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In times of change: How distance managers can ensure employees' wellbeing and organizational performance

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ABSTRACT

Organizations develop and adapt to societal changes and technological developments, where one consequence is that dispersed workers are more common than never before. It is difficult to ensure employee wellbeing and performance, when separating managers from employees by either time or geography. This paper explores the wellbeing of employees doing distance work, and examines the practices of the distance manager aimed at ensuring employee wellbeing and organizational performance. The pilot study use a case study approach in four organizations with qualitative interviews of distance managers and employees. The study show both positive and negative aspects of distance work. Positively, the employees find distance work to be professionally challenging and they feel they make a difference in their work. On the negative side is the feeling of loneliness and frustrations about lack of communication. The analysis of distance managers' practices showed that they used both activities and capabilities in order to ensure employee wellbeing and organizational performance. The activities included planning, newsletters, and surveys, and the capabilities were to listen, create and show trust, and give authority to the employees. Contrary to previous findings on motivating of knowledge workers, our findings show that motivation, surprisingly, is ensured when focusing on the basic needs such as working conditions and belongingness.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, workplaces and employees have become more dispersed due to organizational changes in large traditional organizations and the development of new business opportunities across the world, such as shifts from production to service- or knowledge-based work environment (Hinds and Kiesler, 2002). As companies move toward globalization and communication technologies facilitate a quicker pace of change within organizations (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002), companies use distance work (Fisher and Fisher, 2001) to accomplish work more effectively and efficiently. 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) (Cropper et al., 2008; Verburg et al., 2013).

Hertel et al. (2005) reported the potential disadvantages at the individual level when working across distances, including isolation, misunderstandings, decreased interpersonal contact, and role ambiguity (Hertel et al., 2005). In a systematic review, Crawford

et al. (2011) found that only a few studies have investigated the wellbeing of employees who work at clients' or customers' offices (inter-organizational work) over a long period of time and how to best manage these employees. 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 and Kiesler, 2002); here, the customer's working conditions influence the employees.

According to Westgaard and Winkel (2011), business rationalizations driven by increasing global competition and performance demands cause poor work environments and work-related stress. However, most preventive intervention studies primarily consider employees' wellbeing, not the balance of both organizational performance and employees' wellbeing. Westgaard and Winkel (2011) call for studies of how work can be organized and managed to ensure both wellbeing and performance. Organizations that are able to combine the two are termed "sustainable production systems" (Westgaard and Winkel, 2011). In this paper the definition of wellbeing builds on a Danish interpretation including both the physical work environment and the psychosocial work environment (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2013)

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and performance is defined as: to achieve the goals of the organization (Neely et al., 2005).

This paper explores how distance managers ensure both employees' wellbeing and organizational performance across distances (i.e., geography and time) (Fisher and Fisher, 2001) within the domain of inter-organizational distance work. To achieve this, the paper consists of two parts: First, it examines how distance employees (hereafter: employees) experience their work at the customer's site. Second, it investigates distance management practices and what employees expect from their managers. The paper makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it adds to current knowledge about employees' wellbeing (inter-organizational work). Second, it expands the literature by exploring the combined management practices of both employees' wellbeing and organizational performance in distance work.

2. Methods

This paper uses a qualitative (Bryman, 2004; Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Yin, 2009) multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009) that was undertaken in 2015 in four different companies. Within the context of inter-organizational distance work (Cropper et al., 2008; Verburg et al., 2013), the aim of this pilot study was to explore distance management practices that ensured both employees' wellbeing and organizational performance.

2.1. Case companies and recruitment

Recruiting the case companies followed several principles: (1) the companies should have inter-organizational arrangements with formal contracts (Cropper et al., 2008), (2) the customers control the working conditions in which the employees work, and (3) the employees have limited access to their own managers due to distance (time and geography). Companies with these characteristics were identified via the internet and the research team's network. This list of companies was then checked against the following inclusion criteria: type of business, type of distance work (inter-organizational work), and long work periods at the customer's location (Denmark or international). The companies were contacted via email and phone calls.

The recruitment process resulted in four case companies: a software development company, an engineering consultancy, a management consultancy, and an advanced manufacturing company selling additional services. The four companies represent different types of business, but all have experienced the emergence of networked organizational forms and they all engage in inter-organizational projects (see Table 1).

2.2. Data collection

The researchers conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with the case companies (Kvale, 1996; Robson, 2002); these contained questions about distance management practices and distance work experiences, especially regarding employees' 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 (see Table 2). All of the interviewees had experience with inter-organizational distance work as managers (with HR responsibility), project managers, or consultants/specialists. All of the employees worked for a minimum of two weeks at the customers' locations, and the majority had worked at these locations for several years. Their experiences with distance work and/or management varied from six months to 17 years, and the majority of the interviewees had been involved in several different projects with a variety of customers.

The employees and managers were given different semi-structured interview guides. The employees' interview guide included two themes: (1) their subjective perceptions of the work-related aspects of distance work (example: "What is the best thing about being a distance worker?"), and (2) their experiences with distance management (example: "How do you and your manager deal with the challenges you meet as a distance worker?").

The interview guide for the distance managers focused on their perspectives on distance work and the positive and negative aspects of being distance managers (examples: "How do you deal with the challenges and problems your employees meet in their work?" And: "What are your recommendations to other distance managers?"). The researchers conducted and recorded 12 telephone and five face-to-face interviews. Two researchers participated in each interview—one conducted the interview and the other took notes. Each interview lasted from 25 to 60 min.

2.3. Data analysis

The researchers coded the transcribed interviews using template analysis (King, 1998; Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000; Robson, 2002). In this study we focused on the experiences of the employees, the management practices and the expectations from the employees to their managers and had thereby already chosen the focus of our analysis, which made template analysis a relevant choice for the further data analysis.

In a template analysis the researchers usually define a number of priori codes to guide the initial data analysis and in our study the three focus points thus served as the first three a priori codes.

The research question together with the questions asked in the interviews determined three a priori codes for the data analysis (Column 1, Table 3): (1) current distance management practices, (2) recommendations for distance management ensuring both wellbeing and performance, and (3) employees' distance work experiences. The researchers then applied the codes to the entire dataset, matching the codes with segments of data selected as representative of the code. In the second and third phases of the data analysis, the original codes were reanalysed — a number of additional codes and sub codes emerged that were then added to the matrix (Columns 2 and 3, Table 3). Table 2 presents the final template. The results section, in which the template guides the structure, includes an explanation of the different themes in Table 3, including their subthemes.

Table 1
Information about case companies.

	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D
Type	Software development	Engineering consultancy	Management consultancy	Advanced manufacturing
No. of employees	170	3100	350	2000
No. of distance employees (total)	165	N/A	280	N/A
No. of employees the interviewed manager is managing	165	30	38	70
National or international distance work	National	National	International	International

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