efficient organisation of work, school and everyday life (Van den Broek, 2012). The emphasis is on the repetitive rather than on the renewing aspect of rhythm. And what's more, the polyrhythmicity is reduced to just one or a few rhythms. Building on the book *Discipline and Punish* by French philosopher Michel Foucault, this dominance of fixed, collective rhythms is attributed to the 19th century birth and reorganisation of factories, schools, hospitals and other institutions, which submitted employees, pupils, patients and citizens to strict time regimes (Foucault, 1987). Rhythm

is seen as a tool that submits workers, students or citizens to efficient, rationalised time patterns. Many contemporary authors, politicians, companies and unions share this idea of the submissive effect of rhythms. They expect that flexible work regimes (working anytime/anyplace) will liberate employees from the submission to conventional work and life rhythms. The work of French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005) is often cited to emphasise that since the 1960s, these fixed, collective rhythms have been replaced by flexible time regimes that allow individuals to freely choose their own working times. In response to the critique of the left on the Taylorian organisation of work, managers in creative industry chose, in the 1990s, to increase the individual workers' freedom and responsibility. The introduction of the World Wide Web and the subsequent evolution of software applications and services facilitated this choice, since it enabled people to work and collaborate independently of time and place. Yet, it took another decade of management and further software development before this idea of working anywhere/anytime became widespread.

In 1960, Saturday morning was no longer an official working day for all workers in the Netherlands, and the five-day week, from 9 to 5, has been the standard working rhythm for most Dutch employees. Results of the Dutch Time Use Survey show that Dutch employees have been quite traditional in their work/life rhythms over the last eight years. Not only are Saturday and Sunday 'non-working days', there has been no shift on the 9 to 5 working hours practice (SCP, 2013).

In his 2005 paper, former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates described how technology would change the way we live and work. He stated that in the new millennium, technology would evolve in such a way that knowledge workers would be supported by intelligent tools for collaboration and communication. And most importantly that these tools would be available anytime and anywhere (Gates, 2005).

Inspired by these possibilities and the vision of Gates, work and organisation psychologist Dik Bijl introduced NWW in the Netherlands (Bijl, 2007). NWW differs from 'teleworking', which was introduced in the 1980s: in teleworking, employees working at a distance were connected to the companies' computer via a telephone line and their flexibility was usually limited to their working place. The many studies on teleworking (Di Martino and Wirth, 1990; Daniels, Lamond and Standen, 2001; Fonner and Roloff, 2010) focus on working place and the frequency of 'being in the office'. Working in other time frames than 9 to 5 is not taken into account. NWW however, made possible by new digital technologies, focuses both on flexible working places and flexible working moments.

In 2007, Microsoft Netherlands decided to implement NWW among all of its 900 employees. This implementation coincided with the move to a new building near Schiphol airport, where flexible workspaces were created. From then on, employees not only had a range of options in where they worked, but also in when to work: they were free to choose their working times as long as the job was done properly and on time. Managers evaluated employees' performance on output rather than on the number of hours worked. Bijl describes three pillars of NWW: bricks (flexible workplaces), bytes (the so-called facilities for work shift) and behaviour. The behavioural aspect concerns the way management and employees find balances in trust versus control (managers) and freedom versus responsibility (employees). Motivations for

Microsoft's shift towards NWW were new business models, new products, the philosophy of 'practice what you preach' and the recruitment of young talent (Van Baalen, 2008, p. 53). This spatial and temporal flexibility had a large impact on Microsoft's employees. They had to give up their fixed workplaces and no longer knew where their colleagues and managers were located. The certainty of where and when to work was replaced by an almost unlimited temporal and spatial freedom. They were free to work anywhere and anytime. They were free to choose their own working rhythm.

Shortly after the introduction of NWW at Microsoft Netherlands, the effects of NWW on productivity, employee satisfaction and cost reduction were evaluated. Microsoft employees appeared to score higher than before on all dimensions concerning job satisfaction, especially on task and skill variety, and on relationships with colleagues and managers (Van Baalen, 2008, p. 59). In self-assessment reports, on a scale of 1-5 the employees scored a 3.97 on productivity. This outcome was mainly influenced by empowerment, extrinsic job motivation and job characteristics, according to Van Baalen. Higher productivity can, if managed properly, lead to cost reduction. This outcome is in line with the conclusion of Joyce, Pabayo, Chritchley and Bamba (2010), that 'flexibility in working patterns which gives the worker more choice or control is likely to have positive effects on health and wellbeing.'

