Impacts of Telework in a Company of Agribusiness Sector

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Abstract: The evolution of information technology and telecommunications has enabled many ways of work to be executed regardless of the time and the place where the employee and the company are, and then, appeared the telework. This study aimed to analyze the impacts that could arise with the implementation of telework in a company in the sector of agribusiness. The research is a qualitative and exploratory case study, with interviews directed to teleworkers and the Information Technology Manager of the company. After analyzing the content of the data collected, it was noticed that the telework has both positive and negative characteristics to the employee as for the company. In agribusiness, it is developing with some peculiarities in this sector. With a competent management, trained teleworkers, modern technologies and efficient communication, telework has become an essential form of labor for the agribusiness sector.

Keywords: information technology, telework, communication, agribusiness.

1. Introduction

The agribusiness is a key sector to Brazil because the country has many natural resources and arable land. Companies in this sector, seeking to better meet customer needs, incorporated information technology in their daily activities to improve their competitiveness.

The Internet spreading together with the information and communication technologies (ICT's) triggered organizational changes in many companies, including in the agribusiness sector. One of these changes is the possibility of people working in their homes or anywhere else outside the company, keeping constant communication with their superiors, with their co-workers and with other organizations.

This type of work is called telework. It is on this issue that the current article deals with, which has as a general objective, the analysis of telework impacts in a company of the agribusiness sector.
2. Fundamental Concepts

Telework appeared in the 1970s as a possible response to the oil crisis, the increasing of traffic problems in big cities and in a scenario of increasing number of women in the labor market. In Brazil, the country where this research was done, telework is still a recent issue, both in practice and in management literature (Costa, 2004). Telework is characterized by bringing the work to the workers rather than move them to work. It is a regular activity outside the central office, one or more days per week, which can be performed at home or at a teleservice (Nilles, 1997).

Of course, work at home or outside the office is not new. However, traditional forms of distance working are very different from the current forms (Costa, 2004). The work becomes an activity that can be made at any time and anywhere. Thus, the organizations themselves stretch its borders: in space, as teleworkers are located in different places; and in time, because the work is no longer restricted to conventional office hours. This way, organizations can operate 24 hours a day with teleworkers online from anywhere in the world.

Telework is considered as a form of work that brings many advantages for employees and employers. For Zimmer (2006), the benefits to the employee are: autonomy and independence in performing their work; time to family contact and for leisure; less exposure to the stress associated with traffic and conflicts with colleagues; increase the options of occupation and possibility to work for people with walking difficulties. For the company, there is increasing of productivity, flexibility and creativity; and decrease in turnover, the hierarchical levels, absenteeism and conflicts and as well as the opportunity to recruit staff in a larger geographical area.

Telework can also bring disadvantages for workers, such as: sense of social isolation, in some cases the employee is negligent in relation to their health and safety; the lack of distinction between work and leisure, the lack of physical space at home that fills in the needs of working (mixing the private space and professional space); and possible negative impacts on family relations because of the constant presence of teleworkers at home (Trope, 1999).

According to Hanashiro and Dias (2002), despite the impending economic gains, the company also has some negative impacts with the adoption of telework, requiring attention of the organization. It is highlighted the increase of costs on extra equipment, with energy and telecommunications and also the increase of costs on employee training. Zimmer (2001) also adds to the difficulty of supervising and controlling from distance; disruption of production team, when members held the telework; and risks of a confidentiality breach.

3. Methodological Procedures

This research is a qualitative and exploratory case study, held in the company Campus Rural Agrária, a Brazilian company for the agribusiness sector, which did not allow its identification. It was performed semi-structured interviews with the teleworkers and the IT Manager. From 35 teleworkers which represented the company were interviewed 11 and from the 10 employee teleworkers, 9 were
interviewed. The interview ended when the issue started to repeat. The roadmaps of interviews were developed from theoretical foundation. The interviews were conducted personally with teleworkers and by phone with the IT manager. After the data collected, it was made a content analysis of it.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Below, the results are presented according to established categories of analysis.

