Free spirits among themselves

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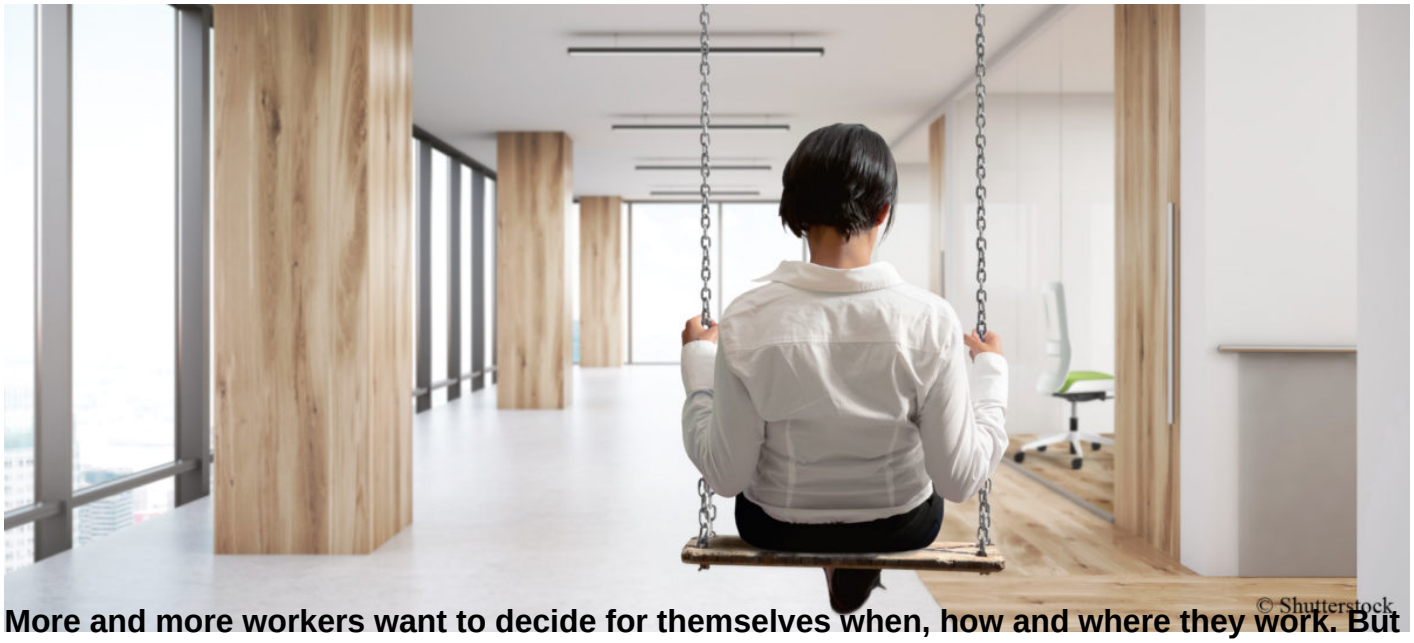

More and more workers want to decide for themselves when, how and where they work. But how far can freedom take us, and how far can we let it take us? An essay on the new status symbol of work.

“What use is freedom of thought, if it will not produce freedom of action?” The Irish writer Jonathan Swift said these words more than 300 years ago, and yet they don’t seem to have lost any meaning today. In politics, in business, in the individual shaping of our private lives, we are more free today than ever before – at least at our geographical latitudes. It’s only in a working context that the concept of freedom is still largely unknown. In spite of all efforts to offer employees a pleasant workplace, in spite of all theoretical superstructures relating to “employer branding”, many employees feel a certain confinement within their company. According to the Gallup opinion research institute, 84% of all employees feel a low emotional connection with their company, or even none at all (source: Gallup Engagement Index 2015). The number is astonishing.

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“Our working environment often sends the message that individual needs and desires are not important to the company, no wonder”, said Jim Keane, CEO of the American office equipment company Steelcase, a few months ago in a meeting with the Harvard business manager. “If machines in factories were as inefficiently utilised as employees, the stakeholders would be beside themselves.” Keane’s solution is to give employees more freedom. “Freedom is the new status symbol. If you want to release individual potential, you have to give the employees the choice.

They need free space to discover their personal working style." The appeal isn't just directed at the design of workplaces, but also, ultimately, at the overall company culture.

Motivation through self-determination

Looking at various studies over the past years, we know that social relationships and friendships in the company counteract employee turnover. In the Bank of America call centre, where management complained over their employees regularly handing in their notice, they introduced the opportunity for employees to arrange their own breaks. "When the employees could decide for themselves when to take a break", explains Keane, "they suddenly had the opportunity to meet with the colleagues they liked. Over time, relationships developed – and the employee turnover rate dropped."

Even in this part of the world, we are already confronting the facets of the concept of freedom. "Dependent on the company culture and the employee's own position in the company, freedom is always also a certain individual space to take action", explains Graz work psychologist Christine Korak, managing director of Agil Gesundheitsmanagement. "If you have a level of autonomy, self-responsibility and can shape your working day yourself, you are happier and more motivated. The employer benefits from this in the form of health, work efficiency and significantly higher loyalty to the company." Above all with regard to time management, Korak demands a minimum degree of freedom.

"People are classed into larks, hummingbirds and owls and, depending on our respective chronotype or chronobiological cycle, we work well at different times throughout the day and night. This is why I always advocate a certain amount of freedom where time is concerned." The limits, explains the psychologist, would be where the freedom became independent and the output can no longer be controlled. And of course, you can't forget that there are types of work where too much freedom is unpleasant or alarming. The right amount would have to be assessed for each individual case.

Collective company management

Locational freedom is also being offered more and more often by employers, as well as demanded by employees. "If you want to position yourself as an attractive company on the market, you will have to offer your employees equally attractive working conditions", says Ewald Stückler, managing director of Vienna's consulting and planning company Tecno Office Consult. "I would regard a certain variety of moods and work settings as standard today – knowing full well that this standard is a long time away from being seen everywhere." For mobile network provider Drei, of

Hutchison Holdings, he renovated the company offices in Brünner Straße and divided the building into different experience zones. Working areas were even set up with WIFI in the garden, which was fitted with wooden gratings, vegetable plots, standing lamps, outdoor armchairs and even a small miniature golf course. “I always recommend that the management team also makes use of the degree of freedom made available to the workers and leads with a positive example,” says Stückler. “There’s nothing better than a CEO who has a couple of strokes of the golf club during his break or sits down under the tree for an informal meeting.”

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In a few cases, the freedom even goes so far that the whole hierarchical structure falls away and the company is then collectively led by its employees. “The Vienna based company Tele Haase, who we consulted for, more or less consists of self-organised teams without bosses”, says Bernhard Kern, CEO of Roomware Consulting GmbH. “Of course, this also expresses itself in the design of the office spaces. It’s just important that this high level of freedom is not just an artificial façade, but actually suits the company. If this is the case, then it’s a win-win situation for both sides in an ideal case.” Heini Staudlinger’s company Waldviertler Schuhe in Schrems is even more free, even more progressive. The company is currently introducing a sociocratic office structure. The boss no longer has the final word as he did before, rather it’s a collective of each individual employee who can now participate with their own desires and ideas of the working culture and responsibility. With a yes, just like with a no. What did French writer and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau say? “Man's freedom does not consist in his being able to do whatever he wills, but that he should not, by any human power, be forced to do what is against his will.”