

## **New forms of employment ICT-based mobile work, Greece**

Case study 30: Microsoft Hellas

*Despite some initial reservations among staff and management, the introduction of mobile work at the offices of Greek company Microsoft Hellas has proved successful. It seems that both the company and staff have benefited from the greater flexibility and autonomy this type of work arrangement offers to employees.*

### **Introduction**

In Greece, the majority of public services, local authorities, large private companies and industries are located in urban areas with high population density. And, since Greece consists of large provincial regions and many small islands, people spend a lot of time travelling to and from work, or even have to settle permanently in large urban areas to improve their employment opportunities.

Mobile work seems a promising idea in Greece. It was thought of as a means of promoting the employment of people living in remote areas, reducing time spent travelling to and from work, and a way to promote decentralisation. However, despite the potential value of mobile work, until now Greek private companies and public institutions and services have not become familiar with the concept.

The promotion of mobile work in Greece presented a number of difficulties. The main obstacles in the adoption and the implementation of mobile work are generally identified as being the lack of:

- technical knowledge, the traditional business culture;
- a workers' unions in the field of new technologies;
- experience in information and consultation procedures;
- negotiation culture on the regulation of non-wage issues, especially issues concerning the methods of business organisation and staff management.

In Greece, employers are not familiar with new working methods. Entrepreneurship is mostly of small scale, while the legal framework concerning mobile work and new forms of employment in general is complicated and has many gaps. This legal framework is actually based on the EU-level social partners Framework Directive on Telework, which was transformed into the Greek legal order by the Greek national-level social partners, by integrating it into the National General Collective Labour Agreement (EGSSE) of 2006.

However, since the provisions of the Framework Directive were not further specified by law or labour agreement, the legal framework is considered to not be detailed or clear enough. According to interviewed stakeholders, mobile work is especially difficult to implement in the

public sector, as public administration is less focused on the achievement of results and autonomy, and more on employee accountability to their employer.

The focus of this case study, [Microsoft Hellas](#), adopted a programme of mobile work in 2011 under the title New World of Work. The programme has already been implemented abroad by subsidiary companies and is considered innovative under the Greek labour market standards. The Microsoft Hellas case illustrates that despite initial reservations, changes to work organisation proved to be easy and successful.

The foundations for introducing such changes were laid by the crisis and disillusionment about what traditional work methods lead to. Therefore, despite poor penetration of new forms of work organisation in the Greek labour market, it seems there is fertile ground for changes mainly due to tiredness with the old way things were being done and due to the increasing need for renewal and innovation (Netweek, 2012).

This case study is based on:

- interviews with two employees, one employer's representative, one trade union representative and a stakeholder from the field of management and businesses;
- desk research based on journals and websites.

## **General characteristics of Microsoft Hellas**

Microsoft Corporation is one of the world's leading technology companies, founded in 1975, with offices in more than 100 countries and more than 100,000 employees worldwide. The Microsoft Corporation develops, manufactures, licenses, supports and sells computer software, consumer electronics and personal computers and services.

Microsoft Hellas SA was launched in 1992. The company's headquarters are in Athens, the country's capital city. When it comes to large-scale organisational change, Microsoft Hellas needs to consult its mother company which is located in the United States.

Microsoft Hellas employs around 120 people. The average age of its employees is 35 years. There is neither a trade union nor works council in the company. Microsoft Hellas is mainly a sales company, the majority of the workers being sales assistants, employed outside of the company's offices due to the nature of their job. Mobile work would not be appropriate for these workers.

Microsoft Hellas, however, also operates marketing, human resources and public relations departments. In the marketing team there are three employees under one supervisor, human resources has eight employees under one supervisor and in public relations there are five employees under one supervisor. Traditionally, the work within these departments was performed on the employer's premises. However, in 2011 mobile work was introduced, providing the staff in the three departments with the opportunity to work remotely.

Microsoft Hellas employees are all permanent full-time employees, since it is considered to be the only form of contract able to make them feel secure enough to want to invest their skills into the company. The idea is that increased flexibility should not result in reduced security for the employees, as that would reverse intended positive impacts of such flexibility measures like increasing productivity and employee satisfaction. Because there is no trade union or workers' council within the company, no operating agreement has been signed concerning the precise method of mobile work program implementation.

## **Design and implementation process**

The New World of Work initiative, already implemented by other Microsoft companies abroad, was based on a new perspective of work organisation, the transition from the industrial to the digital era and in line with technological developments. The programme is based on the concept

that the transition to the digital era should lead to a reappraisal of work organisation methods (Netweek, 2012). It was introduced at Microsoft Hellas under the management's initiative, specifically by the General Director, based on a tested model of work organisation from Microsoft Netherlands, where he was previously employed.