Four years after the research by Van Baalen, the management of Microsoft noticed that employees had easily adjusted to flexible workplaces. To the management's surprise, however, employees seemed to keep working the traditional core working hours. Why did employees not take greater advantage of their temporal freedom? What other factors than the organisation's time patterns were influential with regard to the work and life rhythms of employees? The above mentioned theories of rhythm show that human beings have a need for daily routines in which everyday activities are periodically repeated. This theoretical insight raises the question as to what extent people and more specifically workers, are willing and able to vary and renew their organisation of time.

In our study, we apply this question to employees in a NWW environment. The headquarters of Microsoft Netherlands near Amsterdam is one of the best examples of such an organisation. There was full cooperation by the management of Microsoft Netherlands to do our research.

Methodology

To find out what kind of rhythms Microsoft's employees developed, we asked the employees to complete a diary for a full week in November 2013. This method is comparable with the method used for the Dutch Time Use Survey, which was carried out by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (NISR), based on the European guidelines for time use research (Harmonised European Time Use Surveys) (SCP, 2013). In the Dutch Time Use Survey, 2000 respondents completed a diary throughout a one week period.

Differences between the NISR method and our method are:

- The NISR works with an analogue booklet and pencil diary. Our respondents used an app to fill in their data. The advantage of an app is that it is easier to use. Moreover, the data can be collected automatically.

- In the NISR research, respondents filled in their diary retrospectively usually in the evening. As we used an app, respondents logged their activities immediately. This made completing the diary more convenient. In addition, we expected that the validity of the data would be higher.
- The NISR method is based on a representative sample of the Dutch population. The data is processed with statistical software to find correlations and significant trends. Our study includes a cohort of employees of a specific company and the data is analysed manually.
- The NISR asks people to fill in their activities in ten minutes shifts. We asked the respondents to fill in their activities in shifts of 30 minutes. This was sufficient because we did not want to know how employees used their time but what patterns could be recognised in work and private activities.
- We did not ask what respondents were doing precisely, however respondents could select their answers from categories such as 'working', 'private issues' and 'travelling'. This made filling in the app easier and it was helpful when analysing the data.
- As we were interested in rhythms of working at home, at the office or elsewhere, we asked about every activity as well as both its time and location.

The app was developed especially for this research. As all employees of Microsoft use a Windows phone, the app was developed for this operating system only and the data recorded in a SQL database. Queries were used to get an insight into the rhythms. Statistical software was only used to create some graphics.

In total 29 employees filled in the app, responding to an invitation that was distributed among 900 employees through the internal message tool Yammer. Of course the small group of respondents was not representative of the full population, but as mentioned before, the data was only used in an indicative way.

The data received from the app gave clear insights into the different rhythms of employees, as well as an answer to the question of whether or not employees working in an environment where NWW has been implemented stick to a 9 to 5 schedule. To answer the second research question about the factors that influence the rhythms of the employees, in-depth interviews were held with 12 respondents of the app. The interviewees were selected from the top 20 most active loggers. As most employees showed a traditional working scheme, the division of interviewees was:

- Ten workers with a more or less traditional working scheme
- Two workers with a non-traditional working scheme

Interviews were conducted by students of The Hague University of Applied Sciences under the supervision of a lecturer-researcher. Prior to the interviews, the students were trained in research methods, interview techniques and the analysis of qualitative data. Eleven interviews were held at the venue of Microsoft Netherlands, and one interview was held via telephone. All interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The character of the interviews was semi-structured and questions were related to topics formulated on the basis of the outcomes of the data-analysis. Every interview was recorded and transcribed. Topic analysis took place using the software program Atlas.TI.

Results

When interpreting the data, we found that most employees worked from Monday to Friday between 9am and 6pm. After dinner, a small number of employees did work-related tasks, but most of them no later than 8pm and not more than once or twice a week. Only two (of the 29) employees worked five evenings a week. The most often mentioned work activity, performed in the evening, was reading and writing emails, usually for about an hour. Other activities mentioned were administration (5), contact with colleagues (19), business dinners (5), conference calls (1), calendar management (2), meetings (4), project work (2) and writing an article (3). Another finding was that half of the employees did work related tasks when travelling home. The data indicated further that the weekends are still primarily reserved for private activities. On Saturday and Sunday, only seven respondents logged work-related activities, including a visit to Microsoft's headquarters to celebrate the Dutch Sinterklaas festivities (2) and having dinner with colleagues and family members (2). Three respondents logged mail activities during the weekend, one during an early Sunday morning, and the others on Sunday evening. On both Saturdays and Sundays, there were no real working tasks logged between 9am and 7pm.

