

Share responsibility, multiply success

Yesterday it was salary. Today it's job satisfaction. People long for work they find fulfilling. In this new working world, companies are trying to come to terms with their employees' changing needs. Greater independence is one approach. Autonomy holds enormous potential – if you allow it.

Expert article

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Do I find my work fulfilling? If you have ever asked yourself this question, you're not alone. Factors such as purpose, flexibility and work-life blend are more important than ever. Flexible working models have become a major job choice criterion. People are increasingly prioritising their health and wellbeing over their work, and are therefore more likely to switch employers. The trend is particularly marked among younger people, as a 2022 Microsoft study showed. It found that more than half of Generation Z and Millennials were thinking about changing jobs in 2023. At the same time, Switzerland is experiencing a record shortage of qualified workers, with the corresponding index rocketing by 68 per cent year-on-year. IT specialists are in second-greatest demand, only just behind healthcare personnel. So what now? What's needed is a new mindset. Salary is by no means the only way of retaining employees and bringing new talent on board.

Fulfilment: an important puzzle piece

It is no news to Ergon that people are questioning their work and its purpose. We have always encouraged employees who want to contribute their ideas and help shape the company. It isn't always easy to have team members question familiar ways of doing things, and set out on an unconventional path. Yet it means progress for both the company and the individual. This is possible if the prevailing corporate culture is one of trust, equal opportunities and transparency. But is that enough to find fulfilment in work, and greater happiness overall? Almost. It takes an additional piece in the puzzle of corporate culture. Independence.

No boundaries, no autonomy

Independence in the workplace means both allowing freedoms and setting boundaries. Employees can decide for themselves how they go about their work, but operate within a set framework of rules and objectives. In practice, they can decide when they work and at what pace, and they organise and prioritise their tasks themselves. This degree of autonomy

cultivates an intrinsic motivation, and it is this that forms the basis of Self-Determination Theory, put forward in 2000 by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. They define intrinsic motivation as the key to personal and psychological growth. It is the foundation of success and fulfilment. Employees are more engaged when they can make independent decisions and directly influence their own performance. Self-determination is often associated with a high degree of drive, and also has a positive effect on health and work-life balance. Where people are able to structure their working hours as they choose, they are better able to reconcile their professional and personal lives. And that increases job satisfaction and prevents burnout. Employees experience less stress and anxiety when they feel that they are in control of their work. People are also more creative and motivated when they work independently, as they are more likely to try out new ideas when they have enough freedom to do so. Strict rules and hierarchies rarely produce innovative solutions.

Autonomy has many faces

Autonomy has been a high priority at Ergon ever since the company was founded. It is one of our strengths. Much of what we do would be impossible without it. Ergonians work in stable teams, and because these are organised autonomously, they adapt faster to change, which helps make the company more resilient. That's a huge advantage for our clients. Projects end, but teams remain in place. They will look for new projects, but at the same time continue to serve their existing clients in case maintenance, adjustments or additions are needed. The related knowledge and authorities are assured even after the project is completed.

The Swiss Labour Force Survey found that employees have more control over the order of their tasks than over their content. Employees at Ergon have both in equal measure, and three more forms of independence besides: The first of these is personal autonomy. Take flexible annual working hours, for example. Ergonians plan for themselves how they

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divide their time, deciding individually how they offset overtime or organise flexitime. They make sure that their hours are compatible with the needs of the team and of their clients. Ergonians can also select their hardware from a wide range, and have a free choice of operating system. Personal autonomy also includes continuing professional development, for which employees are independently responsible and manage their own available budget individually. Here they coordinate with their team leader. Team autonomy is a further form of independence. For example, Ergon staffs projects as decentrally as possible to encourage knowledge-sharing. It also minimises dependence on individuals, which is good for business continuity if someone falls sick or is taking time off, for example. Our autonomous teams are responsible for projects, clients and achieving set targets. The third form is project autonomy. This helps to maximise the benefit to the client. To achieve this, teams independently decide who will take which role, and define their own deputisation arrangements. They also make decisions on technology autonomously in consultation with the client.

What encourages autonomy? And what hampers it?

While trust and transparency create the basis for autonomy, there are numerous factors that encourage it. These include working together as equals, clearly defined targets, flexible working hours, specific roles, areas of responsibility, authorities and measurable indicators. All of these provide direction and aid decision-making. But how does that look in practice? At Ergon, employees know what the company is earning, they're familiar with our KPIs, and what we're spending. All salaries and expenses are transparent. There are regular information events on the issues that are currently driving the company. Just as important as transparency is equal opportunity. This means that everyone has the same training budget, there is a narrow salary spread, and the same occupational pension rules apply to all. The principle of equality and transparency of information create trust. They signal that we are all pulling together.

Finally, knowledge-transfer also encourages autonomy, which benefits not just companies, but clients as well. Ergon has ‘communities of practice’ to make sure that knowledge and experience are shared. These communities are cross-functional-team groups that handle with specific subjects and best practices for the company as a whole.

By contrast, a lack of transparency and micromanagement get in the way of people working independently. There can be no autonomy where there is a lack of dialogue, information is kept back and feedback is not constructive. An autonomy-friendly culture must permeate the company itself, but also be exemplified by each line manager.

An effort that pays off

Companies that have not yet addressed the autonomy issue are sometimes afraid of losing control. But it's worth giving it a chance. Autonomy demands a foundation of trust and respect on both sides, but that's not all. The next task is to get employees of all generations to the same level of knowledge. Companies that achieve the balance between autonomy and control open the doors to greater fulfilment, job satisfaction and results.

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