Hurray, I'm my own boss. Why am I doing this to myself?

Some celebrate it as self-determination. Others see it as self-exploitation. Old, rigid structures of the working world disperse and are replaced with flexible structures in terms of working time, location and organisation. Whereas employees previously only had limited control over their work, they are now increasingly becoming the boss of their own work. And many look back on the times when 9 to 5 and clear work instructions were a reason to grumble, and to be happy. After all, flexibility at work goes hand in hand with taking on responsibility. And nobody asked for that.

Flexibility as a marketing strategy for rationalisation?

Without the digitalisation of the working world, all flexibility concepts would be impossible. After all, it is only because of new technologies that employees can collaborate with customers and colleagues at any time, from any place and in almost any way. And, as a result, there is now no need for a fixed office workstation, fixed working hours, or instructions according to the book.

And therein lies the crux of the flexibility problem: Companies can save vast amounts of money by rationalising office space and, for example, establishing shared desk concepts. And because many tasks can be completed in just a few clicks, there may no longer be any need for a separate department. Whereas procurement departments previously had to place orders painstakingly by telephone and fax, employees themselves can now place their own orders using the corresponding software - and the system automatically calculates the budget for each individual eraser.

With every further step towards digitalisation, the gap between the opportunities and constraints of flexibility becomes greater: Employees have increasingly better arguments against rigid structures, but in return have to act using an increasingly networked approach and under their own responsibility. Companies are becoming more flexible and open, but at the same time are streamlining structures that they apparently no longer need in the digital world. And that can take its toll.

In principle, the problem of flexibility is like a self-checkout in a supermarket: The customer feels more self-sufficient while shopping, even though they are taking on tasks and responsibilities that actually belong to the checkout staff. And it's not that they are being relocated, they're being made redundant. And are only missed when the till goes on strike.

The discussion about more flexibility at work would not be nearly so animated if it didn't involve huge potential for a new world of work. After all, fewer structures also means greater freedom for individual employees. The only question is: How much of this can and will they accept?

Not more freedoms, but different freedoms: That's how flexibility at work can succeed

Total flexibilisation of working time and location is very stressful for many employees. After all, "no fixed start time" also means that there is no fixed end time. And that means there is a risk of self-exploitation - the more so because colleagues are very good at playing the game of "who spent longest in the office". The same goes for the home office problem: How do I prove that I'm doing something if nobody can see me? Usually the answer is: I'll simply work non-stop to appease my (unjustified) bad conscience.

It's also just as stressful when your boss simply says: "Here's your project. Get started." Suddenly there is no rulebook to tell you what has to be done when and how - the end result is the only specification. This might make a born organiser jump for joy, but it will cause a more "robotic character" to short circuit

And therein lies the great art of flexibilisation - by the employees and by the company. They must take advantage of the opportunities without completely throwing out the old structures. For there is just as much need for the freedom-loving multi-tasker, who has everything under control, as for tireless worker ants, who can complete clearly defined tasks with excellent precision. And depending on the company or industry, one or the other type will dominate.

So it's not so much a question of which freedoms you as a company should offer. Rather, it's a question of to whom you offer these freedoms. And to answer this, you need to analyse your in-house target group: Who works for us? What are their tasks? Which structures are need for this Who and What? And which are not needed?

Of course, this also includes ensuring that the respective employees are clear about which type they belong to. And that they don't simply shout out "Yes!" by reflex when a home office day is offered. Or when the option of job sharing or taking over project management with high self-responsibility is offered.

The same applies to apparently desirable aims, such as flexitime: If you have been arriving at work punctually at 8 am and leaving at 4 pm on the dot for years and years, you don't suddenly have to arrive at 11 am and stay until 7 pm just because you now can. If flexibility does not improve the quality of work or the quality of life, there is no reason to use it. And that's the big opportunity of flexibilisation: It is offered. But it's not compulsory. For anybody.