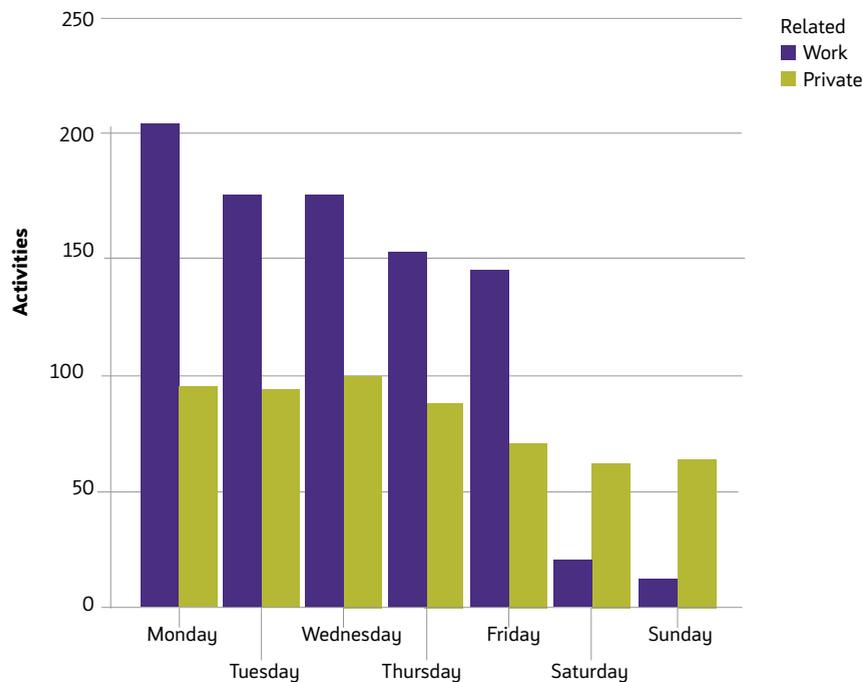


Table 1: number of logged activities during the week

Another finding is that those who have a part-time job try to keep the non-working days really free from work related-tasks. The data show only a minimum of employees who have developed a schedule in which working and private matters mix intensively. These findings indicate that most employees stick to a rather traditional 9 to 5 (or 9 to 6) working rhythm.

The analysis of the data raised questions about the employees' motives for this rhythm. Why do employees keep a more or less fixed working rhythm? Is it related to their attitude towards NWW? Is it a matter of culture and tradition or are they influenced by external factors? In order to answer these questions, we organised twelve interviews, focused on the following topics:

- What attitude do employees have towards the new way of working?
- What facilities are provided by Microsoft Netherlands to work on flexible times and places (food facilities, communication technologies, attractive flexible workplaces and meeting rooms etc.)?
- How many years of experience do the employees have with the new way of working?
- What are the employees' motives for choosing specific working venues? Are these choices related to specific tasks?
- What are the employees' motives to attribute certain time slots to certain tasks?
- How often do employees prefer to communicate with colleagues?
- What are the employees' preferred ways of communication with colleagues (face to face, digital, (a-) synchronous)?

In the interviews, the employees showed a very positive attitude towards the new way of working. All interviewees pointed out that they didn't want to go back to a company with traditional working schemes.

According to them, Microsoft Netherlands gives them all necessary facilities and freedom to realise their 'perfect' personal work/life rhythm. All employees are tooled with the latest technology and devices for communication and collaboration, and every manager is trained to manage their employees according to the principles of NWW. As one of the employees said: 'No one controls how many hours and at what hour I work'. The main reason to keep a mainly 9 to 5 schedule has to do with the time patterns of Microsoft's clients. As Microsoft Netherlands is mainly a vendor and consultancy company, most employees have direct contact with clients. The working rhythm of the employees has to fit into the working rhythm of their clients, expressed by one of the interviewees as: 'My working rhythm is mainly driven by appointments'. This alignment of working hours with those of the client is a good example of the mentioned bonding aspect of rhythms. In some cases, these appointments drive people to non-traditional working hours. As one of the interviewees has many overseas contacts, he quite often has conference calls late in the evening.

