

New forms of employment

ICT-based mobile work, Finland

Case study 29: Suomen Pienyrittäjien Mainostoimisto

SPYM is a young company which prioritises the well-being of its employees. It has a good working atmosphere and a culture of high trust, and has introduced efficient mobile work practices.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the development of mobile technologies has created new opportunities in Finland for people to work whenever and wherever they want (Alasoini et al, 2012). Fewer jobs are bound to a specific location. According to a Finnish occupational health survey, one third of interviewed employees have, at least occasionally, worked away from their primary workplace, in premises belonging to their employer, a client or business partner. In comparison, only 16% of the respondents in 2012 (15% in 2009) said they were undertaking telework at least occasionally. (Kauppinen et al, 2013.)

The way people work in Finland is changing significantly, largely due to the rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Ministry of Economic Development, 2012). Mobile work practices are part of this change. Work organisation is expected to become less hierarchical; with working arrangements and employment relationships already being tailored to the individual employee's needs. Mobile working practices are related to increased productivity and individual freedom of employees (Alasoini et al, 2012.)

Mobile work is also associated with flexible working time arrangements, which have been increasingly applied in Finnish working life. These arrangements are considered to have a positive effect on the quality of working life as they lead to a better work-life balance (Järvinen, 2012). However, the increase of mobile and flexible working practices has also created new concerns about greater workloads, as work can spill over into one's private time (Alasoini et al, 2012). As a result, the Finnish Parliament has recently changed the Occupational Safety and Health Act, making employers assess the effect of working times alongside the other work related harms and risks face by their employees that they are obliged to consider.

In the case of mobile work, however, it is difficult to enforce the requirements of Finland's labour legislation, especially those of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the Act on Occupational Safety and Health Enforcement and Cooperation. The Occupational Safety and Health Act obliges employers to take care of the safety and health of their employees while at work, including work circumstances, working conditions and other aspects of the working environment. However, the legislation is based on the traditional concept of work taking place in a relatively stable environment, in a specific workplace and during specific hours. According to this, the workplace is generally considered to be the property of the employer who is therefore able to control the safety of the work environment and the well-being of staff. Consequently,

occupational health and safety inspections are targeted at specific workplaces. However, the major question that arises in the case of mobile work is how an employer can ensure the safety of employees who work from multiple locations. This is also a challenge for public authorities which have to ensure that employers carry out their legal obligations. There has been some discussion about this, and the occupational health and well-being risks that are specific to mobile work are considered to include issues such as travelling and a more complicated communication environment. Tools have therefore been developed to alleviate the risks of mobile work (Hyrkkänen and Vartiainen, 2009).

The mobile employee increasingly needs to take a role in assessing the risks associated with their work environment, even though the legal responsibility of occupational safety and health still lies with the employer (Alasoini et al, 2012).

In Finland, there have been new approaches to work space design, taking into account needs such as silence for concentration and spaces suitable for teamwork. As mobile work becomes more prevalent, traditional personal offices become less useful and give way to work environments that are multifunctional and inspirational (Tekes, 2011).

This case study examines Suomen Pienyrittäjien Mainostoimisto (The Finnish Small Entrepreneurs' Advertisement Agency, SPYM), a small advertising agency of young professionals in their twenties and thirties. Both management and staff represent a generation for whom mobile technologies are a natural means of communication.

Information for this study was acquired from interviews with: an employer representative and two employees at SPYM; an official from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; and an official from the Ministry of Employment and the Economy.

General characteristics of SPYM

SPYM, founded in 2008 in Jyväskylä as a limited liability company, offers a comprehensive range of marketing and communications services. The two founders, who were also the only employees for the first year of operation, met during their studies and launched the business prior to graduation. In 2009 they began to hire workers and since then the company has been steadily growing. In the first couple of years the company's annual growth was 100%. In late 2013, the company opened their first branch office in Helsinki. SPYM has 14 employees and one subcontracted person (as of January 2014). The company shares the office with a consulting company. SPYM and another company it shared office space with (specialising in content and text production) merged over two years ago. Both operate under SPYM's brand. In January 2014, four of SPYM's employees owned shares in the company. All the companies operating on the premises also own shares in each other's businesses. This and other partnerships allow them to combine different expertise and reach new clients. Expansion is one of SPYM's strategic goals.

