

Human Resources Policy & Teleworking

(Summary Report)

The implementation of teleworking within a company demands other ways of working and needs other ways of managing.

Part I – Other ways of working

A. The organisation

1. Strategic objectives

Flexibility: more time and resources available to the customer.

Work/private life balance: enable the employee to better organise travel, commuting between work and home, and work/private life balance.

E-solutions: e-work = e-business solution supporting telework will help the company that uses telework to enter the e-business world.

One of the added values of telework consists of meeting employee needs for more flexibility, to make work compatible with own lifestyle and achieve individual objectives with a greater sense of individual responsibility. At the same time it is expected to gain productivity, improve office organisation efficiency and prepare the company to new working practices.

2. Types of teleworkers

In the early stages, telework only addresses the jobs consisting of quantifiable and controllable tasks. The more telework becomes accepted and spreads as an alternative way of organising work, the more managers and professionals also start working remotely.

Telework structure may have different scopes:

- i. The occasional teleworker – mainly professionals and managers having laptops and taking advantage from working from home occasionally.
- ii. The part time teleworker who regularly works from his home base, up to 50% of the time. The employee receives some additional equipment but still has a personal office in the company. This is a voluntary decision from the employee but the company does assess the request to telework based first on business needs and secondly on employee's individual situation and ability.
- iii. The shared-office type of worker, who is visiting customers most of the time (say 80%).

- iv. The mobile worker who is regularly visiting customers. The mobile worker has no dedicated office in the company building and receives full equipment and support.

3. Communication and Corporate strategy

Day to day communication is done by e-mail; it is ideal for solving small problems and details. But meetings are still necessary for more complex problems. Sometimes video-conferencing is considered as an alternative. However, it poses some problems on the level of privacy. Especially the partner of the teleworker has objections against this use of video-conferencing as it may interfere with private life.

Particular care is to be paid to the protection of data and information. Confidential data and information, passwords should be protected in such a way no third party can access them. Security regulations and working practices should be strictly observed. Use of the equipment provided by the company for private purposes, and particularly for reading private or privately acquired programmes or storage media is not permitted. Classified paper waste may only be disposed of in the company office.

4. Meetings

At one company the minimum interval for having meetings is a fortnight. These meetings usually take 1 to 4 hours. Based on practical experience this company discovered that the quality of the meetings enhanced drastically because employees are focused on the meeting and transferring information during their weekly or bimonthly gatherings.

At another company, there is no specific regulation about scheduled team meeting but the policy foresees that working from home is only for personal work, and that meetings with business relationships are not allowed.

5. New style of management (see Part II)

The first line manager and the human resource manager are gaining in importance. They really play a key role and become coaches instead of supervisors. The focus is now on trust and outputs, not on control and instruction follow-up.

6. Secretarial contact/ Contact point support

The role of the administrative office also changes drastically. It becomes a message-centre and a virtual network. The secretary will become a liaison person and the support job becomes more technical and complicated (search of programs on CD-ROM, transfer of files from one network to another, changing configuration, encrypting of programs, etc.). It is obvious that a lot of attention has to be paid to training and educating these liaison people.

For the mobile workers, a specific helpdesk service is designed to ensure minimum disruption and maximum support to the employee while travelling or working from home, compared to the current level of service provided to office employees.

The helpdesk is helping the teleworker with any hardware or software problem. The company usually does maintenance of the equipment. Faulty appliances should be taken to the company premises for repair or replacement.

7. Central filing and documentation

In some companies, all training courses are electronically available and can be consulted by the teleworker. Also documentation that was stored in personal drawers before will more and more be centralised.

8. Work environment and tools

The working tools are continuously changing. The use of tools like groupware, e-mail increases dramatically. The electronic agenda must be open and updated at all times, to enhance visibility and enable customers/colleagues to reach the teleworker.

9. Image

Many companies fear for their image; in a teleworking environment, particular care has to be given to always providing an adequate response to customers.

