

RWE Westnetz: “Innovative Working Worlds”

What does this case study demonstrate?

The “innovative working world” of Westnetz is more than implementing a high-technological and ergonomic working environment and conducting a friendly working atmosphere. After an expensive investment in the company these new workplaces are changing the communication and organisation of work in a more effective and efficient way to the benefit of both. The company benefits by reducing the costs for travelling (through homework and videoconferences) and work places as well as producing more effective, creative and productive working results. The employees benefit by having more flexibility (short ways to the other colleagues and the line managers, combining better working and private life conditions, etc.) and a high-tech equipment as well as working in a sociable area (feeling well at work). The implemented concept of an “innovative working world” is changing the communication and working culture fundamentally. The new working environment forces and allows different communication forms (digital and real) and enables and pushes team work.

Workplace innovation elements: work organisation practice (communication ways, job autonomy, flexible working), structure and system improvement, workplace partnership.

Context

The company is part of a mother company, responsible for electricity networks in the Western part of Germany and has 13 external business locations, with all in all more than 5,000 employees. It is characterised by a high and formal participation of the employees’ representatives and the employees.

The motivation of the company for WPI is a high employee orientation but also societal changes like demographic change, work-life-balance, healthy work, digital communication and digital business world, flexibility of work (time and location), sustainability. Restructuring the company and moving the headquarters to a central new building the management took the chance to create a new innovative working environment, which was developed and implemented in a very short time of half a year. A first top-down concept was made for the new headquarters, and then a pilot version was implemented and tested with one department (involving all the department staff), this was then improved and transferred to every floor of the whole new headquarter.

Innovative Working World

The “innovative working world” is a comprehensive workplace concept allowing and “forcing” with its different “landscapes” new communication and working possibilities in a flexible way - changing the whole working and communication culture from a more individual to a team working environment.

New working areas for all the employees of the headquarters were developed and created. The new headquarters has 11 floors, each floor for about 50-60 employees. Before the employees moved from their former working places to the new rooms, the new working arrangement was developed by a special workforce. Each floor has the same friendly and living room / lounge atmosphere oriented arrangements: desk sharing but also fixed working places (the latter mainly for the management), places for informal and formal meetings, speed meeting areas, lounges fostering creative thinking, up-to-date technological and ergonomic infrastructure, self-service for coffee, tea, water for free; and a relaxation room. This working environment is very flexible not only for different communication and networking possibilities but also for using workplaces by every employee (desk sharing). It allows also external employees

(coming from other locations) to work at the working places of the headquarters and other sites. More home office work is possible now as well. The new IT working environment also gives the opportunity for telecommunication and videoconferences for exchanging important issues with the colleagues of the local sites (reducing travel costs and staff costs for travelling, leading to more short time adjustments of work and organisational issues). The “innovative working world” at all the floors of the headquarters is supplemented by centralised rooms for health (fitness centre with a trainer giving advice once a week), family-work-combination (a “family room” combining a working area with a playroom for children in case of urgent child care problems) and a canteen, also usable for meetings in the afternoon or morning. The new working world changed the whole working culture and was a kind of “cultural” shock for the employees at first, forcing the communication and working activities from more isolated single and personal work (places) to more team work. The communicating in a flexible and short way improved the knowledge exchange, organisation and team work, even across hierarchies because the line manager is working at the same floor and easy to reach. After a few months this new kind of cooperative work and networking forced by the new working environment was accepted and “lived” by the employees.

So who benefits?

The company was looking for innovative workplace solutions combining both flexibility for the company needs (efficient and sharable working places) and the employees’ needs (homework, friendly working atmosphere). Although the employees were first confronted with a totally new working environment they now see the benefits for their everyday work, especially after some improvement. The innovative working world is the ground for a new kind of team work and communication culture, which has to be transferred into new behaviour and attitudes.

Efficient (working places that can be used by every employee, homework, reduction of travelling) and more effective (short-time coordination, team work solutions, short way communication and problem solving) ways of working and communicating were established within the innovative working world; doing everything, that the employees feel comfortable and “having a great place to work”. Improvement of work and living conditions, improved communication possibilities (incl. new technologies) and more efficiency (decrease of CO2 production by reducing business travel and travel to work, lower room rates) are the main objectives of the innovative working worlds.

The flexibility, the friendly and high-tech working arrangements are giving space for every desired communication (informal, formal, telecommunication, bilateral, spontaneous, group meetings, etc.), homework and relaxing phases. In the end this improves the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation, based on benefits for the everyday work of the employees.

Prognosis

The innovative working world changed and is still changing the working culture of the employees and their line managers. Effectiveness is evident because of the team work and the short way communication. Efficiency will be evident within the next years, by showing minor costs per working place and being flexible for increasing staff numbers in times of up-swinging economic cycles.

After a first feedback of the pilot department in the implementation phase a general evaluation with an employee survey including all the concerned employees of the headquarters will be conducted at the beginning of 2015, looking for representative results concerning acceptance and feedback, improvements. If this evaluation has positive results, the concept will be transferred to other locations in Western Germany – preconditioned that a reconstruction of the rooms and buildings are possible.