# CREATING HYBRID WORK PRINCIPLES AND ACTIVITY-BASED OFFICE PRACTICES BY CONSENT DECISION-MAKING

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# INTRODUCTION

- The new way of working in hybrid is not 'one size fits all'

- The principles of hybrid work and office practices are more likely to succeed if they are carefully decided together with the personnel

- One suitable method for achieving this aim is consent-based decision-making, which is a pattern in Sociocracy 3.0 collection of tools

# CASE ORGANIZATION:
# UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI IT CENTER



Photo: Tero Kärkkäinen

- ~200 employees

- Share of remote work 60% vs office work 40% (Post-COVID)

- Traditionally, personnel used to work in private or small shared rooms with 1–2 roommates and assigned desks

- In August 2022 most of the workforce moved to a new activity-based office

- In the new office an assigned desk was granted only to those who

  - come to the office 4–5 times per week

  - had medical reasons for a special workspace

# NEED FOR NEW WAYS OF DECISION-MAKING

Stressful move to an activity-based flexi office

→ For most people: losing their assigned semi-private rooms
→ Considerable amount of distress before moving in
→ Concerns constantly raised already one year before the move

The management delegated the decision-making power to personnel

Decision-making power delegated over two domains:

→ Principles of hybrid work in general
→ Everyday practices in the new office building

# WHY THIS MATTERS, BASED ON RESEARCH

References
- Bababour and Rolfö, 2019
  https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2018.1516805

- Sirola et al, 2021
  https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2018.1516805

- Marzplan et al, 2022
  https://doi.org/10.1108/JFM-08-2021-0081

If we consider psychosocial risks → tailoring the workplace according to the demands from the workforce is beneficial
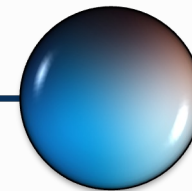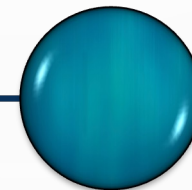
The concept of activity-based offices is solid. The shortcomings are in implementation and use of the premises.
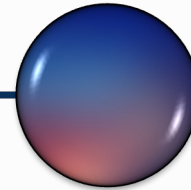
A tailored solution unique to each organization and considering individual differences increases the likelihood of success
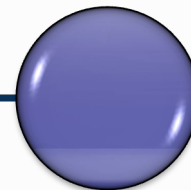
There is need for employee-created, explicit rules in activity-based offices

When people move from private offices to activity-based offices, extra care is needed

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# **SOCIOCRACY**

- It is essential to involve users to co-design in workplace development

- Sociocracy 3.0 is a method for co-creation of work practices

  - Defines a process for making participatory decisions in an organization

- **Consent decision-making:** decisions are made using a certain process

  - Deliberately inviting critical arguments, to expose hypotheses to critique  ← *Like in science !!!*

  - Needs and concerns are collected before and during decision-making process

  - To be qualified as an objection, an argument must reveal a *risk* in implementing the proposal or present an *improved version* of it

  - In contrast to a majority vote, even a single objection can overturn / amend a proposal

  - Ultimate authority shifts from people towards reasoned arguments

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# CONSENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

1. Agree on the organizational need (ie. "the driver")

2. Present proposed solution (incl. evaluation criteria, responsibilities etc)

3. Ensure the proposal is understood as it is currently written
   - Answer clarifying questions ("what do you mean by X?", not "why propose X?")

4. Brief initial reactions (no dialogue), to see proposal 'through each other's eyes'

5. Indicate & record potential objections

6. Reflect arguments one-by-one: see if an argument qualifies as objection
   - This may result in a recursive loop: counter-arguments are recorded and resolved in similar manner, until an argument is reached that hasn't been countered
   - If two people keep objecting to each other's arguments, pause the process and send them to find a common ground

7. If an objection was qualified, resolve it by amending the proposal
   - Go back to → Step 5: Indicate objections to the amended proposal

8. When no objections remain, celebrate reaching an agreement!

9. If time remains, concerns (="not quite objections") can be discussed – they are often useful as metrics or evaluation criteria
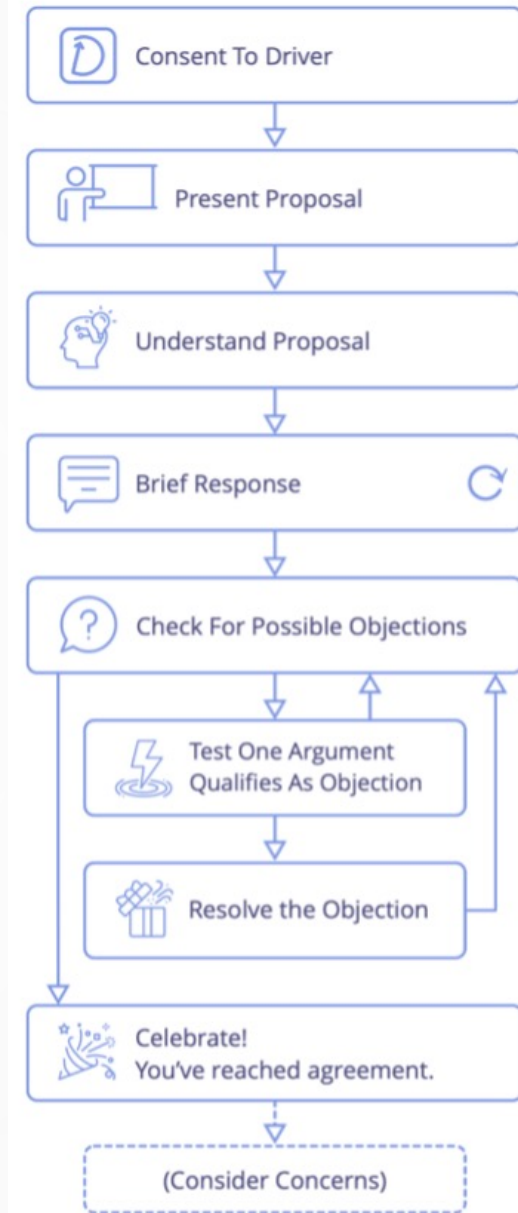


Image source: sociocracy30.org (CC-BY-SA-4.0)

# SOCIOCRACY IN PRACTICE

- Hybrid work & office policies co-creation succeeded

  - Multiple preliminary sessions for proposal forming (Spring 2022)

  - Four decision-making workshops, 36 policy decisions (June 2022)

- Examples of policies

  - Flexi areas based on activity zones instead of being dedicated to different teams.
    The zone rules were carefully crafted to solve the majority of the concerns about flexi desks.

  - Meetings shall be scheduled to start quarter past, to have a break between consecutive meetings

- Refining the policies: a process of continuous improvement

  - Within a year: two new iterations to the flexi zone practices, with minor adjustments

  - Consent decision-making has been used in follow-up iterations as well

  - We are also experimenting with asynchronous decision-making process online: mixed results

# RESULTS

We have collected feedback from multiple sources:

- Spontaneous feedback (multiple channels)

- Multi-locational work survey

- Internal survey in IT Center in November 2022

- Well-being survey 2023

- Interviews 2023

Findings across all sources were similar:

- There have been many concerns, but they have been heard and responded to

- Current situation is described with cautious optimism

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# THANK YOU!

# QUESTIONS?

Feel free to ask me questions
also after the presentation!

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