

Integrata Unternehmensberatung GmbH: Telework Pioneer in Germany: SME Case 15

Overview

Integrata Unternehmensberatung was founded in 1964. Services include consultancy and training measures in the areas of organisation and information technology. The company was transformed into a public company in 1989. Individual spheres of activity were split into subsidiary firms over the next few years: Integrata Unternehmensberatung GmbH and Integrata Training AG. The Integrata Group currently employs approximately 750 employees. The registered office is located in Tübingen with further branches widely distributed throughout Germany. The company is also present in Austria and Switzerland.

The new work model telework has been known at Integrata since the mid 1980s. The company was one of the German pioneers in this area. Dr Wolfgang Heilmann, founder of the company and advocate of telework, developed a teleworking concept that has experienced only a few changes up to the present day. Approximately 200 employees work as mobile or alternating teleworkers.

Practice

The deciding factor for the introduction of telework was the rapid company growth. This took place to such an extent that even the opening of an additional branch would not have offered a satisfactory solution. The optimal solution, on the other hand, was telework. This also enabled Integrata to establish customer and distribution networks that did not require the opening of new branches.

The model of alternating telework was deliberately chosen because its main advantage is the flexibility for the employees to choose their own workplace. Teleworkers spend one to two days per week at the offices and three to four days at home or with the customer. The company stipulates very little with regard to the general set-up of telework. There are only a few central regulations as to, for example, the determination of an office day. Teleworkers meet every Friday in order „not to lose sight of each other“, says Steven Harpenstein from the marketing centre. In addition, teleworkers practice desk sharing.

Activities that can be carried out at home first of all include all conceptual work and all work involving reference activities. This is followed by the drafting of statistics and reports, literature study, making telephone calls and programming. Activities carried out at home are mainly activities requiring peace and concentration and activities that are not too communication orientated.

The tele-workplace equipment is not financed in advance by the company. However, the professional use of the equipment (PC, printer, telephone) is acknowledged and employees are reimbursed for these costs by monthly expense billing. The model is based on voluntarism which is why some of the extensive bureaucratic regulations, such as service contracts, insurance, share of private use, can be avoided. Integrata

placed great importance on the uncomplicated integration of telework into the corporate structure. Therefore, no extensive company agreements were drawn up. The company trusts in a high level of employee responsibility, explains company founder Wolfgang Heilmann. This will only be successful if the employees themselves want to practice telework.

Early experience dealing with video communication was gained during a pilot project with ISDN visual telephony. During implementation of the project it was found that after initial scepticism acceptance towards the new technology increased with increasing usage time. Users felt that conversations via visual telephones were helpful, motivating and pleasant. The majority of conversations exceeded 20 minutes and they mainly had the purpose of project control and employee management, which emphasises the importance of the visual telephone as a management tool. The reduction of business travel to an absolute necessary minimum was emphasised as an economic advantage.

The proportion of teleworkers at management level is an interesting feature of the telework structure at Integrata: the number of homeworkers has increased with increasing professional position. Regular work at home is natural for Integrata management. Also, telework is distinct in the different areas marketing, administration and production. Telework in marketing and production stretches to significantly lower levels than in administration, which is more dependent on the office infrastructure.

Experience

Integrata places great importance on exclusively working with full-time employees as this is the only way to guarantee the corporate identity. This would not be possible with freelance project members who also work elsewhere. Initially only programmers worked spatially separate. In the meantime though there are teleworkers from all corporate sectors.

Experience with telework so far has been very positive. On the management side improved quality of work results are mainly mentioned. This is to such an extent that the results can be considered as absolutely above average. This is a confirmation that telework at Integrata is a success and therefore will be maintained. Surveys within the company showed that the examined employees consider telework in the quiet and undisturbed home atmosphere to be a definite advantage. Also, the possibility of free time management and working in accordance with the individual biorhythm are of great importance particularly for creative activities. Teleworkers feel motivated and that their effectiveness has been increased. The employees examined considered disadvantages such as lack of communication and the risk of isolation resulting from this only as a danger if the proportion of homeworking was very high.