

The Lived Experience, Working Life in the 21st Century

By

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Remote Work Update

The Corona pandemic has led to a surge in digital work. Home offices have gone from being the exception to the norm; in particular, the measures taken to combat the COVID-19 pandemic led to a very large number of workers, especially knowledge workers, being forced to work from home. In this sense, the percentage of people working from home in Switzerland has doubled from 25% to 50% (<https://www2.deloitte.com/ch/en/pages/press-releases/articles/remote-working-most-employees-want-to-go-back-to-the-office-after-the-pandemic-but-not-as-often-as-before.html>).

A study by Rundstedt shows that most companies surveyed have not introduced smart working, however, but teleworking, which means they have simply moved the same processes that previously took place in the office to a remote location. (https://www.rundstedt.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Whitepaper_Smart-Working_2021_DE-1.pdf). Remote working is thus often understood as a technical phenomenon rather than an organisational, cultural, or management issue. This was not particularly surprising at first, because at the beginning of the pandemic, virtually no one was prepared for the widespread introduction of home-office work. The research suggests, however, that since the lockdown began, less has changed than one might suspect. Many work processes continue to run synchronously, unlike the usual practice in location- and time-independent remote work settings by means of asynchronous communication.

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A study by the HWZ Zurich University of Applied Sciences conducted interviews with 10 Swiss companies of different sizes from various industries, giving a differentiated and encouraging picture of the opportunities that could be exploited with remote work, but also of the challenges that must be overcome in the process (HWZ, 2022, Remote Work - Opportunities and Challenges of Hybrid Work in Swiss Companies). We would like to describe this picture in the following paragraphs.

In the post-pandemic era, the increasing prevalence of remote work will give companies access to international and more flexible talent pools located outside of the companies' main markets. However, this inevitably leads to higher competition in an international labour market. To successfully combat the shortage of skilled workers, it is essential for decision makers, managers, and employees alike to have a high level of affinity with remote work issues.

The HWZ study clearly shows that almost all the companies surveyed have had good experiences with hybrid working, a combination of remote work and office work. They have

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found that neither extreme – 100% Office Work or 100% Remote Work works well enough. A complete focus on remote work often leads to problems in collaboration within and between teams. In the case of exclusive office work, negative effects on employer attractiveness are to be expected if work is only permitted in the office, although remote work would be possible to a reasonable extent. In addition, in this case the potential productivity benefits of well-organised remote work cannot be exploited. For this reason, all the companies surveyed – with one exception – have decided to rely on a hybrid combination of remote work and office work in the future. Technical and organisational adaptations have already been implemented or are in the planning stage. These can include a new design of the office space with special zones for deep work, collaboration, and project work. Others have introduced innovative collaboration tools like wonder.me or agile working methods. However, this also shows that not all companies have yet initiated the upskilling and reskilling of employees and managers regarding their workflows and workstyles.

The fears that hybrid work would be lived out as a virtual form of the traditional office process with a lot of presence due to the pandemic have been partially confirmed. The true benefits of remote work with asynchronous and location-independent performance of work are not yet universally recognised as an opportunity. This shift could enable a new style and attitude in management but would also presuppose a high degree of autonomy on the part of employees. Another interesting argument concludes that the work environment impacts creativity which is crucial for innovation and market success. Skilled employees working in remote settings benefit the company and enjoy a higher degree of autonomy, and their workflows result in an increase of individual creativity.

Positive experiences with remote work will presumably only gain momentum when managers themselves act as role models to exemplify the new possibilities of hybrid work. It would be important not to view remote work as a purely technical or organisational phenomenon, but to treat it as an organisational, cultural, and management issue. The pressure on companies



to introduce hybrid work models will intensify further due to the shortage of skilled workers and the desire of many job seekers for work-life balance. Good employer branding regarding flexible forms of work will offer an indispensable competitive advantage for many companies in the 'war for talent'.

Remote work will also have a major impact on tourism. There are already more than 40 countries that offer a so-called remote work visa, making it possible, for example, in Portugal to stay in the country for up to five years while working remotely. Switzerland is one of the most competitive countries in the world, due to its excellent education system, political stability, and very high innovative strength. In addition to these

classic factors, however, the degree of digitisation of companies and the willingness of management, executives, and employees to transform are also of central importance, and here the Swiss Remote Work Competence Center can offer professional support and networking.

When considering remote work as an organisational development issue, a frame of reference is needed against which possible measures can be assessed. One dimension of the framework is the concept of 'psychological safety' which has been studied in positive psychology research for many years. Psychological safety describes how individuals perceive the consequences of their interpersonal risk behaviour in a specific context. Particularly

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in situations with unclear hierarchical subordinations, or where employees have a high degree of autonomy and have not been systematically prepared for these forms of work, individuals perceive an increased risk of revealing their true self in this collaboration. On the other hand, creativity in collaboration is required in these situations, as well as the ability to question the status quo and develop new solutions on this basis (<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305>). Studies also show that having access to a safe environment with regulation of privacy when working remotely, can lead to better concentration and increased creative output on an individual level (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00140130512331319409>). Due to the sudden, unforeseeable, and widespread introduction of the home office as part of the pandemic-related measures, most of the employees affected have not been prepared either personally, structurally or culturally for the requirements of remote work. The current wave of massive resignations in the USA, which particularly affects remote workers, shows a development that is also imminent in Europe if effective measures are not taken quickly in personnel development.

In concrete terms, this means that companies should accompany the introduction or, in the case of the pandemic, the normalisation of remote work with measures to increase

psychological safety. Both managers and employees must specifically address the three most important pillars of psychological safety – respect, trust, and appreciation – in further training, team building and, above all, in the selection of managers.

A second dimension of the framework is formed by the principles for agile working and agile leadership because of its relevance to the innovative capacities of companies. Employees who are not used to working with agile methods such as Scrum or Design Thinking must be trained in these and provided with competent support in their application, at least at the beginning when working remotely on a team level. This applies even more to the preparation of managers for agile leadership methods such as Cinefin, Catalyst Leadership or the application of the 'Agile Onion'.

On the one hand, anyone who sees the home office as a continuation of the same activity in the same structures at a different work location ignores the opportunities inherent in greater autonomy and agile processes. On the other hand, they accept the risk that employees who work remotely will feel excluded from internal communication flows and, for this reason alone, experience a less strong connection with the company, which in turn promotes the intention to leave, unless the managers learn how to engage employees working remotely.





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