

Here today, gone tomorrow – or the new normal?

In 2020, many employees started working from home with little or no lead time. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a boom in working from home in Switzerland. But how should companies deal with this issue after the pandemic?

Background

According to a study, 28% of Switzerland's working-age population worked from home for at least half a day per week before the pandemic. Of the remaining 72%, a third said they would be happy to do so in future¹. A survey in the summer of 2020 showed that more than 70% of workers aged 30 to 50 would like to work from home more often after the pandemic, and over 60% of younger and older workers also expressed this wish². Since working from home has a positive effect on productivity, satisfaction and work-life balance, SWICA believes that it should continue to be an integral part of any modern business. However, as well as advantages, there are also risks, especially as regards team development and employee isolation. This makes systematic occupational health management all the more important in order to protect health, satisfaction, performance and productivity in the long term.

Facts

- Many employees would like to work from home more often in the future.
- Productivity and job satisfaction increase when we work from home.
- Eliminating the need to travel to work leads to fewer days lost due to mental health issues.
- Working from home makes it easier to combine work life and family life.
- A combination of working from home and working at the office looks to be the way of the future.
- Combining home working with working in the office (e.g. two to three days each) makes sense.

Opportunities

Companies which offer their employees the opportunity to work from home are meeting a real need^{1, 2}. Flexibility and work-life balance are improved, and commuting time is reduced. Short commute times have a positive impact on general health. Commuters are more likely to suffer from backache, headaches, fatigue, sleep disorders and gastrointestinal problems. Work days lost due to depression and other mental health issues are significantly higher than for non-commuters⁴. The mental and physical discomfort increases proportionally with distance and travel time. More than half of workers who worked at home for at least one day a week in the spring reported that they were more creative and productive and better able to balance work and family life⁵. Striking the right balance between work and family life significantly reduces stress, not least because most people were able to use the time that they would have spent commuting for private pursuits. This reduction in stress had positive health impacts. Employees are not only healthier and more satisfied, but also more productive. Companies can use workplaces and office space more efficiently and increase their attractiveness as employers. Companies which recognise the added value of working from home and aspire to combine working from home with working in the office will be rewarded with increased productivity, healthier employees and reduced office workplace requirements.

Risks

The biggest risks of working from home are inadequate leadership qualities, the accumulation of overtime and employee isolation. As recent studies have shown, job satisfaction and productivity in people working from home peak after about two and a half days. After three days, satisfaction and productivity drop⁶. Three days of working from home plus two days of working in the office per week, primarily for purposes of social interaction, therefore make sense⁷. Many employees miss the social interaction that office life brings⁵. However, it is important to consider the needs and lifestyles of the individuals in question. Managers also have to be trained and sensitised on how to manage at a distance. If this expertise is lacking, the health-promoting aspects of working from home are put at risk. Constant control, permanent availability and a lack of trust act as stressors and put a strain on employees. Another risk is the ergonomic set-up of the workplace. If employees do not have a suitable place to work, the positive effects fizzle out, and working time is likely to be lost. Ergonomics training counteracts this risk. In addition, clear rules are needed regarding working hours, breaks and availability, as remote workers sometimes remain available in their leisure time, write emails and do not take breaks.

Conclusion

Working from home should be introduced as an addition to normal office working by enabling both forms of working to coexist. Employees and their individual needs are central. Not everyone can perform to their full potential in the office or at home. Working from home has been shown to increase productivity and job satisfaction, especially by eliminating the need to commute to work, leaving more time for family and private life. Companies can reduce their costs for office space and general infrastructure and position themselves as modern employers who have recognised the requirements of today. Combining two or three days of home-working with a similar number of days at the office reduces the risk of isolation and enables social interaction. In order to implement working at home successfully, managers must be trained, ergonomic offerings must be developed, and clear rules regarding working hours, break culture and availability must be defined.

Sources

¹ Deloitte 2016

² Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute 2020

³ WorkAnywhere 2013

⁴ TK Die Techniker 2020

⁵ Gfs.Bern 2020

⁶ Golden, T. D. 2006

⁷ Schulze, H. 2011

OHM offers with a focus on working from home

Thanks to its wide range of prevention management services, SWICA is able to meet the individual needs of its corporate clients in the area of home working. In addition to holistic consultation services (including analysis), there are individual measures relating to specific topics. These are delivered as presentations, workshops or webinars which are geared to the needs of managers and/or staff working from home:

- Ergonomics
- Nutrition and exercise
- Presence and absence management
- Healthy change management
- Resilience
- Stress
- Preventing burnout
- Digital detox
- Sleep
- Healthy immune system
- HRV measurement

All these services are delivered by experienced specialists at the customer's location or online as webinars. In order to boost the long-term effect of the contents, the events can be supplemented with e-learning and/or "FollowMe" offers. With "FollowMe", participants are sent messages after the workshop or webinar to encourage them to review the content. They also receive tips on how to apply what they have learned.