B. The employee

In most firms the employees work 1 to 1.5 days a week at their respective office and spend the rest of the time working from home or at the client. Some firms also have employees that don't have an office anymore.

1. Work environment and tools at home

Of course you need the facilities to work properly, efficiently and effectively (ideally in a separate room). The company can offer its employees used or new office furniture so they could work ergonomically at home, without incurring additional costs. Laptops are the ideal solution for people who must be able to work from anywhere. Besides the office furniture all employees also need a big screen, a large keyboard, a printer and separate telematics facilities. Some firms will also cover the additional costs that were made to bring the alternative workplace at home to generally accepted standards regarding safety, ergonomic aspects and general working conditions. For safety reasons the company must ask its employees to install grounded outlets. Some firms first make a visit to the alternative workplace to see if it is in accordance with the legal safety regulations applicable in Belgium (note: as the Belgian law requires that houses are equipped with grounded outlets, no reimbursements for safety investments were foreseen in most of the firms).

2. Personal planning and organization (time management)

Some courses need to be given to give the employee a good awareness of what will be the impact of telework. These courses also will help the person to maintain or even improve his productivity. Very important is a course in time-management and personal planning. Other useful courses are technical trainings on how to best use new communication tools. The introduction of teleworking mostly also implies changes related to reporting, management of projects, reporting lines, and so on. Making the people aware of this is a must.

3. Working hours

Most employees working in a telework environment can decide themselves how they can organise their time as they think most suitable for their customers, taking into account existing working time regulations. But very important is the fact that everybody has the strict obligation to update their agenda so the client/colleague/secretary can check the availability of the person. The balance between work done at home and work done at the office is sometimes firstly agreed between employee and manager, based on the business needs and the type of job.

4. Self discipline

When working at home it is very important that the employee has enough self-discipline to work productively at home without giving in at potential distractions. Complying with deadlines remains very important.

5. Working alone and getting advises and support

It is important for the employee that he can get support from the head-office as well as for technical issues as other issues like personal advice... An adequate helpdesk who can help the teleworker with any hardware or software problem is needed. The maintenance of the equipment is mostly done in the company itself.

6. Freedom of choice

Some big firms also offer the possibility for employees, who don't like or don't have the possibility to work at home, to work at one of the other premises of the firm (so called satellite offices). Most employees have the choice of doing teleworking or not. Therefore, business support functions need to put facilities at the disposal of teleworkers, such as remote service centres for supporting technical logistics, for answering human resources questions (such as the European HR help desk organised by IBM) etc....

A special category can sometimes be the sales force, which are regularly visiting customers and/or distributors. At some firms they don't have an office anymore so they have to work from an alternative work place.

7. Motivation

The motivational factor in telework is very important for the employee. He must keep pleasure in his work. The feeling of isolation must be avoided. Good people management remains an important factor.

8. Reducing stress

One can say that stress levels reduce drastically when traffic jams can be avoided. Also the possibility to work at home without any disturbance can have a positive effect on stress.

9. Separate professional / family life

There are two important aspects here:

Firstly see that you set up your home office (separate room) in such a way that you are least disturbed by family members when you are at work. Also strict agreements between the family members can help.

Secondly try to separate your family life from your job. Strict company rules are necessary so an employee cannot be called when he is on holiday (there is a need for telecommunication equipment dedicated for the work).

Note: Technologies like video-conferencing on a day-to-day basis can sometimes generate resistance from the partners of the employees.

Part II – Other ways of managing

A. Human Resources Management

Implementing a telework project has several impacts on "classic" HR practices.

1. Recruitment

No extra tests are performed in the recruitment procedure. Telework can be seen as having a positive connotation when recruiting new people as well as retaining existing employees.

2. Education and training

In some company, every employee gets a 2 day training session in tools (hard and software) and if wanted/needed he can follow extra modules in time management etc.

In another company, an awareness session of homework related issues, is organised before any new teleworker starts the new working practice. Such session includes information regarding safety and security aspects of working from home, technical explanation on the telecommunication connections and the IT environment, and advises regarding behavioural aspects and time management. For the full mobile workers, such session is more thorough.

