

# **Report by Dr Beatrix Behrens and Prof. Dr Lutz Bellmann on the EIPA event on the mobile working environment in public administration**

**Written by Beatrix Behrens**

**Beatrix Behrens (EIPA and HdBA) welcomed participants and guests and introduced the topic – one with relevance stretching beyond the pandemic in view of the requirements of a modern working environment. In times of crisis, making working hours and, most importantly, places of work more flexible has become a ‘success story’ almost overnight, helping to safeguard performance in business and administration.**

**IAB Deputy Director Ulrich Walwei gave his keynote speech, asking the question ‘What does “New Work” mean today, and what is its future?’. The starting point is the transition from industry to the knowledge society. He emphasised the meaningful role of work, the greater independence of time and place, the increasing importance of flexible project structures and the significance of digital and non-digital skills. Communication skills will also play a prominent role in the future – not only specialist and methodical skills are critical to success in the new working environment.**

**Coronavirus has accelerated digitisation, stressed Ulrich Walwei, who believes that employers and employees have relativised their reservations about mobile working in the crisis situation, on account of mostly positive experiences. Demography also plays a key role,**

and the appeal of employers is decisive in a competitive labour market. Business and administration must focus more on the wishes and ideas of employees, and particularly on what employees expect from their work. The focus is not just on recruitment, but on retention as well.

**Florian Kunze, holder of the Chair for Organisational Studies at the University of Konstanz,** reported on the results of the Konstanz home office study. Surveys conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed a massive transformation in the working environment as a result of the coronavirus crisis. The home office offers opportunity because of the increase in commitment and productivity. However, this comes with risks, such as exhaustion and loneliness. Childcare only reduces productivity in the home office if no suitable workplace is available. Many employees appreciate the flexibility associated with mobile working. It is important to find the right balance of working on site and working in a home office for the particular work context and tasks.

Based on current studies carried out by IAB, **Lutz Bellman, holder of the Chair for Economics at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg and Head of the IAB ‘Establishments and Employment’ research department,** discussed the benefits and reservations of mobile working from the perspective of employees and businesses. The current results of the IAB study ‘Business in the COVID-19 crisis’ show a strong increase in the importance of the home office. There is a lot to be said for this development continuing. Work in a home office is no longer stigmatising, experiences are better than anticipated, and businesses have invested in physical and human capital accordingly. Explicit arrangements are important because they help to significantly improve job satisfaction with regard to compensation for overtime, the compensation period for working time accounts, availability and (adjusted) performance targets.

The German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) has for many years played a pioneering role in shaping the mobile working environment beyond the 'classic' issue of reconciling family commitments with one's career or private life. **Martin Neubauer, Head of sub-department Z2**, reported on nearly 20 years of experience with this HR-policy instrument. As suggested by the scientific community, good boundary conditions and agreements need to be in place, which are manifested in a corresponding service agreement. In principle, all employees can work mobile, something that is also utilised by more than 90%. There is no need for formal approval procedures, which will also relieve the strain on HR. People can work with team agreements and fall back on self-organisation, personal responsibility, and trust. On-site time (currently one day a week due to coronavirus) is clearly regulated and based on the requirements of the work units. In view of this evolved culture and the corresponding boundary conditions, the BMFSFJ had a significant advantage in coping with the pandemic. Thanks to its IT equipment (all employees are given a laptop), the organisation was immediately ready for work. The key topics in this summary are: building trust in the management, including with clear objectives and shaping of processes, technology, accessibility and individual flexibility. New spatial concepts with points of encounter and for innovation are crucial. As the BMFSFJ was immediately able to work and act during the crisis, without limitation, employees could be supported and qualified with targeted support offerings. The promotion of health and health training on topics such as resilience and self-limitation are also important. In order to learn from experience for the further development of flexibilisation, the Ministry has evaluated the quantitative and qualitative aspects of mobile working through interviews. A

key finding is the central role of managers in mobile and flexible work. Good leadership therefore requires guidance and support and should not lead to excessive demands on managers.

The international perspective was introduced in the webinar by **Eileen Fuchs, Head of Division DGI 1 – Digital Policy Principles, EU and International Affairs at the Federal Ministry of the Interior**. She reported that as yet, there is no structured approach to the experiences in other countries. In her experience, however, most employees of the European Commission worked from home offices during the lockdown. She also observed that mobile working led to a flattening of hierarchies, as otherwise managers would not have had the opportunity to just 'call in' and ask employees how things were going and what work they were doing. There is a need for a digital organisation culture to promote this. In addition, more encouragement for spontaneous input, mutual knowledge transfer and networking is also important. The BMI supervises and controls the 'open' network PersDiv (personnel in digital administration), with the option of cross-agency networking and learning from one another. All authorities are invited to learn through this (e.g. through the PersDiv newsletter) and to join in with the network.

The overarching goal must be to bring about cultural change and, in particular, a digital culture with corresponding rules and a code of conduct as well as associated processes. In the majority of cases, these success-critical culture components are not taken into consideration in the digitisation and shaping of 'New Work' – a new topic for the future.

**The views expressed in this blog are those of the authors and not necessarily those of EIPA.**