IMPULSE PAPER

The New Normal? The World of Work after the Coronavirus Pandemic

Two sides of the same coin ...

The new world of work is full of contrasts. On the one hand, we travel much less and move around in a smaller space than before. On the other hand, video-conferencing tools offer a fast and cheap solution for staying in touch with others: distance is no longer an issue.

This paper illustrates key aspects of the world of work in large german manufacturing companies that may be undergoing long-term changes as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the same trends are emerging across companies, the advantages and disadvantages must be weighed up in each individual trend. This publication presents the pros and cons of selected trends in condensed form.

Home working

The experiences of the Working Group support the findings of numerous studies undertaken since the start of the pandemic: remote workers' **productivity** is as at least as high or even higher than it was at the office. Employees working from home tend to work longer and more often during non-standard hours. This is particularly the case when they need to reconcile gainful employment with childcare and home schooling. Due to the restriction of face-to-face contact and the introduction of stricter hygiene measures at the workplace, the frequency of common cold infections – and thus sick days – have also been significantly reduced. Virtual backgrounds in videoconferences protect privacy at home. The acceptance of video conferencing tools is increasing, along with the weariness of taking part in these virtual calls – the infamous "Zoom fatigue". A workday punctuated by back-to-back video conferences increases the perceived tempo of the daily work routine. A more compressed and fast-paced workday is often mentioned as being part and parcel of virtual working.

After more than a year of the pandemic, work stations at home are still being described as makeshift or temporary. There is an increasing lack of ergonomic desks, chairs and separate monitors. Employees rarely have a separate room in their homes in which they can work. The boundary between working time and leisure time is blurred. Old routines of togetherness at the workplace have been visibly displaced by a monotonous isolation, which workers can at best counteract by learning how to self-direct and regulate their own workday routines. Whether it was the chats at the photocopier or the coffee machine, the office grapevine or a quick hello between meetings – most employees miss the short, often spontaneous, informal and cross-departmental interaction with their colleagues. Now that this interaction is missing, intrinsic motivation and identification with the organisation are all the more important. Virtual coffee breaks and self-help groups among colleagues – some of which have emerged as grassroots movements on the initiative of employees – are one answer to the lack of face-to-face interaction. One thing is certain, however: even after the pandemic, working from home will remain an integral part of everyday life for many employees.

"A workday punctuated by back-to-back video conferences increases the perceived tempo of the daily work routine."

A new role for the office

There are many reasons why employees want to continue working from home at least two or three days a week after the pandemic. In some cases, they have realised that they can work better and with less disturbance at home. Commuters benefit in particular from the time saved. Organisations – both in Germany and abroad – can also use these new circumstances to restructure or reduce their office space in order to save on high rental costs. Individual work stations can be used alternately by different employees ("desk sharing") or redesigned as creative spaces. The office is increasingly becoming a place for **creative teamwork**, discussion, brainstorming and intensive exchange.

"The office is increasingly becoming a place for creative teamwork, discussion, brainstorming and intensive exchange."

Remote management

As a result of the shift of work to the private sphere, many companies have had to make cultural adaptations – shifting from a widespread emphasis on **attendance** to a results-driven culture that gives employees more autonomy in shaping their work and daily routines. Against this background, we find that **management** in particular gains new meaning.

This cultural change relies on mutual trust between managers and employees. Managers can contribute significantly to the building of trust when they learn to act with the right mix of **empathy** and **leadership**. This contrasts with a purely authoritarian leadership style. Whenever there is a lack of trust between employees and their superiors, friction is more likely to arise in the virtual working environment. Since the pandemic has ushered in a paradigm shift towards remote leadership, relationships based on trust have become more important than ever before.

Increasing employee autonomy also leads to tension with the recording of working time – a necessary, but not always technically feasible or accounted for exercise. Thus, old questions are being raised again, such as the flexibilisation of the maximum daily working time and new remuneration regulations for overtime and work at weekends.

