

Hüwels Betonelementewerk GmbH: Supplementary Telework in the Construction Industry: SME Case 13

Overview

Hüwels Betonelementewerk GmbH in Oberhausen has been in existence for more than 40 years. It is a family-run company founded by the father of the current proprietor and managing director. The company produces precast concrete components. In order to survive in this highly competitive market the company decided to specialise, *inter alia*, in the production of custom-made products. The company manufactures concrete components ranging from briefcase size to components with a weight of 20 tons. These include balconies, stairways, facade elements, gable walls and much more.

The company employs 17 employees. These are mainly production workers trained as precast concrete part workers and concrete workers (bricklayers and trained staff). The staff also includes a master tradesman, a secretary, a constructional engineer and the managing director and proprietor of the company who trained as a civil engineer as well as an economist.

Practice

The managing director and proprietor of the company has practised temporary telework for approximately 2 years. Telework mainly takes place from home during the evening, at weekends and so far - on a limited basis - on weekdays during normal working hours. He is technically equipped with PC, printer, scanner and internet access. Currently the company's electronic data processing system is being upgraded and adjusted, which will enable him to directly access the company system from home. So far the data transfer has been carried out with floppy disks.

Activities carried out by the managing director in the frame of telework primarily include cost estimating and calculation as well as the drafting of tenders and correspondence. Only to a very limited degree he works on drawings and AutoCAD drafts carried out by the civil engineer.

In some cases the company is already able to provide suppliers (for example for form working) with finished work instructions, plans and drawings by email or floppy disk. Suppliers can then directly use these for the production of their products and without further additional effort. In that way an acceleration of the total process and a much lower error rate is achieved. However, the majority of suppliers are not yet equipped with the technical prerequisites required for this. The same type of cooperation is currently starting with architects, construction companies and engineering offices, also leading to a significant acceleration in the handling of orders. As these processes are carried out increasingly by electronic means there is also an opening for telework. Because the managing director is already practising telework, he is much more open minded towards this new process of cooperation. He therefore should be one of those

who will reap the benefits of this new development early – in an industry usually considered to be rather conservative. It is very likely that this analysis of and preoccupation with these new IT technologies for cooperation with suppliers and customers would not have taken place if he had not already practised telework.

Experience

The experience gained by the managing director from practising telework is entirely positive. Thanks to the possibilities of telework he is, for example, able to carry out important additional calculations for orders that normally would not be done due to work and time pressure restrictions. At the same time additional calculations in particular provide valuable indications for weak spots in company and production. In addition, he has discovered a much higher productivity with himself: „In two hours telework I get twice as much done.“ The tenders drafted show a much higher quality because he, as a teleworker, is able to draft them without disturbances and interruptions. He, as a teleworker, can also - at last - deal with tasks that cannot be looked after during the day due to constant interruptions. „Sometimes phone calls are forwarded and I discover that the caller just wants to find out about the price for a concrete step. Any other company employee could have answered that.“ He further remarks that employees have started developing a greater independence due to his slightly greater absence from the company premises: „If you are absent more often, which is inevitable as a teleworker, employees increasingly stop to ask you about relatively unimportant issues. Issues that they really should be able to resolve themselves.“

In the light of these advantages for himself and the company an extension of telework is planned for weekdays during normal working hours. The managing director is not considering full teleworking days but half days when he, for example, either „tele“-works in the morning or the evening while spending the rest of the day in the company.