Microsoft. Does the new way of working work?
(Source: Facillitair & Gebouwbeheer 04–05–2009 by Natascha Geernaert)

Microsoft Netherlands moved into a new building a year ago. So did its employees. But the move to Schiphol Airport was anything but a traditional removal operation. That's because Microsoft Netherlands seized the occasion to introduce the New Way of Working. As a result, The Outlook – as the building is appropriately named – resembles a social club more than a workplace. The concept is wonderful, the vision splendid, but the question is: does it actually work? Managing director Theo Rinsema looks back.

‘To be honest, we’re not there yet. How we collaborate and our IT tools continue to evolve, and so we’ll never reach a final destination,’ says Rinsema at the start of his story. ‘But I can tell you that when I stood up in front of the troops three and a half years ago and said we were going on a journey together, they were less than enthusiastic about it. The only thing that was clear was that Microsoft Netherlands entered a process of change in the second half of 2005 that has lasted until today. We wanted to find out for ourselves what the New Way of Working means. I still can’t tell you exactly what it is. What I can say is that we’ve separated our work from the physical location, generally referred to as an office. That required a change in the way we work, cooperate and manage,’ explains Rinsema.

Microsoft Netherlands found it crucial to live up to its image in introducing the New Way of Working. ‘For ourselves, but for our customers too. The world is becoming more transparent, and it’s much easier these days to see whether a company actually is what it claims to be. After all, how can we sell IT to our customers if we don’t use it ourselves to achieve our goals?’ Rinsema says.

Rinsema has a very clear idea of what those goals are. ‘We want to attract talented individuals and earn their loyalty as an employer. We also want to continue growing by getting people who think in entirely different ways to work together.’ Other goals are to improve the organisation’s productivity and vitality. These are all pretty tricky aims, because success depends largely on how people behave. ‘Microsoft Netherlands naturally uses a lot of IT,’ explains Rinsema, ‘and every employee has a smartphone that can be used for e-mailing and chatting. And for making phone calls, fortunately! But it’s absurd to think that someone will become more productive if you give him or her a smartphone. In fact, they might even become less productive. The point is for people to modify their workstyle so that the technology works for them.’
Impact
The most important part of the change process for Microsoft Netherlands was the interaction between people and technology. In the early days of the New Way of Working, employees had to master the multinational’s new stratified work pattern. ‘If I want to talk to a colleague, I first check whether I can chat with them on Office Communicator,’ explains Rinsema. ‘Since everyone at Microsoft has a company laptop, I don’t even know whether the person I’m chatting with is at the office, at home, or in the pub. Once you’re chatting, you see very quickly whether you need to call them or whether a few chat messages will suffice. In the first instance, you just press a button and start a phone conversation using the same software. Press again and you switch on the webcam. If you discover that another colleague ought to be in on the conversation, you just add him or her to it. The way we now work is stratified, in the sense that you always start with a chat, then go to a phone call, then to the webcam, and finally to having a group of people communicating.’

Rinsema calls it ‘great technology’, but he also realises that it’s a difficult adjustment for many people. ‘The trickiest are the meetings, where we have some people sitting together in a room and others calling in. The problem is that the people in the meeting room see the calls as an interruption. It’s easy to imagine that someone hasn’t taken the trouble to come to the office. The person calling in may ask a relevant question, but all the folks at the office can think is, “We discussed that fifteen minutes ago already! Where the heck was he? Probably making himself coffee!” These are all things that have to be considered in a change process like this one.’

‘What we also didn’t realise,’ Rinsema continues, ‘is the impact that the new building would have on the employees. We had already introduced the New Way of Working before we moved, but The Outlook seemed to act as a catalyst, an accelerator, on the whole change process. That’s when the penny finally dropped for thirty to forty percent of the employees. They really explored the new building and soon began encountering and collaborating with one another. It was wonderful to see!’

Solutions
The organisation had completely underestimated the building’s impact on new employees, however. ‘New employees are put through a two-day training course,’ says Rinsema, ‘and that remained. But what we noticed is that they just didn’t feel at home. They liked the environment and understood what we were attempting to do, but they couldn’t sort out who their actual colleagues were. When we discovered that four or five months down the road, we immediately made adjustments to the introduction programme. Now new employees meet their direct colleagues on their second day. We also made a tour of the building part of the programme. We even take people to their locker and explain “Here’s your locker and your direct colleagues’ lockers, so this is where you’re likely to meet up with them.” Very simple things, really, but they’ve had an enormously positive influence.’