The employer and employees said the General Director arranged meetings with personnel to explain how the model worked and presented positive aspects based on the experience of Microsoft Netherlands. Before introducing the New World of Work programme, Microsoft Hellas was required to solicit approval and funding from the mother company in the USA. The changes that have taken place for the implementation of the New World of Work programme revolve around three axes – humans, the workplace and technology (Microsoft Hellas, 2012):

On the first axis – humans – the emphasis is on flexible working hours and also the opportunity to work away from the employer's premises. According to the interviewed staff, even before 2011 Microsoft Hellas provided employees with some flexibility over the times they started and left work. They were allowed to fit their start and finish times around family responsibilities, healthcare needs and so on, although they did need to stick to official working hours. Absence for a full working day in order to work from home without seeking permission was an extremely limited and one-off practice. Despite being given some freedom in choosing their working time, staff preferred to be 'formal' as to arrival and departure times. Since the adoption of the programme, all employees are eligible to work from home, and all have taken the opportunity of working away from the employer's premises for some days per week.

According to the interviewed employer and employees, management at Microsoft Hellas started to change its attitude and mentality in order to persuade staff to follow its example. Sensing the change in attitude, employees began to try mobile work.

One interviewed employee said the change was gradual. At first, people felt it was still preferable to work from the office. However, when the CEO and department heads began to work remotely others followed suit. According to the employees, today they get to decide independently how to organise their work, the location from which they perform it, the hours worked, and so on.

On the second axis – workplace – there was a complete reconstruction of the company's headquarters. Because everyone had the chance to work from home, there was no need for an individual workplace for each employee. The number of workplaces was reduced by 50% since few people had a fixed office space anymore, including the chief executive and the director general. The exceptions were the accounting and HR departments.

Several meeting rooms and 'quiet rooms' were created to house activities such as meetings, brainstorming, the need for concentration, discussions where confidential information was shared, telephone contact with customers, presentations and such like. In addition, drawers were replaced by personal lockers located at the entrance of each floor (Microsoft Hellas, 2012). An employee said nobody had their own space and each morning staff decide independently which office they will be using for the day.

On the third axis – technology – the company uses the Lync system to keep people informed about a colleague's availability and communicate with them in real time. People can also use the system to make video calls, exchange instant messages, and share screens and presentations. This system makes it possible for the employees to work from anywhere with internet connection and stay connected with others in the company. All staff are connected and have the opportunity to communicate with each other at all times. Each employee logs their daily tasks and programmes to their personal calendar which is visible to everyone inside and outside the office. In order to facilitate mobile work, the company provided every employee with a laptop, a smartphone and a 3G stick.

The introduction of mobile work at Hellas was also brought in to attract new talent, especially highly qualified people who lived some distance from the company's offices. The programme

was also expected to reduce costs. A further objective for adopting the mobile work system was to bring about a change in mentality, particularly to get management and staff focused on achieving targets rather than spending a certain number of hours in the office.

There was a need not only for cost reductions but also for improved efficiency and productivity. According to the experience of Microsoft Netherlands, the new programme could revive the employee's psychology, resulting in efficiency and productivity improvement (Microsoft Hellas, 2012). Indeed, according to interviewed employees, a more trusting relationship between the employees and management has grown and this has improved efficiency.

## **Working methods, processes and procedures**

Most employees work at home one or two days per week. The tasks usually performed from home require writing, concentration and thinking, while tasks performed in the office usually include meetings with colleagues and clients.

One interviewed employee said they preferred to work at home in order to perform tasks like market analysis, development plans, preparation of overseas performance reviews (demonstrating the company's performance at national level), writing presentations, speeches, articles as well as overseas conference calls. Yet, this seems to be quite subjective, since some other employees preferred to work in the company's premises either because they were more sociable or because they lacked space to work at home. Some said that if they needed to they could move to one of the quiet rooms (rooms designed for a small number of people) found on almost every floor of the office building.

As regards to health and safety, the general provisions of the Labour Law are applied. This means that if an accident occurs while a person is working from home or when commuting to and from work, it is considered to be a work accident. Mobile work does not have an impact on training, since when a training event takes place, everyone is invited. Pay is target-oriented and not based on working time, since employees receive bonuses (additional to standard monthly pay) for achieving specific results.

According to both the interviewed employer and employees, mobile work as a form of work organisation is made possible by new technologies offering employees safe access tools as well as direct contact with their colleagues while working away from the office. The Lync programme for communication is available to all staff each time they turn on their PC or mobile phone. Moreover, all employees have remote access to company files. According to one interviewed employee, company files are stored in cloud servers, providing the employees accessibility to company data using their personal passwords.

Interviewees said that, apart from new technology, another important aspect in implementing a mobile work system is good organisation of tasks and accountability within the company. On the one hand, it is important to allow employees autonomy and flexibility, and on the other to supervise the tasks, evaluate performance and so forth.