The youngest employees are in their early twenties, while the oldest are in their early thirties. The company considers its young personnel to be an advantage in the advertisement industry which has changed dramatically in recent years with the increasing prevalence of electronic and mobile marketing, as well as social media.

The company's founders, as well as most of its employees, are men. However, the number of women in the company increased after the merger and recent recruitments. The company recruits new employees based on their personality and not on gender. The new employees are expected to fit with the creative, positive and open-minded culture of the company. The staff consists of various experts, such as graphic designers, web coders, communication experts, sales and marketing professionals. Some have been to university; others have had vocational school training. Creative industries and graphic design fields require staying up to date with the most recent industry developments and involve a lot of 'learning by doing'. All the employees have permanent contracts. The company used to employ freelancers as well, but decided, as it

expanded, to hire its own full-time employees. This allows the company to benefit from the input of its employees and makes management easier. SPYM is a small company and does not have a specific human resource department. The company executives manage most human resource issues, but production and sales managers also share these responsibilities, particularly when they concern their respective departments.

Even though the company does not have a specific human resources department, the well-being of its employees is a key strategic priority. SPYM believes that only employees that are feeling well can produce high quality work. The meaning of 'well-being' can mean different things in terms of each individual. It includes up-to-date and ergonomic equipment, good lighting, meaningful job descriptions, varying work tasks, good salary, reasonable working times, and an opportunity for mobile work or telework. SPYM has recently created a new strategy which, to a great extent, was based on the views of the personnel: their goals, dreams, motivations and career paths. In general, the company is open to testing new methods and procedures at work. SPYM uses one IT platform for all of its functions such as planning, customer register, sales and invoicing. In addition, the employees use different programmes needed in their respective work areas.

SPYM has used various work management methods that were aimed at increasing productivity and innovation. The company has an open plan office which promotes better communication. However, this can also cause distractions and, in 2013, to combat this, the company introduced so-called silent hours at the office. Certain times, such as morning coffee, lunch time, and the end of the day, were reserved for catching up and sharing news. During particularly busy times, from 09.00 – 11.00 and 12.00 – 14.00 all disruptions were prohibited to ensure a calm environment. This practice has now been discontinued, but ways of calming office noise are still occasionally discussed. In late 2012 the company experimented with the idea of reserving one day a week on which employees could freely choose any activity that would develop their own skills or serve some function in the company. This practice was also discontinued because one 'free' day a week proved to be too frequent, but it is still occasionally used.

The interviewed employees are a female graphic designer in her early twenties and a marketing strategy and content production specialist in his early thirties. The graphic designer started as a trainee at SPYM and was one of the first employees hired by the company in 2009. The marketing planner was hired in 2011 when he was running a communications agency and serving as a subcontractor for a large international corporation.

In Finland, there is no specific legislation covering mobile work. However, each company can develop its own practices within the framework of general labour legislation, particularly the Occupational Safety and Health Act and Working Hours Act. SPYM is not subject to any collective agreements.

Design and implementation process

Mobile work was introduced almost accidentally at SPYM. In 2009, the interviewed graphic designer planned to spend several months in China because her partner was going there on a student exchange programme. When she asked the SPYM management if she could work from China, the idea was rejected on the grounds that it was too complicated and radical for such a young company. However, the employee did not lose her belief in this form of work and reintroduced the subject to the company managers with an improved execution plan that addressed issues such as communication methods, internet connections, and dealing with time differences.

Consequently, the idea of mobile work emerged from the personal situation of an employee in this company. The employee felt experienced enough to work independently and she knew her

working style. She felt very comfortable with the idea of mobile work and thought she could carry out her tasks outside of the office and even while on the other side of the world.

