A recent survey of 400 multinational corporations found that two-thirds plan to implement shared-desk workplaces by 2020. But research shows these arrangements have a range of outcomes, many of which are negative.

A recently published study of 1,000 Australian employees found that shared-desk environments had a number of problems. These included increased distrust, distractions, uncooperative behaviour and negative relationships. On top of this, there was a decreased perception of support from supervisors.

Another study showed that shared-desk environments can lead to employee marginalisation, indifference and inattention to co-workers, loss of identity and decreased organisational commitment.

These studies and more should sound a cautionary note against the uptake of shared-desk arrangements.

Changing workspaces

Office spaces are changing rapidly thanks to remote work, technology and the need to innovate. But cost is also a big factor.

Office space is typically the second-biggest cost for organisations. And some research suggests that up to 40% of office space is vacant at any one time.

The cost of offices is one of the drivers of shared-desk work arrangements, which fall into two categories: hot-desking and activity-based working. By using these arrangements, an employer can fit more workers into an existing space and more efficiently use the available space.

Hot-desking is where employees either share a desk with others or are not assigned a

permanent desk and must find one when needed. Hot-desking arose as a strategy to save on space and to cater to the needs of employees who largely worked outside the office.

Activity-based work , by contrast, assumes all employees work flexibly and will seek out a range of different spaces to undertake different tasks. As such, these workspaces provide a range of work settings for different types of activities such as meetings, collaboration, private work, creativity and concentration. Employees are expected to switch between these settings as necessary.

Proponents of activity-based work claim that cost is not a major driver of its uptake. Rather, companies have implemented it to attract and retain talent, and increase collaboration and innovation, employee well-being and sustainability.

But plenty of research shows negative effects of shared-desk workplaces. These negatives potentially outweigh the benefits.

Diving into the research

Some studies have suggested that having a permanent desk may not be as important as the overall layout of the office, or the freedom to personalise that space.

But employees without an assigned desk complain of desk shortages, difficulty finding colleagues, wasted time and limited ability to personalise their space. And, as I noted earlier, hot-desking has been found to result in higher levels of distrust, fewer co-worker friendships and decreased perceptions of supervisory support.

Meanwhile, research on activity-based work has shown that it is likely to work best for employees who see themselves as mobile and independent, and who have largely self-contained work processes. For those who work well in these environments, the ability to select a workstation or area based on individual needs and preferences is seen as a positive. Another positive is the ability to avoid unwanted social interaction when necessary, by working in a quiet space,

for example.

However, the flipside of activity-based work is workers who have trouble finding privacy or concentrating. Further research shows that employees rarely, if ever, switch between different work settings. While those who did switch workstations were found to be more satisfied, there were strong objections among those who didn't.

Activity-based work can also have an impact on the social dynamic in the workplace, creating tensions between those who come into the office and use certain spaces regularly, and those who don't. Lastly, it can create additional work, as workers must find and set up a workspace, move between locations, and then remove everything at the end of the day.

So while hot-desking and activity-based work are touted as increasing communication, collaboration and efficiency, research shows there are other outcomes as well. While these environments can work well for some employees – those who are highly mobile and autonomous, for instance – the research shows that many employees do not work well in these environments.

A one-size-fits-all solution is unlikely to succeed. Implementing one may have negative impacts on the organisation as well as workers. Employers need to accommodate differences in individual employees and in the type of work they undertake. Additionally, research has shown that management style, as well as social and cultural factors will have a significant impact on whether activity-based work is successful.

Workplaces should be designed to support both well-being and productivity. This requires a more nuanced approach.

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Read more http://theconversation.com/the-research-on-hot-desking-and-activity-based-work-isnt-so-positive-75612