Microsoft Netherlands came up with another idea to maintain social cohesion: the ‘physical minimum’. In this strategy, team members agree on the minimum
amount of time that they will spend working at the office, and when that will happen. Some teams decide on a couple of hours a month, and others on four times a week. ‘Once you’ve agreed on a physical minimum, people start behaving differently,’ says Rinsema. ‘It becomes totally acceptable for someone to call in during a meeting. And the rest of the time is the virtual optimum. In other words, it’s down to the individual. It doesn’t matter where you’re located during that time. We allow people to work at home, but it’s not an obligation. In fact, we have employees who simply come to the office every day from 9 to 5. The only thing they don’t have is an assigned desk.’

The fact that the managing director himself does not have an office in this new working environment raised eyebrows among Microsofties all over the world. They came to Schiphol from far and wide to inspect ‘the miracle’ of the New Way of Working. ‘I make use of four, five or six workspaces a day – concentration zones, collaboration zones, quiet zones, lounges – and don’t find that at all troublesome. It’s a much bigger challenge exploring what the New Way of Working means for the organisation,’ Rinsema believes.

Mistake
And just how does one do that? ‘We simply announced “We’re going on a journey. Who’d like to come along?”’ Rinsema explains. Looking back, the man who stands at the head of seven hundred or so employees now thinks the whole–organisation approach was a bit over the top. ‘One of our mistakes is that we waited too long to involve middle management in the change process. We were afraid that we’d be confirming the hierarchy and status of management if we allowed them to head the change. But the New Way of Working concerns us all. In their turn, the managers felt the New Way of Working would have a major impact on how they actually managed the department. That made them cling to their own management style.’

Rinsema now knows how Microsoft Netherlands could have tackled the situation more effectively. ‘We should have made it clear to the employees what the New Way of Working would mean for them. It means a shift from “being managed” to self–management – from the manager who opened up the shop in the morning and closed it at night to the individual employee. Our employees told us that they found it hard to stop working in the evening when they worked at home. At first we thought “What’s wrong with that? It’s great when employees work hard, isn’t it?” But we got a failing score on an employee satisfaction survey. So we appointed a coach to help people find the right work/life balance.’

It was a step that has done nothing but good at Microsoft Netherlands. Since introducing the New Way of Working, the company has ranked among the five best employers in the Netherlands, and this year it even heads the list. During the voting, employees said they were proud to tell other people where they worked and that they felt they made an important contribution to the company. Despite this success, Rinsema remains modest. ‘We certainly don’t want to tell anyone what to do, because there are so many different factors involved: your organisation, your business model, and your corporate culture. The main thing is that you really want to develop and grow. And even now, we learn something new every day.’
Microsoft Netherlands awarded Best Employer in The Netherlands*
17 April 2009

Microsoft is voted best employer in the Netherlands by the Great Place to Work Institute Netherlands. The result is based on surveys among the employees of participating companies. Especially the New Way of Working provided many positive reactions. Employees were presented 57 propositions in order to gauge opinions in the areas of credibility, respect, honesty, pride and camaraderie. Microsoft Netherlands won this year with a score of 92 points from a maximum of 100.

Pride
The company scored best in the area ‘proud’. Staff indicated that they are proud to tell others where they work and that management acknowledges the importance of their contribution to the business.

Trust
The areas 'credibility' and 'respect' showed good results. Credibility is for open communication, professionalism and integrity. Staff indicated that they have much responsibility and that management demonstrates amply trust in employees.

The New Way of Workings
According to staff Microsoft is a real 'Great Place to Work', among others things, because the space for new ideas and the transparent and pleasant atmosphere within the company. Especially The New Ways of Working resulted in many positive reactions. Staff indicated that they very much appreciate the opportunity to manage their working hours in a flexible way, and the opportunity to work at home or elsewhere. Moreover, the employees are very satisfied with the new office as it is fully equipped to support the new flexible work style, which contributes to a pleasant and positive corporate culture and work pleasure.

* On a yearly basis, in 40 countries there is an inventory of Best Workplace practices. An intensive process of survey, analysis and evaluation, leads to lists of the Best Workplaces in each of those countries. Also, on a yearly basis, a European List is composed. This is the largest survey of workplace practices worldwide.

Media partners het Financieele Dagblad and de Pers published the list on April 17th, 2009.