

HUMANITY IN A LAW FIRM

A real-life example backed up by research

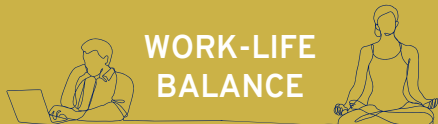
DE ROOS
ADVOCATEN

INTRODUCTION

De Roos Advocaten is a law firm that consists of lawyers specialized in corporate law, intellectual property law, privacy law, and litigation. They are a full-service law firm that works with lawyers specialized in tax, labor, and rent law. The company was founded in 2011 and focused on innovators: organizations in the technology, online, and creative sectors, popularly known as the "start-up space". They guided many investment rounds in these types of companies, both on the entrepreneur's and investor's sides. With around 30 full-time employees, they also bring much experience with the challenges for online businesses in the field of privacy and the protection of know-how and creative expressions.

De Roos faced the typical issues often seen with traditional law firms. Poor work-life balance, elaborate procedures that stifled creativity, and high attrition rates were the norm. Additionally, they wanted to create a competitive edge by improving output. These issues provided a defining moment in which the company decided to differentiate itself from traditional law firms by creating a competitive edge and better serving its clients.

De Roos examined many possibilities for solving their issues and decided to create a culture of cohesiveness through self-management. They implemented a self-management approach by incorporating various practices in their organization.

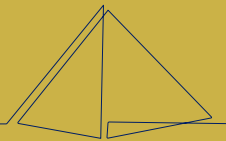


WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Traditionally, law firms are characterized by poor work-life balance wherein employees must log minimum hours. This process does not ensure high productivity rates, as the quality of the work is not necessarily linked to the number of hours logged. Work assignments can sometimes be finished faster, and the minimum number of hours required may not add value.

De Roos firmly believed that a good work-life balance wherein employees have a fulfilling personal and professional life would ensure productivity and employee satisfaction. It took several measures to ensure that employees achieved work-life balance. One example is the no-holiday policy, wherein the firm gave employees the liberty to decide the time and duration of holidays without having a pre-determined schedule in place. In parallel, they did not use minimum hours to appraise their employees.

LACK OF A STRICT HIERARCHY



Traditional law firms have a strict hierarchy, and this often causes delays in producing output. Moreover, legal contracts or documents usually require many iterations when being developed. In the case of traditional law firms, every time a new iteration is made, one has to go through multiple layers of hierarchy. This system is inefficient and lengthy.

De Roos never established a strict hierarchy to try and increase efficiency and productivity. The only hierarchical process it had was in the case of the traineeship, where the senior lawyer supervised the trainee's or junior lawyers' work. However, the firm considered every employee's opinion, whether junior or senior, in terms of experience. With a flatter structure, they encouraged their lawyers to take the initiative and take up projects they were genuinely passionate about. For instance, lawyers could work on regular and diverse projects such as legal design. If they had an idea or venture, they could pitch it to the team and take it forward. This gave them a sense of ownership and increased job satisfaction.



TRUST

De Roos is honest and transparent about its operations, fostering trust among its employees. One way they have fostered trust is through their CEO (who, by the way, is not a lawyer), who actively speaks to every employee regularly to seek their feedback. The CEO is always approachable and keeps in touch by sensing how everyone is doing. The necessary action is taken based on their feelings, emotions, and feedback. For instance, if someone wants to take up a specific type of project, they can soundboard it with the CEO, who then guides and encourages their progress. With this approach, employees increasingly trust the system as their voice is heard and the appropriate response is given. As a result, the attrition rates at De Roos are very low, and a high level of trust has also helped De Roos attract many young talent.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the original case of Semco, Ricardo Semler built their approach and culture from the ground up, and it became a living example of going from practice to theory. De Roos's actions and approaches can similarly be backed up with research. This way, the approach is validated by theory, and vice versa; the theory is grounded with real-life examples.

Transparent leaders live their values. Transparency is an authentic openness to others about one's feelings, beliefs, and actions, allowing integrity to flourish. Such leaders openly admit mistakes or faults and confront unethical behavior rather than look the other way. A critical practice that can be noted from De Roos is the fostering of trust and ensuring transparency among its employees. Top management and employees have witnessed transparency in their projects.

Focus on good work-life balance. Lack of work-life balance is typically characterized by the existence of work/non-work conflict (Greenblatt, 2002), i.e., the interference of work demands with the performance of personal responsibilities and activities (Parasuraman et al., 1996; Frone et al., 1997). Factors one might expect to be associated with engagement in career self-management behavior have been linked with the experience of work/non-work conflict. These include job involvement (Adams et al., 1996), high levels of individual initiative (Bolino & Turnley, 2005), and excessive time spent on work activities (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999). In turn, it has been demonstrated that work/non-work conflict has significant undesirable consequences affecting psychological and physical health (Parasuraman et al., 1996; Frone et al., 1997), reduced job and life satisfaction (Adams et al., 1996; Carlson & Perrewé, 1999), and lower levels of organizational commitment (Netemeyer et al., 1996).² Concerning De Roos, the effective implementation of self-management has ensured no work/non-work conflicts. If there are occurrences, the system helps employees reach solutions to resolve the conflicts. This helped retain employees for a long time and has significantly impacted lowered attrition rates.

Psychological ownership has been found to generate the conscientiousness and extra-role activity that facilitates self-managing work teams' effectiveness, especially in dynamic organizational environments where roles and requirements continually change (Pierce et al., 1991; Vandewalle et al., 1995). Ownership is the means through which self-management enhances team effectiveness (Campion et al., 1993) and is perhaps the most crucial ingredient for defining the transition from a traditional, manager-led team to a self-managing unit.¹ The process also recognizes that employees can make mistakes, which is part of the learning process. Hence, employees are not brought to task as the organization in case of mistakes.

Autonomy. Self-management cultures treat employees like adults so that they can shape their work: freely collaborating with colleagues, managing their time, and making conscious decisions on contributing best. This keeps employees engaged and provides a safe container for people to stand up and speak their truth. The Dutch healthcare provider Buurtzorg exemplifies the benefits of self-managed organizations. Front-line nurses have the authority to make decisions that affect their work. They end up using less than 40% of the hours that Dutch doctors have stipulated for patient care, reduce emergency hospital visits by 30%, and save the Dutch healthcare system hundreds of millions of Euros annually. Patients heal faster, stay in care half as long, and become more autonomous. Buurtzorg is consistently rated employer of the year and has become the poster child for healthcare providers worldwide.³ Since De Roos deals with clients in the start-up space, their approach often has to be one of creativity and innovation. They have addressed self-management, giving their employees ample freedom to think outside the box, pitch ideas to the firm, and choose projects they like. This created a culture of innovation and has helped them meet their objective of creating a competitive edge.

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