



Creating proximity across distances – Management tools to support performance and employee well-being.

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CREATING PROXIMITY ACROSS DISTANCES –
MANAGEMENT TOOLS TO SUPPORT
PERFORMANCE AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

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One consequence of organizations' development and adaptation to societal changes and technological developments is distance work where time or geography separate employees and managers (Fisher & Fisher 2001). Distance work and management occur at different locations, such as from home (telework), in satellite offices (intra-organizational work), or at the customers' or clients' locations (inter-organizational work) (Verburg et al. 2013; Cropper et al. 2008). In inter-organizations, distance employees are employed by one company (the provider) but work at a different company (the customer) (Cropper et al. 2008; Hinds & Kiesler 2002) ; here, the customer's working conditions influence the employees. Distance work and management are a characteristic in various types of knowledge work (Fisher & Fisher, 2001; Jacobs, 2004; Li & Scullion, 2006) where work-related stress is still an unsolved problem. When either time or geography separate managers from their employees, it becomes more difficult to ensure both the employees psychosocial work environment and organizational performance.

This paper explores distance managers' preventive activities that ensure both employee well-being and performance across distances as part of their daily management. The study contributes to the discussion on management of prevention of work-related stress in the context of distance work.

We applied a case study approach to explore the tools distance managers make use of to ensure employee wellbeing and organizational performance. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews of both distance managers and their employees working in two types of knowledge work (Alvesson 2004) i.e. specialized manufacturing and consultancies in four inter-organizational distance work places.

The researchers conducted 17 semi-structured interviews including questions about distance management practices and applied tools along with distance work experiences, especially regarding employee wellbeing and organizational performance. The dataset from the four companies consists of one manager from each company together with up to four of their distance workers located at their customers' companies. The researchers coded the transcribed interviews using template analysis (King 1998) where the research question determined three a priori codes for the data analysis.

This study shows that physical and social working conditions at the work sites, both nationally and internationally, directly affect the employees' wellbeing and thus their performance. As inter-organizational distance work deprives the employees with the ability to meet face-to-face with their manager the distance managers' primary concern therefore is whether the employees perform as expected and according to plan and how they, as managers, can create a sense of proximity and belonging to the company. Dialogue with the distance workers is a core activity and conducted via Skype, phone, Lync or email. The frequency varies from weekly to monthly calls depending on the type of employee and the given situation. Focus in the calls is either on project related issues, which need to be solved, or the performance and well-being

of the employees. The manager typically initiates the calls.

Beside the direct contact via Skype, Lync and mobile phones, the managers also apply other management tools and practices to ensure well-being and monitoring performance. The managers thus conduct a systematic monitoring of their contact with their employees (who have they talked with and when). They also make use of ongoing individual follow-up surveys focusing on both well-being and performance to support the distance managers' direct contact with their employees and to monitor changes in either of the two areas.

In the direct contact with the employees they focus first on employee's well-being and then on the performance (content) acknowledging that their well-being determines their performance. The dual focus is important as the distance managers recognize that the customers' working conditions have a direct impact on the performance of the distance workers. Besides the direct contact with their employees, the study also shows that continuous expectancy alignment among the customer, employee, project manager and distance manager is an important tool to ensure both performance and well-being. Finally, the template analysis showed that distance workers highly value time to talk and management capabilities i.e. the listening, understanding and/or the acknowledging manager as ways to ensure their well-being – prevent them from being stressed.

Acknowledging the impact distance has on management of prevention of work-related stress in the context of distance work future organizational intervention research should also consider the distance (time &/or geography) between the managers and employees but also who is responsible for the employees' work environment.

The study shows that distance managers apply more than just traditional IT communication tools in their management practice, and that well-being has first priority in the talks with the distance workers besides the focus on performance. The employees however value time to talk and management capabilities like the ability to listen, understand and acknowledge that good working conditions are a prerequisite for their well-being and consequently their performance.

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