The management examined this possibility more closely and, together with the employee, started looking for practical solutions to potential problems. They decided to give her suggestion a three-month trial on the condition that, should any problems emerge, the trial would be suspended. The employee was expected to work part-time, mainly due to the time difference and technological limitations. Her salary would be based on the number of working hours. All the files necessary for work had to be transferred by email to the person working outside the office, which was laborious and time-consuming. Once in China, the employee worked according to Finnish time and started her working day around 14.00. The employee had prepared herself for this kind of work by reading about the experiences of other companies and freelancers. However, she developed her own work plan based on her work tasks and individual working style.

The first three months' period in China went so well that it was extended twice at the employee's request. In total, this employee worked remotely for most of 2010–2012 both abroad and in Finland. During 2010–2011 she spent 12 months in China, going there three times to accompany her partner. The first two stays in China lasted three months and the third one lasted six months. Between her stays in China, she visited Finland. She also spent six weeks in Greece for personal reasons. Once the employee returned to Finland in 2011, there was no need for another full-time employee at SPYM, but she continued working part-time for SPYM at her parents' home, almost 60 kilometres from Jyväskylä. This was also mainly mobile work due to her distance from the office. She chose this living arrangement to minimise expenses. She also had one or two additional jobs at the same time. In the spring of 2013, a permanent position at SPYM became vacant and she moved back to Jyväskylä.

This success in mobile work has led to further development of this work pattern at SPYM. The company has made agreements with its numerous partner companies in different regions and towns, allowing their employees to visit each other's offices and use their premises for working.

Working method, processes and procedures

At SPYM every employee has the technical ability to work mobile. The company provides its employees with laptops that have an information security system. The company also uses Virtual Private Network (VPN), a cloud service that enables safe access through the internet to the company's database. The employees can access the internet through the 3G network from their mobile phones, which can be connected to laptops. Many employees have their own private network connections which they may use and, if needed, the employer provides a mobile internet connection. All the employees may also use Skype for video conferences.

SPYM does not have any written procedures or guidelines regarding mobile work, but the generally accepted rule is that management and all a worker's colleagues have to be informed in advance of any plans to work mobile, so that meetings and working arrangements can be planned accordingly. An employee also has to give one week's notice of any plans to work from some other location. This is done at the weekly Friday afternoon sessions when all workers at the company spend a moment together to close the week. Any employee absent from these meetings is told of mobile work periods by email.

An employee planning to work mobile has to inform and discuss with the management the tasks he or she plans to execute. SPYM uses a virtual working time surveillance system where employees mark time spent for different work tasks. Upon the employee's return to the office, the management can require them to show the results of their work, if necessary. Based on the results, the management can assess whether the working time spent for the task correspond to the achieved results. This also helps to evaluate whether an employee had any problems while working away from the office, and generally the management can easily identify any problems.

Until now, there have been no major issues arising from working in this way, nor has any employee been denied the opportunity to do so. The starting point in SPYM is respecting each other's professionalism and there been no need to examine the employees' specific work practices.

Communication between mobile workers and office-based colleagues is usually through phone calls or text messages (in case of an urgent matter), and by email. In case of common company meetings or internal training events, the employees working at a distance may participate through Skype. For example, every third week the company holds a morning coffee meeting to share internal information on a particular topic; participation is voluntary and workers may join in through Skype. In addition, when working mobile, whether abroad or at home, employees need to have access to the ICT necessary to do their work. Sometimes they have to be able to participate in Skype meetings. At other times, being within reach of a phone is sufficient.