Intense debates on the topic of performance control sometimes arise in this area of governance, which has until now been regulated primarily through legislation. The pandemic means that methods and instruments of control and management have needed to be adapted to the context of virtual communication. A "one size fits all" application of "analogue" leadership methods onto the digital space simply does not work, posing challenges for both managers and employees. In particular, employees who are usually motivated by the physical presence of their superiors and colleagues at the office, and those who structure their working day by taking breaks together, often find it difficult to maintain a rhythm structured by intensive work phases and regular breaks while working from home. At the same time, the cultural change has made modern managers realise that leadership is not only "top-down". Rather, it is important to perceive management as a kind of coaching, delivered in partnership with the employees. Against this background, it is to be hoped that the pandemic has introduced a modern era of leadership culture.

Equal opportunity

It is now undisputed that remote working and working from home are possible on a broad scale. Many companies have been able to equip a large part of their workforce with technical equipment and server access at relatively short notice, making mobile working possible. The purchase of software licences and IT departments' outstanding support have created a virtual communication space for the successful relocation of a large part of our interactions.

In order to contain the pandemic, employees working in the support services of manufacturing companies were generally sent home to work. However, this was hardly possible for those working directly on the shop floor. Provided that a slump in orders did not lead to short-time working, these employees continued to go to work. Given the strict hygiene regulations introduced onto the shop floor, these workers often perceived their home office colleagues as enjoying special or better treatment, which is also reflected in the differences between the types of technical equipment provided to each group. While laptops were not absolutely necessary for shop floor workers before the pandemic, the current lack of company email addresses or company devices for this employment group is a major hurdle. This is of particular relevance to communication with the works council and trade unions, as well as the ability to participate in works council meetings during the pandemic – but also to a company's general communication with all of its employees. **A "new normal" based on the principles of equal opportunity therefore means that all employees should be equipped with adequate technology.**

Ability to identify with the employer

The experience of the pandemic has shown that recruiting new staff without face-to-face contact often works better than expected. Digital interviews, onboarding and getting to know colleagues via video conferencing required quick rethinking, adaptation and, above all, creativity. Some companies offer special formats for informal, friendly exchanges, such as wine tastings, digital onboarding for new trainees, virtual meetings over an "after-work beer" or exclusive film screenings.

Newly hired employees working from home need closer support, at least at the beginning, in order to get to know work processes and to find their way within the company. In addition, they must be provided with technical access and work equipment. Time delays in providing access and equipment and patchy support lead to frustration and possibly hinder their identification with their employer in the long term. Without identification with the company, especially while working remotely from the office, there is a fear that the loyalty of newly hired employees will remain weak. The question of whether loyalty to the company is strong enough for the long term can probably only be answered in the next few months.

We'll see ...

The coronavirus pandemic has turned the whole working world into an ad hoc real-life laboratory, where home offices, remote management and video conferencing are the rule and not the exception.

The long-term effects of this experiment are not yet clear. Many questions remain unanswered at present. How does digital onboarding affect an employee's ability to identify with their company? What will be the impact on occupational health and safety?

A return to "normality" is difficult to imagine and suggests a stability that did not exist even before the pandemic. On the contrary, we must assume that we are in a constant state of change.

We have to ask ourselves how we want to go down a gear; decompress our busy workdays and structure work in a way that promotes health. What skills do we need to move confidently in an uncertain, ever-changing world?

To find answers, we need to break out of old ways of thinking and re-think work in a spirit of collaboration with employees. This requires courage, confidence and a positive attitude towards change. It requires a new culture.

PARTICIPATING COMPANIES

ABB | Airbus Operations GmbH | Festo Didactic | Merck KGaA | OPTIMA packaging group Gmbh | SAP SE | Siemens AG

The following compilation of arguments is based on interviews with members of the working group "work, education and training" of germany's plattform industrie 4.0 from the spring of 2021

www.plattform-i40.de