According to the employer, the Microsoft Lync programme enables monitoring when specific employees are online and what tasks they are working on at any given moment. Consequently, employees are interconnected at all times, allowing supervisors to know which employees are working from home and which from the office, who is online, and facilitating direct contact at all times. Furthermore, the employer representative reports that the Lync programme also provides electronic calendars completed by each employee and shared with their manager, who is able to supervise the tasks performed during the day.

To function well, mobile work systems require structured design and analysis. At the beginning of the year, each employee sets specific targets, has daily contact with a supervisor and is evaluated by structure of assessment process (tools). According to one interviewed employee, evaluation is carried out once a year on the basis of whether specific targets set out at the start of

the year have been achieved, while mid-year an intermediary official inspection of work in progress is conducted. Another employee reported that the work each person has to carry out is clearly defined and well organised.

According to the employer's representative, the company expects specific results from each employee, and evaluation is carried out according to measurable quantitative and qualitative criteria. It is not possible to waste time without working as this will show in the results, therefore whether work is done from home or from the office is not important. As mentioned in the interview, based on this character of work, a relationship of trust has been built between the employer and the employees.

## **External support**

While Microsoft Hellas did not seek or receive any support outside its network, it drew on the best practice of another Microsoft branch, Netherlands, in implementing the mobile work programme. For this to happen, the parent company in the US was asked to approve the reform and a series of changes started taking place.

## **Outcomes**

The results of the implementation of the mobile work system were recorded in the interviews conducted for this case study and employee satisfaction surveys conducted by Microsoft Hellas at regular intervals. They focus on the following topics: improvements in employee satisfaction and productivity; cost savings; better use of space; and improved employee relations.

### **Improvements in employee satisfaction and productivity**

Annual employee satisfaction surveys show improved results in recent years compared to previous years, despite the increasing volumes of work and the intensified pressure deriving from the current market status and competition, as well as the insecurity and uncertainty caused by the current crisis. Also, the improvement of employee satisfaction is linked to the reduction of the employee stress levels, which is attributed to the improvement of work–life balance.

Work intensity has fallen as employees save commuting time. The increase in employee satisfaction has led to an increase in productivity and to the improvement of the company's competitiveness (Microsoft, 2012). According to interviewees, up until now there has been no controversy over the issue of working outside the employer's offices.

### **Cost savings**

According to Microsoft data, electricity consumption has been reduced by 20%, while there has also been a reduction in stationery equipment consumption – paper, inks and so on – in fuel consumption and generally in the cost of transportation expenses from and to work, also covered by the company. The cost of leasing property and office space also decreased by approximately 30% (Microsoft, 2012). An employee reports that due to the implementation of the mobile work system there are great savings in transport costs for the company, that the work is carried out entirely online and that the files are now kept electronically, which is particularly useful in saving printing paper.

### **Better use of space**

One employee reported that following the introduction of the mobile work system and the remodelling of the company building, the space became more oriented toward clients' needs. Given that the staff's physical presence is not required every day, people do not have their own office. Consequently, staff office space was reduced and more space was created for interviews, working with clients, presentations and hosting associates and start-up businesses.

## **Improved employee relations**

Another employee said that due to the remodelling of office space which became possible after the introduction of the mobile work system, employee contact has improved. Specifically, it is reported that because employees are situated in large common spaces and because each day the person sitting in the next office may change, employees come closer to each other while they can also see how other departments work and which procedures are followed, resulting in better insight into the company's way of functioning and their colleagues' needs.

## **Strengths and weaknesses**

The implementation of the mobile work system has been beneficial both for employees and employers. According to the interviews, there were a number of benefits.

### **Improved work–life balance**

From the employees' point of view, one of the greatest advantages of the mobile work system is a better balance between personal and professional life. Specifically, it has been reported that workers enjoy greater flexibility in organising their everyday life and in adjusting their professional life to their personal and family needs. This has been especially advantageous for pregnant women and young mothers who have the opportunity to work mainly from home even before or after the maternity leave period.

The particular case of a pregnant employee was highlighted. She had chosen – before maternity leave – to work from home three out of five days per week while the rest of the department worked twice or even once per week away from the company's premises. This system has also been particularly useful for parents who can balance family responsibilities like picking up children from school and participating in after school activities while also being able to finish their work afterward from home.

### **Reduced commuting**

Another benefit is saving productive and personal time by reducing travel to and from work. Indeed, it is reported that there are employees living in areas away from the company's offices for whom travelling to or from work might take 45 minutes up to an hour, especially during peak hours. Usually, these employees choose either to adjust their working hours to avoid traffic congestion by working for instance from home during early-morning hours and getting to the office at noon or later, or choose to work three days per week within the company's offices and two days per week from home, and vice versa, in order to save time. A reduction in company's expenses has also been reported, since cars and travel costs provided by the company have been significantly reduced.

