CADE 2018 abstract
Name: Virtual managers' perspective on virtual work – challenges and new practices in service organisations
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Purpose: As use of ICT-s (information and communication technologies) has become prevailing in everyday life, the same ICT-s have also become ordinary in work context. This has lead to several new work forms to be adopted – virtual work, e-work, distance work etc. Although there is myriad of different terms used for describing the new work context they all boil down to one crucial difference between ordinary and virtual work that is ICT-mediated communication. ICT-mediated communication presents new challenges for managers and virtual work adoption requires reframing understanding of work as we have used to define it. This article concentrates on managerial perspective of virtual work and how management thinking and practices need to be changed in order to be successful in new – virtual – environment.

Methodology/Approach: Virtual work is not suitable for all types of work and positions in organizations. Mostly suitable types of work appear to be intellectual, non-manual work assignments that are more likely in service organizations. Empirical data was collected using in-depth interviews during which virtual managers' were asked to reflect on several perspectives comparing ordinary (face-to-face) management techniques to virtual (ICT-mediated) management practices. Sample consisted of 36 top-level managers who had at lest 3 years of experience managing virtual workforce in service organizations. The 36 interviewed managers were chosen covering all 12 different subsectors of Estonian service industry.

Findings: Managers describe use of virtual work, but have not fully acknowledged the changes needed in management techniques that allow succeeding as a manager and organization in virtual context. Virtual work is being used and seen as addition to ordinary face-to-face work, not as separate modus operandi. Most managers lack vocabulary to describe the new context as well as have little or no formal training in the field of ICT-mediated communication. Virtual work has been adopted due to demand from employees' side, rather than deliberate change process and innovation initiated from top management. Consequently no formal procedures have been changed, including rules for new communication context or training has been provided. Virtual work is usually allowed only at senior and managerial positions. Paradoxically, although expectations regarding new recruits abilities to work in virtual context are high, organizations' readiness to provide related training is low.

Originality/Value: ICT-mediated communication is rather well researched topic, but its specifics in manager-subordinate context have gained comparatively less attention. Virtual work tends to be researched mostly from virtual worker's perspective – gap current research is filling. Interesting insights are gained from virtual manager's perspective in service sector context that have implications not only on how management of service sector workforce needs to be changed but also on academic management education and human resources management practices in service organizations.