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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Background information:
Occupation/industry: Distance work within manufacturing and knowledge intensive companies
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Problem
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.

Method/procedures
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.

**Findings/Results /Analyses**

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 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/employees highly value time to talk and management capabilities i.e. the listening, understanding and/or the acknowledging manager as conditions/activities/ways to ensure their well-being – prevent them from being stressed.

**Practical implications**

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.

**Conclusion**

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.
References


6-800 ord and describes the proposed presentation.
- A statement of the problem
- Procedures
- Analyses
- Results
- Practical implications
- Conclusions
- Cite relevant literature

Brief summary of 3-4 sentences

IEA
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 mother company to ensure performance, well-being and knowledge sharing given the constraint to communicate in person with the co-located employees.

Dialogue with the distance workers is a core activity and is conducted virtually 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 project related issues which need to be solved or the performance and well-being of the employees. The calls are typically initiated by the manager.

Safety Science
The findings show that employees experience distance work positively. The job is flexible with a high level of autonomy and the potential for personal growth. Employees’ specialist skills are both challenged and applied, which is stimulating for the employees. The results generally agree with those obtained in previous wellbeing studies—they show potential for the fulfillment of self-actualization needs (Maslow 1965). As in previous studies of knowledge workers’ wellbeing, we also saw frustrating experiences like loneliness and isolation in the case of distance work.

Furthermore, our results showed that unpleasant reception and treatment by the customers, poor physical working conditions, too high performance expectations from the first day on the job, and delayed response time from their distance managers caused frustration and affected employees’ wellbeing. In more extreme cases, the employees named a lack of hot water for several days, limited online access, power crashes, and local safety issues as factors affecting their wellbeing. Consequently, this study concludes that physical and social working conditions at the work sites, both nationally and internationally, directly affect the employees’ wellbeing and thus their performance. This study stresses the importance of addressing employees’ basic needs, like physiological needs, safety, and belongingness, in order to ensure motivation. The reason for this is that this study offers new knowledge that employees engaged in inter-organizational distance work
are at risk of inadequate working conditions where their basic needs are not met. This adds to our current knowledge about motivation of knowledge workers.

this study suggests that distance managers should be aware of the customers’ working conditions and their capability to fulfill their distance employees’ basic and self-actualization needs.

In the template analysis, the distance management practices covered both activities and capabilities. We did not expect to find capabilities mentioned as a practice. This finding indicates that employees highly value intangible practices (capabilities) such as listening, understanding, and acknowledgement.

Husk balance performance and well-being.
The working conditions have a direct impact on the performance of the distance workers/virtual/dispersed (ref)

WB → performance, WB forudsætter: gode arbejdsforhold (1) og forudsætter en nærværende/god leder (management and leadership= (2)?

1) Maslows pyramid – gode arbejdsforhold – i bunden.
2) God leder = Listen, understands and acknowledge med fokus på bunden af Maslows needs pyramid (1).

RQ: Which tools do managers have to support good management - when not face-to-face (in their daily practice)? What should the managers then do across distances? To create proximity across the distance?

Hvad siger vores data her?

1) Systematisk opfølgning (skema) – hvem hvornår (frekvens)
2) Systematisk opfølgning på både trivsel og performance (skema FLS) (indhold)
   a. Fokus i samtalen – først på trivsel og arbejdsforhold
3) Align expectation among stakeholders/organizational parties/partners – task and working conditions - among project manager, project owner, resource manager (distance manager) and the distance worker (to protect the employee)
4) Lederne selv (er også et værktøj) – sanser udfordret/begrænset:
   a. Det forudsætter
      i. Reliable power/access to manager and family
      ii. Trust and time to talk,
      iii. acknowledge that working conditions are a essential to conduct the tasks and perform