Mobile work practices have been steadily expanding at SPYM. Since the beginning of 2014, all employees have been carrying out at least some tasks outside the office. Some spend only a couple of days a year away from the office while others, especially those living further away from the office, do so two or three days a week. Everyone is given the opportunity to work like this, according to their personal needs. It is always up to the employees to initiate this way of working; the company does not specifically encourage it. The management needs to be informed about longer mobile work periods (of weeks or months) months in advance, and there is a more detailed planning session for this which typically includes the production manager. If the reason for mobile work is that the employee simply wants to travel abroad, or work from home, SPYM does not cover any travel or living expenses. If mobile work is carried out during a business trip the employer naturally covers travel costs. However, the mobile work itself does not cause extra costs for SPYM apart from some minor phone or internet connection bills.

According to the company, mobile work functions best when there are tight deadlines and certain work tasks that require concentration and silence. Graphic design, web coding, text production and marketing are among the tasks that can be better performed while working mobile. For SPYM, mobile work is a tool for enhancing well-being as it provides an opportunity for concentrated working without office disruptions and also variation by changing the environment. In the company's view, the most important aspect is the end result, and it acknowledges that its employees have different ways of achieving this. Consequently, each employee is allowed to arrange his or her work according to his or her personal needs, while specific project timetables and budgets set the general guidelines.

The employee representative working with marketing planning usually works mobile two or three days a week. He typically works from home, or at coffee shops, on trains, at friends' homes and occasionally while travelling abroad. Sometimes, he has accompanied his spouse on holiday and worked during the day but spent the evenings with his partner. At the beginning of 2014 this employee, who lives 50 kilometres from the office, was working mobile often to avoid a lengthy commute. This employee considers working from a fixed place as rather strange, and mobile work as a logical option. Mobile work enables him to carry out work whenever it suits him, such as very early in the morning or in the evening, and it allows him occasionally to take time off in the middle of the day for personal reasons such as leisure activities.

As of January 2014, the interviewed graphic designer uses mobile work considerably less than before. Now, as she is back from China and working full time for SPYM, she mostly works at the office, but occasionally spends a day or some hours working mobile. In the office, she sometimes works at her desk, but also in the kitchen or on the office sofa. In the summer she worked from a coffee shop, which she found a familiar and convenient place.

External support

SPYM's business network has an important role in the development of the company's mobile work practices. The experiences of mobile work are shared and compared within these networks. However, SPYM considers itself as something of a ground breaker in the development of mobile work practices in its own network. Indeed, SPYM has served as an example of good mobile work practice and has provided support to other companies. However, it also sends its employees to various business seminars to learn how mobile working is practised abroad, particularly by leading international companies. Participation in these seminars is planned according to needs of the company and skills development of the employees, and the company covers the participation and travel costs.

Outcomes and effects

The outcomes of mobile work have been significant both for the employees and SPYM. While initially the company approached mobile work with some suspicion, mobile work has proved to be just as effective as work carried out at the office. As a result, this practice is considered a valid alternative to working at the office. It has become an indispensable part of SPYM's working procedures. The company executive who was interviewed said that, in the beginning, he could not have imagined that the attitude to mobile work in the company could become as positive and open as it is today. This attitude was formed by the company's employees who have established the trust in mobile work as an efficient practice.

According to the employees, different environments are important for inspiration and making the work more interesting. The opportunity to work from different places helps keep up employees' spirits and productivity. Mobile work also breaks down the traditional periods of holiday, working time and free time, which can sometimes be restrictive.

The employee representative working with marketing planning is used to working on his own terms due to his entrepreneurship background, and he likes the ability to arrange his working and free time in a more flexible way than would be possible when working only in the office. The ability to work from different places and at different times allows him to have a higher quality free time. He also looks for inspiration from the various work environments and likes to test different ones.

The graphic designer commented that the long mobile work periods she spent in China gave her lots of new ideas for work. However, lack of a work community made work abroad lonelier. She considers her more traditional working pattern a welcome change after extensive periods of travelling. Both employees noted that the mobile work pattern helped them achieve many more things in life, including a better work-life balance.