4.1 Information and Communication Technology Used by Teleworkers

Information technology available to teleworkers employees are: a notebook of the latest generation with a top of the line processors: Wireless connection, a 3G broad band internet connection, e-mail access, MSN, Skype, and extranet access, so that everyone is able to know what is happening in the company of where they are. Also available is a mobile phone for each employee teleworkers. Managers receive a multimedia projector and a digital camera. The sending of the fax and mails is also on account of the company.

All representatives use fixed or mobile telephone, computer or laptop and internet. Other technologies available and used by them are: fax, MSN, multimedia projector and Skype.

Communication with customers occurs most of the time in person, either representatives or employees. The representatives usually visit the customer firstly, and after that the customer already knows the products, communication can occur by phone or email. In case of employees, the visits occur when it is requested technical monitoring. With the company and with other co-workers, communication occurs mainly by phone, e-mail and MSN.

4.2 Teleworkers Routine

The daily routine of representatives varies according to the needs of each one, because they set their own schedule. First, they make an itinerary of visits, scheduled by phone or in some cases by e-mail and then, they go to do the sale or answer the customer’s queries and follow the work with customers. Then, they go to their homes or to a service center to organize, register the orders and close the load.

The daily routine of the employees are given as follows: seven of the nine of the interviewed stay one day a week at home and two of them stay in the office of the company (usually on Monday) to resolve bureaucratic issues, send e-mails, make arrangements for customers and also, schedule visits. In other days of the week, they make visits to customers, follow representatives, attend lectures, fairs and other events. They travel a lot, because the state is divided into specific micro regions and each one of them have its region of responsibility. They are connected
to the Internet on the daily basis and they communicate to answer the customer’s queries and solve any problem at any time by phone, e-mail and MSN.

### 4.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Telework

From the interviews, it was possible to establish a framework regarding comparative advantages and disadvantages of teleworking, as follow.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of teleworking for teleworkers for employees and representatives for the company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Representatives</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td>- Lack of routine</td>
<td>- Increase of knowledge and learning</td>
<td>- Basis for recruitment and selection increases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Flexibility of teleworking</td>
<td>- Exchange of experiences</td>
<td>- Increase of productivity and creativity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Reduces stress with traffic</td>
<td>- Feedback with the customer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Exchange of experiences</td>
<td>- Lack of routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Increase of knowledge on culture and tourism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
<td>- Tiring travels</td>
<td>- Tiring travels</td>
<td>- Lack of control and supervision</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Lack of habit of using the cell phone and the Internet by customers and by the representatives.</td>
<td>- Distance from family and friends</td>
<td>- Increase in telephone costs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Difficulty of communication in cities where the phone has no signal</td>
<td>- Feeling of loneliness and isolation</td>
<td>- Difficulty in communication (in cities where the phone has no signal and when customers and representatives do not have the habit of accessing email)</td>
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</table>

As you can see, various aspects covered by the literature regarding the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking were highlighted in the results. Furthermore, we found features of telework in the company surveyed, for example, the report of the employees that the infrastructure of hotels where they stay during their travel to the country is very bad.

### 5. Conclusion

Through this research it was possible to understand how the teleworking develops into the agribusiness sector. The most IT’s used by workers are the telephone, computer and internet and the most used by them to communicate is personally and by phone. The routine of teleworkers employees is more rigorous, and they all
have to submit reports on their daily activities. As for the representatives, there is greater flexibility, because they themselves make their schedules and designate the days of the week that they will work. Both for the company and for the employees and representatives, the biggest disadvantage of teleworking is the lack of communication in places where the cell phone has no signal or a lack of access to the habit of accessing IT’s. The main advantage for employees is the gain and exchange of cultural experiences. For the representatives, is the flexibility of teleworking.

It is noticed that the teleworking has its importance in the agribusiness sector, as it became possible to select qualified professionals who are close to customers. Despite the physical distance of the company, IT’s allowing all to be in touch, informed of the events. But there is still a need for the sector of agribusiness in Brazil to adapt to these technologies. It is essential that people incorporate in their day to day and that the cities also provide an appropriate infrastructure which allows that teleworking is exercised efficiently.

References