### **Reinforcing employee autonomy and responsibility**

Employees in their interviews also report that they value greater autonomy in organising their work tasks and time. For example, one interviewee reported that mobile work brought about an important change in mentality; a mentality leading to more equality among workers, and a more democratic model of work requiring from management to have trust that employees will properly do their job. It was also highlighted that employees' performance within the company is supervised, however not in a 'compulsive' way, since employees were considered to have the maturity and professionalism to keep their commitments to their managers.

### **New technology and familiarisation with company products**

The mobile work programme has been implemented with Microsoft products, including Lync, the internet, laptops, smartphones, instant messaging and video calls. It has resulted in employees

becoming more familiar with the products they are promoting and selling. This is a good promotional strategy for the company. According to the interview with the company's representative, the company is keen to promote its model of work among other Greek enterprises. Although increased sales is not the goal here, the expansion of this model could contribute to the promotion of Microsoft products.

### **Trouble-free relocation**

The mobile work system has proved to have benefits on unforeseen circumstances. A burglary at the head office required relocating all employees to another office for nearly eight months. According to the interviews this caused no change in the rate of working, since employees' relocation was straightforward, without needing to transfer documents, files and so on, given that work is stored in electronic form on personal laptops.

### **Increase in productivity and overall cost reduction**

Overall, the interviews showed that improvement in autonomy and satisfaction increased employees' productivity. In particular, the staff felt that the company shows respect to its employees and employees feel personally responsible to organise their programme. They also feel that their family life has considerably improved offering 'tranquillity and satisfaction', leading employees to become more effective. One of the greatest reported advantages was a reduction in the company's operational costs – a fact of great importance since it coincided with the start of the financial crisis in Greece. There has been a reduction in office space, travel costs, stationery equipment consumption, printer use and electricity consumption inevitably leading to a more effective use of the office space.

In fact, until recently, the company leased an entire building in the centre of Athens – the Innovation Centre – providing space and technology for events, meetings, start-ups and innovative companies. After the company's headquarters reorganisation and the release of space used as offices, the Innovation Centre left the rented space in Athens and was transferred to another city, reducing the premises rent cost significantly.

### **Opportunities to attracting new talent**

According to the company, another big advantage was that the improvement of working conditions also created the opportunity to attract new talent from the labour market. Microsoft is more attractive to people living far from the company's premises, as they can work from home without spending time and energy for their transportation.

In conclusion, both the company and the employees appear more focused on the advantages rather than the weaknesses of the mobile work programme.

For employees, the weakness of the mobile work system is related to the lack of a separate space at their residence, especially if they have a family with young children, since there is no quiet place and it is difficult to concentrate. However, on the whole, the introduction of mobile work improved, not decreased the quality of work performed. It appears that despite the possibility offered to balance family and private life, in cases where there is no separate quiet space at home, work can invade personal life and the opposite. The company, on the other hand, reported no weaknesses.

### **Future plans**

Microsoft's future objective is to offer even greater flexibility and autonomy to its employees. Moreover, within the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR), the company aims to promote the new work model it is implementing and also to support its implementation within other Greek companies.

Already related presentations have been released for Microsoft's companies-clients (for example, pharmaceutical companies, consumer goods companies and so on). They have expressed great interest in the way this flexible mobile work system is being implemented and its results, both in terms of direct operational costs reducing and improvement of employee performance related closely to employees productivity improvement.

## **Commentary**

Although the economic and social situation in Greece requires a change in mentality, according to stakeholders' interviews, it is estimated that this change will take time. Most heads of companies still feel insecure in employing permanent staff and offering them at the same time increased autonomy and flexibility, as they perceive the employment relationship in the traditional sense, where the employees' presence in the workplace is considered a basic obligation, inherent to paid employment.

According to the stakeholders, it appears that unfortunately in the context of the financial crisis, most of the companies prefer wage reduction, uninsured employment, contract recruitment and independent services instead of investing in productivity through employee satisfaction improvement and by introducing both innovative staff management methods and alternative cost reduction methods.

However, as this case demonstrates, both from Microsoft and the stakeholders, there is a need for that companies to adjust to the current financial crisis by adopting new work organisation methods. They need to be able to provide security to staff, since permanent full-time contract employees show greater commitment and consistency towards their employer than freelance workers or temporary workers, who are unlikely to have such a strong motivation to invest in a company.

## **Information sources**

### **Websites**

Lync: <http://office.microsoft.com/el-gr/lync/>

Microsoft Hellas: [www.microsoft.com/hellas](http://www.microsoft.com/hellas)

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