From the point of view of SPYM, employees' well-being and a good atmosphere at work are key priorities. Mobile work has helped achieve both. Employees who are feeling well are more motivated and productive. The opportunity for mobile work also increases the attractiveness of SPYM as an employer, and enables the company to recruit personnel outside the Jyväskylä region. SPYM also encourages its employees to work at partner companies' premises in other regions because of the opportunities of networking, and supporting greater business cooperation between these companies.

Strengths and weaknesses

In general, SPYM believes that mobile work has more strengths than weaknesses. The strengths include enhanced occupational well-being, work atmosphere, productivity, innovation and competitiveness. The weaknesses are more related to practical technological problems, such as difficulties with network connection which prevent direct access to the company's documents.

Also, the transmission of large files between colleagues by email is very time consuming. When working away from the office, employees do not always reply instantly to emails, or cannot be reached by phone. According to the company representatives, patience is very important in such cases, while a re-evaluation of the matter's urgency is sometimes helpful too. However, the company has used some innovative techniques to solve this kind of communication problems. For example, one interviewed employee revealed that if someone in the office has Facebook chat open he or she can be an important channel for communication with the rest of the colleagues in the office.

Communication has also specific problems, such as ensuring other colleagues understand the transmitted message correctly. Also, colleagues may have specific preferences and styles of communicating. Some are not as comfortable with the video conference medium as others. Sometimes it is more convenient to have a face-to-face meeting.

During longer periods of mobile work as, for example, when the graphic designer spent a year in China, support from the colleagues in the central office is particularly important. This included help in reaching certain people, delivering messages or sending the necessary work files by email. In short, mobile work practices require flexibility from all parties involved.

According to SPYM employees, the biggest challenge related to mobile work is to make sure that the person away from the main office still feels they are a member of the work community. The employees also 'virtually' share things not directly related to work such as photos, situation updates or interesting links. They also keep in touch outside work. It is also very important, as well as challenging, to keep the mobile employees up to date with all the information that is exchanged in the office. While technology helps with this, it is no substitute for direct contact with colleagues in the office. For this reason the interviewed employees did not prefer completely mobile work practices. Mobile work may also cause feelings of loneliness and isolation. As a result, SPYM employees believed it is necessary to keep a balance between mobile work and office work.

One SPYM interviewee also noted that it is very important to plan mobile work tasks carefully. The person working away from the office has to know exactly what tasks must be done before their mobile work days and plan the course of those days in detail, including the estimated time of each task. When working at the office, it is easier to find new work if the planned tasks are completed faster than expected.

Drawing a line between work and free time can be challenging as well. One SPYM interviewee said it was more difficult to achieve a feeling of having completed the day's work when working mobile. This may happen if a mobile worker continues to browse the internet or use social media platforms after their work is done. This type of behaviour creates an illusion of having worked all day long. As a result, one interviewee had developed certain personal practices and rituals to avoid this illusion. After finishing the day's work, she closes the computer and cleans the desk. Afterwards, she usually takes a walk to create an illusion of coming home from work. This type of transition was necessary to switch effectively from work to free time. These challenges show that self-discipline is particularly important when working away from the office.

Another SPYM interviewee noted that the effort of keeping work and free time strictly apart may be more stressful than mixing them as the need arose. The interviewee believed that mixing work and free time was a more meaningful practice, as long as a healthy balance was maintained. Checking emails in the evening or starting work very early in the morning was not a problem as such. According to this employee, various individual skills, including stress management, were also very important in balancing work and private life.

The interviewed SPYM representatives said most problems related to mobile work could be solved as working practices developed. For example, to address certain issues, the company has increased the number of video conferences. It makes visual communication possible, such as

showing one's drawings to others which is an important part of a design process. However, even the video conferences could not fully transmit all the participants' reactions. The company still prefers face-to-face meetings when dealing with important strategic and operational matters.

