

Zutt & Partner The Net Agency



Hans Peter Zutt, founder and owner of an advertising agency, had already tried to combine work and leisure 20 ago when he installed a high-tech infrastructure for distance working in his holiday home, a mountain hut in the Swiss Alps. This earned him a lot of publicity and the reputation of being one of the first “telework pioneers“, of running a “model business for telework” in Switzerland. This case study does not repeat the well-known history of the initiative, but rather describes the further development of the original concept in later years and its current position – as depicted by Philip Zutt, son and presumptive successor of the founder.

1. Company name and function

ZUTT & PARTNER - THE NET AGENCY

The company was founded in 1978 as a small advertising agency. Over the last few years it has steadily developed further into the present medium-sized communications and Internet consultancy company. Since 1991 the company has appeared on the market under the name “The Net Agency”. Today, company activities concentrate on the three areas of marketing and communications consultancy, image and text design, and computer science services (programming) for clients. Besides traditional advertising, multi-media productions for the largest banks, direct-TV design, i.e. digital and modular film and video productions directly from the computer are also offered. In 1995, Zutt & Partner employed 15 people, mostly graphic designers, advertising experts and telecommunications consultants. The estimated turnover then was around 1.5 million Swiss Francs. Today, there is 35 staff including part-time workers, apprentices and field agents, corresponding to 25 full-time posts.

2. Short description of the initiative

In the beginning there was the wish to reconcile family and work. The advertising specialist and father Zutt asked himself the question, how could it be possible to be successful in his profession and still be present at home during a time when the children were growing up. He found the solution in 1980. The company was no longer to be centrally lead but instead it was to be decentralised. Today, after two decades of pioneering work the company operates per-

fectly with the help of computers, mailboxes, and hands-free equipment. These replace a large part of face-to-face communication. Meetings are only held if personal, physical presence is absolutely necessary. The few meetings now are prepared more intensively and better than previously.

Zutt & Partner's telework model is set up according to the cell principle. The mother cell, the management site, was divided into locally separate daughter cells for design, conception, production, consultancy, public relations, computer science, F & E, finances, personnel etc. Although these take on specialised tasks, they can exercise business functions completely autonomously. The cells, which are spread over North East Switzerland, are connected with each other via the most modern telecommunications media, digital rental lines, central Email and Voicemail systems, intranet and LAN, fax machines, and Dictaphones linked to the telephone.

It is company policy to always buy the newest, best and fastest equipment, with the specification that they are network compatible. This innovation enthusiasm also carries over to employees and has a strong influence on the company culture; it is also used as a selection criterion when recruiting employees.

Today, telework is practised by slightly more than half (15 to 20) of the 35 employees, in line with the various requirements and demands of the individual projects, alternating and part-time (between 10% and 80%) as well as in exceptional cases full-time at home. Although there is the opportunity to telework, there is no obligation to do so. Thus, around 15 people make no use of telework, although they could do so. However, all are included in a system of tele-co-operation. Tele-co-operation is absolutely vital for the company; it could not operate without it.

3. Innovative aspects of the project

The company was one of the firsts in its sector to have a system of decentralised, interlinked telework places, which now also have Internet access. Innovations in computer technology were and are constantly acquired and implemented or, if necessary, developed by the employees themselves, to perfect the operation of telework. In the course of time the intention of creating multi-functional workplaces could be realised: accordingly, more and more responsibility and authority was delegated to the cells. The hierarchy was adapted to the ideal of the individual workplace and levelled out. The positive experience caused the company to progressively expand the telework model over time.

Employees appreciate the freedom of telework, the culture it is based on and the communication forms, as well as the end to commuting and the opportunities for more efficient and concentrated work where peace and quiet is required. There did not seem to be any problems in the private interpersonal area. Experiences regarding work satisfaction, efficiency and client satisfaction were good. In most cases the clients did not even notice that Zutt & Partner were working in separate locations. The reduced office and parking space brings financial advantages. However, in the end the pioneering spirit is more important for the Zutts than financial gain. Hans Peter Zutt has called himself a “technology freak” and an “idealist”.

The biggest difficulties in the realisation of the telework model were of a technological nature. Zutt & Partner sometimes had to develop solutions themselves, which sometimes proved to be very expensive. The elaborate network system that made telework possible is not completely free from disruptions. If any form of interruption occurs, the whole work of the company is disrupted.