Workplace management and gender: a literature review and a research agenda

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Aims of the contribution

This research proposes a comprehensive literature review of all the studies on how workplace management influences female workers and, more generally, impact on gender equality. Specifically, with the term workplace management, we refer to the strategies to deliver organizational goals and support workers' needs by mean of both spatial and organizational features of the workplace.

Description of the research

Introduction

The issue of gender equality is assuming a central relevance in academics' and practitioners' debate; there is general convincement that gender diversity should be accepted and valorised in business and organizational contexts. Conversations on the topic revolve mainly around the factors which facilitate or hamper women's career progresses. Among these factors, workplace management has, so far, gone under-remarked. This is rather surprising as evidence exists that the physical and organizational features of the workplace differently affect male and female workers. For instance, a recent study by Jones Lang LaSalle (Puybaraud, 2017) reveals that more men than women believe that the workplace impact the effectiveness of their work. Why? What does this difference mean and how can we deal with it? The same research finds a significant difference between men and women in the use of "third places" (i.e. cafés, libraries or co-working spaces) at work. It results that men work from third places more frequently than women. Why does this happen? To what extent does this trend influence the way we design and manage the workplaces and we look at organizational and business performances?

Despite the prominence of the topic, a comprehensive review of scholarly contributions is still missing. Research on gender and workplace management is scarce and scattered across multiple disciplines, while mainstream contributions on workplace management rarely address directly gender issues; instead they consider gender as an additional variable. Furthermore, most studies adopt a single disciplinary perspective, whilst a more transversal and inter-disciplinary stance would be desirable to identify a broader spectrum of gender-related issues in the workplace. Such a situation likely has practical consequences on the design of workplaces, and on performances and job satisfaction of workers.

Our literature review intends to overcome the aforementioned shortcomings. In so doing, we also expand the scope of the analysis from traditional themes of workplace management (e.g. typology of office; perception of indoor environmental quality) to new trends, including collaborative spaces and shared facilities, which scholars define as 'commons' and we expect that differently influence male and female workers.

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Materials and methods

We performed a systematic literature review based on two sets of keywords, combined in queries through the logical operator AND. We combine keywords pertaining all types of gender-related words with keywords pertaining to workplace management. The former set of keywords includes: "gender", "sex", "female", "wom?n", "femini*", "discrimination", "bias*", "stereotype*", "equality". The latter includes: "workplace", "workspace", "space plan*", "organiz* space*", "office", "meeting room*", "corporate building*", "co-work*", "collaborative space*", "flexible work*", "home office*", "homework*" and "cooperative work". The selected keywords range purposely from general terms like "gender" and "workplace", to specific terms like "flexible work", "co-work", "cooperative work" that explore the new trends in workplace management.

By combining these two set of keywords, we obtained 117 queries, which, in October 2019, we ran on the abstracts, titles, and keywords of English written documents hosted in the Scopus database. This search ended up in more than 100.000 results, which we narrowed down by applying a set of selection criteria. Specifically, we decided to include only contributions: (i) published in scientific journals (ii) published in the last 10 years; (ii) in the fields of management, economics, business, architecture, engineering, human resources, gender studies, psychology and social sciences; (iv) related to developed countries. The application of these criteria leads us to select 15152 papers. After reading the abstracts, we included in the literature review 101 papers.

Results

The selected papers span different disciplines. To systematize their contents, we propose a conceptual framework, which we summarize in Table 1. Each paper finds its place inside the table and this helps to recognize the most frequent themes that scholars have analysed when dealing with gender and workplace. The framework consists of a matrix in which we classify papers along two dimensions. The columns identify the spatial and organizational features of the workplace, which researchers have recognized as features that have consequences on women. These consequences are reported on rows, distinguishing consequences on women's (i) productivity, (ii) creativity, (iii) career advancements, (iv) leadership and status; (v) job satisfaction, (vi) work-life balance, (vii) wellbeing, and (viii) health . Clearly, it may occur that each paper covers more than one theme and, thus, potentially belong to more than one cell in the matrix. For the sake of simplicity, while reading a paper, we identified its main theme and, when discussing the paper, we acknowledged the multiplicity of its themes.

From our reading of the papers, we find support to the idea that all spaces are gendered: space's features produce or reproduce gender practices (Panayiotou, 2014). Physical indoor characteristics (lighting, humidity, noise, etc.), the type of office (single office, shared office, open plan, etc.) and flexibility in working schedule, load and place affect to different extents men and women wellbeing and status perception (Chung, 2018; Formánková, 2015; Choi, 2017; Hirst, 2018). In particular, flexible work arrangements have an impact on women's work-life conflict and job satisfaction (Azar, 2018; Beauregard, 2011). Moreover, the literature confirms that shared offices of medium dimensions and shared facilities (Weijs-Perrée, 2019; Bodin Danielsson, 2019) have a stronger effect on improving female creativity, proactiveness and expertise distribution than open plan offices have (De Korte, 2011; Banks, 2011; Heinzen 2018).

Table 3: Framework for the analysis of the selected papers of the literature review

Consequences of women's	Features of the workplace						
	Spatial features of the workplace					Organizational features of the workplace	
	Indoor environmental quality	Ergonomics of the workstation	Type of office	Supportive collaborative facilities	Interior design & aesthetical features	Flexibility of working place	Flexibility of working time and load
Productivity							
Creativity							
Sharing Knowledge & innovation							
Career advancement							
Leadership & Status perception							
Job satisfaction							
Work-life balance & work-family conflicts							
Wellbeing & comfort							
Health							
Co-workers relationship							

Conclusions

Our review reveals a strong multi-disciplinarity of research on gender and workplace management. In our view, this stands as a strength rather than as a weakness: due to the newness of the topic, studies stem from different disciplines stating the urgency of the theme and its practical implications. Accordingly, it is necessary to bring forth an interdisciplinary research agenda on questions such as: do the design and organization of workspaces – including the collaborative ones – favour the integration and inclusion of women and more generally of minority and diverse groups? How can collaborative spaces' design help organizations achieve gender parity in business contexts? Which workplace characteristics do designer have to consider for improving the level of satisfaction and productivity of the diverse people working in these spaces? Do the new collaborative workplaces empower women to take on entrepreneurial and innovation opportunities?

As attention to gender spans many disciplines and fields, we recognize this literature review as an essential step for scholars interested in gender issues. Moreover, given the widespread attention to gender equality and diversity in the business community, we think that it can offer useful insights to executives, human resources managers, and managers in charge of corporate social responsibility who are increasingly called to design inclusive work practices.

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