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Die flexible Führungskraft

Strategien in einer grenzenlosen Arbeitswelt

12 Abstract

Practical experience within enterprises shows that flexible working arrangements are on the rise. Employees are increasingly working on a mobile basis, from home or at alternate locations, or are interacting in globally networked teams. The arguments for such practices are clear: They enable employees to better reconcile their private and professional lives, while companies benefit through improved collaborative capabilities, as well as through comprehensive and generally better cooperation and responsiveness. Integrated IT platforms play a significant role in supporting the technical feasibility of these arrangements.

To implement such programs, businesses and enterprise decision-makers must ask which employees this work concept is appropriate for, to what extent, and what risks it may entail given the company's specific conditions. The selection of employees in particular – as well as the underlying criteria – is in this regard often a crucial subject of negotiation between works councils and enterprise management teams, along with the extent of and the right to such flexibility. Not infrequently, the middle-management level is deemed to be a restraining or “obstructionist” stratum; these managers are seen as being unsure how they can fulfill their individual management responsibilities for their employees in the absence of close and direct daily contact.

Managers are thus generally accused of refusing to allow such arrangements. Our observation is otherwise: Managers are often not sufficiently taken into account, and are not perceived as a specific interest group in achieving the objectives of flexibility. However, they are as a rule the ones who decide on the extent, nature and design of flexible working arrangements, or at least have a significant impact on these factors.

The focus of our study is explicitly on the changes bringing enterprise managers into the borderless working world. The current study, based on a survey of 2,500 managers and 40 in-depth interviews, shows how daily managerial tasks shape themselves in a flexible working world, how flexibility is in fact experienced, what the realization of these arrangements means for managers, and how they assess flexibility's effects.

The study shows that managers are not an “obstructionist” population, but in the vast majority of cases are in fact active supporters and primary drivers of a working environment that accommodates employees’ wishes for a better reconciliation of professional and private lives. Importantly, they themselves work to a very large degree under these arrangements. But they must counteract the centrifugal forces of flexibility, and are in this regard faced with significantly increased requirements in terms of communication and its intensity. Explicit and ongoing communications are the engine of smooth cooperation and the bond that creates team cohesion. Communication was and remains the most important managerial task – and this will be all the more true as work relationships become increasingly virtual. This communications and informational work must serve many purposes; it must coordinate, orient and provide information, but it must also foster social relationships, attention and awareness. Employees want to “be seen” – with regard to their work performance and value to the enterprise, but naturally also as people with social needs and individual backgrounds. Managers in the borderless working world thus find themselves thrust strongly into the role of pace-setters and coordinators of the virtual work streams, in order to keep the flow of information going.

In the future, it will be important to clear away enough free space for these managers that they can develop their own potential for strategic orientation, for networking within the enterprise, and for the creation of conditions necessary for their employees’ development. Given the competitive environment and the ongoing demographic change, this represents an important challenge.