

HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION

CASE STUDY

ECI



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Abstract

One of the ways to cope with the ever increasing demands from employers and employees regarding flexibility and quality of life is to implement adequate information and communication systems. This Dutch publisher implemented a tele work system that generated flexibility for both workforce and employers. Working at home gave the workers the possibility to combine private care tasks with their work, making them more productive. A carefully prepared implementation process made sure that employees and employers mutually benefited from the flexible tele work system.

HI-RES Case Study: Dutch Publisher

Sector

Publishing - Nace Code DE.22

Key Words

Organisational design; implementation; tele work at home; work division; flexibility

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1. Background Information

This Dutch publisher is a daughter of a big media concern, which has an 80% stock in ECI, while several Dutch publishers own the rest.

The publisher is Holland's biggest book club with almost 600 employees. Being a book club it acquires members. These members get a catalogue a few times per year with a huge assortment of books, cd's and video's. Members can order from the catalogue. This is mostly done by telephone, but it is also possible to order on-line or via the postal services. Members can also visit the stores. The publisher's market consists of private consumers in The Netherlands and the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Important activities within the company are:

- programming and purchasing the assortment
- acquiring new members
- storing and distributing books, cd's and videos
- store sales to members
- processing incoming and outgoing telephone calls (orders, complaints, service)

The primary process is controlled by management, which is supported by the Marketing, HRM, Finance and ICT departments.

2. Drivers for Change

Already by the beginning of the 1980s written communications between members and the publisher began to be replaced by tele communication. This shift required a new kind of work organisation and the application of new ICT. Moreover, although the publisher wanted to hire more personnel, it lacked office space. The sector management therefore decided to design and implement a tele work system because it was now possible for staff to work from home. The design was first tested in a pilot consisting of 4 employees.

Other foreseen benefits were:

- increased flexibility: tele workers can be easily deployed in peak hours
- increased productivity

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

The change process had two main aspects: technical and organisational.

The technical change basically dealt with installing all necessary equipment into the homes of the tele workers. The organisational change, which took from 1990 to 1998, went quite well for the following reasons:

- the implementation started with a pilot consisting of 4 employees. This way the first experience with work at home was gained.
- the choice to whether work at the office or at home was up to the employees from the beginning
- the tele marketeers working at home were placed within one department. This way special attention could be paid to specific issues.
- the tele marketeers working at home were given the same rights and duties as the employees at the office
- the individual wants and needs of the workers at home were taken into account as much as possible. Working times were tailor-made for each employee.

4. Obstacles to Change

There was a huge obstacle to change – the high cost of technology. In addition the technical realisation required enormous effort. The publisher is still improving the technical systems in order to make the workplace at home as comfortable and effective as possible. The demands upon a proper workplace design and the technical assets at the workplace were quite expensive. One mayor problem is that technical problems cannot be solved immediately at home. This situation puts high demands on the system-design.

5. Risk Analysis

Both the physical and the temporal border between work and private life vanish. This could cause feelings of alienation from the social system of the organisation. The publisher tried to avoid this problems by arranging regular meetings at the company, and weekly visits of a manager to the homes (=workplaces) of the workers.

6. Benefits of Change

The publisher was able to increase the number of employees easily without having to increase office space. Moreover these flexi workers come from a loyal group of workers who can easily be deployed in case of unexpected peaks in production. Furthermore tele workers are more productive that the regular office workers.

For employees with care tasks at home (children) this flexible way of working enables them to combine work and care tasks. Employees with mobility problems (physical disorders) also benefit from this way of working at home.

Conclusions

The success of tele working cannot be seen separately from the general ambiance in the company. Interviews in the company demonstrate that employees and management at the Dutch publisher have quite informal working relationships. Many employees have already worked for many years at the company, creating an atmosphere of 'everybody knows everybody'. The company asks for optimal performance from its employees but, in return, tries to satisfy their individual wants and needs. The managers at the publisher have formulated the following symbiosis: "The interests of the employer mostly are parallel to the interests of the employee. If a tele marketeer enjoys his/her work, he/she will treat our clients nicely, which benefits the performance of our company".

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