SPYM recommends mobile work practices to creative industry companies because of the inspiration their employees can get from changes to the work environment. Small companies might be more suitable for this type of work, as they can easily adjust their working procedures. In a company applying mobile work, mutual trust between the employees and employer is very important. The employees need to be trusted to carry out their work tasks as agreed. They need to be responsible, solution-oriented and strict. Carrying out mobile work, to a great extent, means working alone and this simply does not work for everyone.

An official from the Ministry of Employment and the Economy said the advantages of mobile work were related to increased motivation, trust, and the ability to influence one's own working methods. Mobile work may help to reduce commuting to work, which benefits the environment. Also, mobile technologies give elderly employees a more flexible working schedule, and less commuting for work purposes may decrease their overall workload. This may become a growing trend. An employer that offers the opportunity to work mobile may be particularly attractive to younger employees, who do not expect to work for the same employer forever and can easily change jobs if a more attractive job offer is available.

According to the representatives from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, it is important to make sure that employees who work at a distance do not feel socially alienated from their office-based colleagues. Some employees may feel this distance is a risk to their career development. Sometimes, management are less aware of mobile employees' input and achievement, which could be crucial in the case of organisational changes or dismissals.

The ministry officials also emphasised the risk of unpaid overtime work. For example, in times of economic insecurity, employees tend to increase their efforts and working time to maintain their positions. In mobile work, work is usually not under the direct surveillance of the employer while results are assessed, and the line between mobile work and unpaid overtime work may become blurred. This risk is further exacerbated by ICT, constant connectivity and always being within colleagues' and clients' reach. To address these risks, the ministry officials underlined the importance of communication about the possible risks and problems between the employee and employer.

The ministry officials estimated that, perhaps at the government level, there is not enough awareness of the different mobile work practices being used by companies. Some ICT companies that are networking internationally have well developed mobile work practices. However, industries like the traditional service sector, which currently does not use mobile work, could benefit from more general information on this practice.

Future plans

SPYM plans to open new branches offices soon, and feels that this could create a need to expand mobile work practices.

Commentary

SPYM is a young company which prioritises the well-being of its employees and a good working atmosphere. Being open-minded, it has applied mobile work practices which proved to be efficient. The company can also be described as having a culture of high trust. The employees have a lot of individual freedom in their working practices. As a small company, SPYM has a very low organisational hierarchy which allows open communication in all directions. This was

exemplified by the introduction of mobile work practices in the company, after an employee convinced company management to try out this new working method despite initial scepticism.

The problems related to mobile work are discussed in a direct manner at SPYM. An open-minded and solution-oriented attitude is essential for mobile work practices to work. It is important for everyone involved to report honestly any problems or dissatisfaction related to mobile work and to be ready to improve their working practices. SPYM's communication culture could be related to its workers' young age. The working practices which are being successfully implemented at SPYM may have a growing significance in Finnish working life.

At SPYM, mobile work practices not only have a direct effect on employees' work satisfaction, but have also become a way of life. The ability to work from different locations and settings encourages inspiration, vital in creative industries, and increases productivity. In addition, mobile work improves the quality of employees' leisure activities and enables them to make highly convenient personal choices that would be otherwise impossible. Employees at SPYM have gradually developed the individual mobile work practices which best suit their work tasks and personalities. However, mobile work presents some challenges as well. Technologies may break down while the richness of face-to face communication cannot be completely replaced by technology. Mobile work works best when properly balanced with some time at the office.

This case study shows that the success of mobile work arrangements depends a lot on the specific situation and the individuals concerned. There are many risks associated with mobile work practices. To manage them properly, it is crucial that both employer and employees pay attention to individual working styles and communication patterns and are able to handle urgent matters effectively.

Information sources

Websites

Finnish Occupational Safety and Health Act

Finnish Act on Occupational Safety and Health Enforcement and Cooperation on Occupational Safety and Health at Workplaces

Finnish government's initiative to change Occupational Safety and Health act (in Finnish, available at

<http://217.71.145.20/TRIPviewer/show.asp?tunniste=HE+201/2012&base=erhe&palvelin=www.eduskunta.fi&f=WORD>)

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