

IOTA PAPER

20
22 MARCH

NEW WAYS OF WORKING IN THE FINNISH TAX ADMINISTRATION

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*The concept of the new normal in the Finnish Tax Administration has raised a lot of interest, mainly because we did something very unusual: we defined the outlines for working procedures for our employees' but did not specify the regulations. Our HR Director, **Pirta Karlsson**, presented the new ways of working of the Finnish Tax Administration in the IOTA Forum on HRM in November 2021 and was asked to share more information and backgrounds of how all this was done.*



When the pandemic started and we recommended our employees to work remotely full time in March 2020, we were not too worried: remote working was already a familiar practice for us, and most teams were already located around Finland anyway. Within our organization, we already had a possibility to choose to work remotely a maximum of 3 days a week when necessary and our IT systems and processes were already suitable for remote work. About 90% of our employees worked remotely almost the entire lockdown period from March 2020 to October 2021. We were right not to worry; everything went very well. We finished all the big projects on time, effectivity increased, sick leaves decreased, and job satisfaction did not suffer.

The concept of the new normal in the Finnish Tax Administration

In the beginning of 2021, we started thinking about the “new normal” (meaning the new ways of working) and what it would mean to us. It was completely clear that we would not go back to our pre-pandemic work mode: people were mostly very satisfied with the status quo and were not keen on coming back to work at the office every day - or even every week. Our employees were happy, and we had reached our targets - why should we then force people to come back to office?

We convened to solve these questions and the solution came easily: we need to decide not to decide. One of our values is trust and we aim for self-directedness, so we don't need to overly regulate. We just need to trust our teams and let them decide their new ways of working.

Of course, the decision-making process really was not that simple. Things were good now, but what would happen in the long run: what would happen to sense of belonging? How would new employees adapt to our working culture? Is it possible to transfer competence when all your meetings are packed with agenda and are held on Teams? How about well-being?

Letting the teams to decide

We asked all our teams to discuss the future needs and best ways of working for each team by the end of September 2021. Which tasks require being at the office, which tasks are better done remotely? When does working face-to-face bring extra value? How can we support the feeling of togetherness, even during remote work? What are the needs for development of our physical offices?

Based on the outlines decided by the team, individual employees could decide their personal way of working in the hybrid model. Their decisions will be reviewed and adopted as we get experiences how it have worked on both team and organizational level. Based on those experiences we can update our hybrid model if needed as well as offer support to the daily work.

The only requirement for the hybrid model was that full-time remote work is not an option - meeting colleagues, working together or at least next to each other, is still important and the teams need to understand and cherish that.

The results of the discussions were diverse, just like our teams are. The feedback on the decision of not deciding has been very good: people are happy to be able to decide where they work, and they regard this mainly as a possibility to enhance self-leadership. The possibility to work from basically anywhere (within Finland) means that we are also able to recruit people from anywhere in the country. That gives us a larger number of potential jobseekers, and it has positive side-effects on our employer brand.

From the "new normal" to hybrid working

So, what does the future hold? When I'm writing this, we are making a comeback to the office work starting from April 2022. When we get back to the office, we need to ensure that our workspaces support and boost our new ways of working. We made an enquiry to our supervisors to clarify what sort of office solutions would support the teamwork in a best manner. We already work in an open office space, but the results showed that we need more spaces that are suitable for teamwork and creative thinking: lots of wall surfaces where people can stick their post-its, large versatile spaces, big meeting rooms - because when we are at the office, people want to be and work together. And that's how it should be.

We also added larger desk areas for teams to make reservations when they want to come to the office and work separately but together. The areas also have "informal spaces" for collaborating if needed. Our workspaces need to also be suitable for hybrid working and hybrid meetings - that's why we have improved our camera and audio technology.

Hybrid meetings need to be not only efficient but to also ensure equal possibilities for everyone to participate, so we established some ground rules to follow. In short, when one organizes a meeting, they need to inform all the participants whether the meeting is live, online or hybrid. If the meeting is a live-meeting, we respect the organizer and show up. If the meeting is a hybrid meeting, the organizer should pay extra attention to ensure that everyone can participate equally whether they are live or online. They need to also ask one of the participants to monitor the chat unless they can do that themselves. We are also currently contemplating possibilities for enhancing the sense of presence with audio-visual technology.

After all this preparation for the new normal, we are enthusiastically looking forward to the next chapter in our work life. We can't be sure of what's happening next or what the future work life will be. What we know for sure is that we need to constantly listen and learn - and be ready to change some practices rapidly, if needed. The pandemic has taught us agility and change capacity and that is what we take with us when we slowly move to the new normal.