A second reason to stick to a 9 to 5 rhythm is related to family issues. More employees with young children work in a traditional scheme than those who don't have children. Young parents start their day at 7am as their children need to be on time at school or day-care which starts between 8.30am and 9am in the Netherlands. Due to the rhythms of school and day-care (which close around 5.30pm), the rhythm of meals is also set: lunch at 12pm and dinner at 6pm. 'My children dictate my rhythm', one of the interviewees said. Those employees who have children accept this as a fact, they are even happy with it: it is their own choice to make Saturday and/or Sunday 'family day'. Simultaneously, they do value the freedom that the company provides them to go home when extra childcare is needed. The presumption that those who don't have children might be much more flexible in their working schemes is however not correct: external factors as partners, clients, opening hours of shops and the

internal factor of personal preferences are reasons why most child-free respondents stick to the traditional working rhythm as well.

In contrast to the finding in the Van Baalen study (2008), which was performed not long after the introduction of NWW and showed that employees had problems with the open office as a workspace, our study shows that employees have fully adapted to this concept. What is more, employees even choose to regularly work at the Microsoft venue in order to meet colleagues and clients. As a motive for this choice, the bonding aspect of these contacts is often mentioned. In spite of all technology available, employees often prefer to meet colleagues in person to have lunch together or discuss their work. The opportunity to meet others at regular times is attractive to them. People only choose to work at home when a job needs extra concentration or when family matters force them to stay home.

Conclusion and discussion

Based on the findings of this research, we firstly conclude that most employees of Microsoft Netherlands, who have been working in a NWW environment since 2007, mainly maintain a traditional 9 to 5 (or 6) rhythm. Although they do not take full advantage of the temporal freedom that NWW provides them, the experience of flexibility, especially at the borders of the day, increases their job satisfaction as already reported by Van Baalen (2008). In line with the findings of Joyce, Pabayo, Chritchley and Bamba (2010), it is *the feeling of freedom* that makes them significantly happier with their working conditions.

Secondly, bonding aspects of family, clients and colleagues are an important factor in maintaining a traditional work/life rhythm. It is unlikely that employees in the Netherlands will develop an entirely new work rhythm in the near future, since their work schedules are closely connected to those of colleagues, clients and family members. Employers can meet the bonding needs of employees by creating work spaces at the office and other facilities where employees can meet and connect with colleagues and clients. At Microsoft Netherlands there is an excellent restaurant, which provides employees and their clients with a pleasant environment to meet, work and enjoy healthy food. This is a good example of a bonding facility that is well appreciated because it helps employees to maintain a healthy working rhythm. At first glance, the above-mentioned aspects of freedom and bonding might seem contradictory. It meets the idea that an individual's rhythm is always connected to those of society and the people surrounding them. The human need to be connected to others is accompanied with the freedom to choose when, where and how to connect. It is this combination of freedom and being connected that explains the increased employees' satisfaction.

The effects of NWW on life rhythms and wellbeing haven't been investigated on a large scale and our study is only a beginning, but the results can be of use to those organisations that consider implementing NWW. It may help them get an insight into the factors that maintain or create a healthy work-life rhythm.

The new world of working is very popular in the Netherlands, mainly because companies expect cost reduction in office space and travelling. Yet the exact implications and effects on

the behaviour of employees in the long term are still unknown. Our study shows that freedom of time and place does not necessarily lead to entirely new work and life rhythms. And although this was an explorative pilot study, it has produced some interesting findings which motivates to do further research. We realise that our data was limited and the employees of Microsoft have special characteristics. These employees are highly educated (mainly academic), very keen on new technology and relatively young (more than 70% of the employees are between 35 and 50 years old). Their jobs are related to sales, marketing and consultancy. Interesting questions for further research are: Do employees in other companies where NWW is implemented stick to the same rhythms? How about employees with tasks which are less client-dependent? And how about self-employed persons? This and future research can be of use for those organisations who consider implementing NWW. It may help them get an insight in the factors that maintain or create healthy work and life rhythms. ■

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Abstract

The new world of work (NWW) is a concept that allows employees, to a certain extent, to choose their own place and time to work. In 2007, the Dutch headquarters of Microsoft was one of the first companies in the Netherlands to introduce this concept. About seven years after the start of NWW at Microsoft, we have investigated how the employees' freedom to work anytime/anywhere affects their work and life rhythms. A small quantitative study was carried out to investigate whether or not employees developed new rhythms. The data showed that there was no spectacular shift in work/life rhythms. Based on these findings, interviews were held to learn about the motives for continuing to work in a traditional rhythm. The results of the interviews showed that employees are happy with their freedom. However, bonding aspects related to family, clients and colleagues are an important factor in maintaining a traditional work/life rhythm.