3. Performance evaluation

Management has to change its style. Employees have to be evaluated on their real outputs and not on attendance. In different companies, the tool used for performance follow-up and assessment is the 360 degrees feedback, which means that peers, colleagues, subordinates, superiors and possibly outside contacts such as customers are giving their view on the individual's performance.

Measuring the outputs does performance measurements. The targets/objectives are determined in writing by the employee together with the first-line manager.

4. Career Management

Employees sometimes have the idea of "out of sight, out of mind" when working at home. They fear they will not be taken into consideration for promotion or career development. The management must clarify the career opportunities, including for the teleworkers if there is a difference. In different companies, there is no distinction made between teleworkers and office workers. It also has to be made clear from the start that some positions are not intended for teleworkers or vice versa.

5. Mobility and relocation

Employees choose where they want to work and how. It has however to be agreed and understood beforehand with the first line manager.

The workplace location must conform to the safety and ergonomic regulations in force within the company. It does not however have to be in a lockable room, as long as confidential data and passwords can be kept from third persons by other means.

6. Labour contract

Telework does not imply new formalities. The employee usually signs an agreement regarding the use of IT equipment, and in some occasions he formally adheres to the telework policy in place within the company.

Teleworkers do not change status, i.e. all internal working rules and policies do continue to apply, with the exception of the clauses specifically relating to work in the office while the employee is working at home. Adopting the telework program does not represent a substantial modification of the employee contract, which continues to be fully applicable.

7. Salary policy and cost reimbursement

There is no specific salary policy for teleworkers. Regarding cost reimbursement, in one company, the part time teleworkers receive an annual allowance of 125 EUR to cover additional minor installation costs and/or any particular cost generated by spending part of the time at home. The mobile worker (who has no company office anymore) receives up to 2000 EUR to cover installation costs and up to 600 EUR per year for operational costs. All communications costs are directly billed to the company.

8. Union Representation

In one company, everything concerning the work council is published on Intranet. In another company, employees can consult a directory of documents concerning labour laws and pension. They can also consult their own Pension plan.

9. Protection of private life

It is important that the employee as well as the employer respect the boundaries between professional and private life. It means the employee cannot be called at home outside of normal office hours and during holidays, unless specifically agreed beforehand.

B. Change Management

Special attention must be paid to resistance against "change".

1. Company culture

The customers may or may not be aware that the employees work at home. They just must always receive the optimal level of response.

2. Team building

Team spirit becomes more important in a telework environment. It also keeps the motivation up. Regular departmental meetings as well as cross-departmental meetings and regular social gatherings help to maintain this group feeling.

3. Empowerment versus control

The new management style doesn't really control the employee. The employee is given more power and will be measured on real outputs. The basis is trust. People determine their objective themselves ("Personal Business Commitment").

4. Mentoring

Young and new employees cannot start by themselves. You have to organise the welcoming and training of these people. They must feel the team spirit, corporate culture... In some company, a new employee gets appointed a mentor who will guide advice and train him through the first stages. Awareness-sessions of what will be the impact of telework on the person are important for employees who start doing telework.

5. Communication

Managers and employees must absolutely know how to best apply all modern communication tools like GSM, dial in, fax, and answering machine...

Teleworking is new working practices made feasible by:

- The reducing cost and increasing performance of computers and telecommunications;
- The ready availability of tools and services that support open electronic networking;
- Increasing willingness by employers, employees and self employed people to explore innovative ways to achieve business and personal goals.

Telework is made attractive by:

- Increasing pressure on industry to reduce costs while improving levels of customer service;
- Increasing concern about the environment and especially the impact of roads and cars;
- The emergence of a networked economy, in which telework and teletrade will play central roles;
- The shift from "paid employment" to "work opportunities", with a rise in self-employment and part time employment, and increasing dependence on entrepreneurs, very small firms and "micro enterprises".

An understanding of telework is now essential to the strategies of enterprises and the careers of individuals.
