

The digital work world – a surge sweeps through the industry

Digitalisation of the work world has taken on a bigger and bigger role in recent years. Today – in the wake of the corona crisis – it has become more topical and prevalent than ever before. Telecommuting has become a critical success factor for companies. Aareon, an IT service provider, has been fuelling the digitalisation of the property sector for years now. We spoke with the company's CEO, Dr. Manfred Alflen, about the corona crisis and digitalisation as well as the impact that the crisis is having on employees, customers and the sector in general.



Die Digitalisierung erfährt durch die Corona-Krise einen bislang ungeahnten Schub, sagte Aareon Vorstands-Chef Dr. Manfred Alflen. Foto: Stefan Freund, Frankfurt

The corona crisis has disrupted both society and the economy. What impact is it having on Aareon?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: The corona virus has in fact created unprecedented challenges for our society and economy. One of our top priorities is to assume our commercial and social responsibility and to do the best we can to protect employees, customers and their respective environments in order to prevent this virus from spreading further. Thanks to our digital structures and robust business model, we are in a position to safeguard ongoing operations, continue customer projects and address enquiries from our customers. We are using both digital and mobile work options and service offerings to do so. Nearly all our employees, roughly 1,700 people, are telecommuting due to the current situation.



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How do your employees like working in their virtual offices at home?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: We have been promoting flexible work schedules and work-site models for many years now – in part to address work-life balance issues. Last year, we went a step farther and introduced a company-wide agreement on mobile work. At Aareon, we have also made virtual meetings a common practise as part of our efforts to add flexibility to work schedules and to reduce the number of business trips we take and, thus, the amount of CO2 that we emit into the environment. In short: Location-independent work from home is hardly something new for our employees. We are profiting from these changes that much more right now during the corona crisis. Today, we are offering specific telecommuting tips that our employees can use to enhance their work in home offices.

The technical equipment required for mobile work is one aspect. Many employees also face family-related challenges, which might involve or relatives who require special care. What approach are you taking?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: Our first priority for all of us at Aareon is to show understanding and empathy. We are in an unimaginable situation right now. Additional stresses are created by children who have to be minded or taught in home schools as well as parents who require care and whom we are not allowed to visit. The top priority is for managers and employees to be aware of this situation and show their understanding each day. We are helping our employees manage these special challenges. We have clearly communicated this commitment to our employees, too. I have seen – and I am also very proud of this fact – that all employees are continuing to energetically and enthusiastically do their jobs and pursue their goals despite all the challenges they face. They are simply there for Aareon and, thus, for our customers.

Humans enjoy social contact – it is certainly a key aspect of employee motivation. How are you helping your employees here?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: One positive thing is that our employees are simply coming up with their own ideas for maintaining contact – things like a virtual after-work get-together or photos from their home offices that have been posted on our digital collaboration tool or on LinkedIn. Our digital collaboration tool, something that we introduced in the Aareon Group about a year ago, has certainly proved its worth during the corona crisis. Information, transparency and photos have become unbelievably important. I think this crisis will ultimately strengthen our bond and bring us even closer together, although we are physically much farther apart. This shows just what type of corporate culture we have, something that we have created and fostered over the years.

The inability to see employees is certainly a special challenge faced by managers. How is virtual management being practised at Aareon?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: We are well positioned in this regard because we have been working over the years to employ a management style that is increasingly based on digital leadership. One part of our management philosophy is independent entrepreneurial styles of work. In this system, a manager acts more like a coach. Teams that consist of employees in different locations or in a number of countries are pretty common at the Aareon Group.

Now that we have taken a look at the employee side of the corona crisis, let's turn our attention to the company's customers for a moment. Interaction with customers is a central aspect of the successful implementation of customer projects. How is this relationship working out during the corona crisis?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: In our efforts to introduce digitalisation and reduce travel costs, we have added special options like “green consulting” in recent years. These efforts have been well-received by customers. These options are now being increasingly used. Customer projects are now being conducted with the help of all digital options, including WebEx meetings and teleconferences. Our customers are very understanding and open to alternative means of communication. This provides us with a good foundation for successful collaboration in the challenging times that we are all facing right now.

How are you helping your customers and, thus, their employees to do their daily jobs?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: We are providing our customers with a wide range of digital solutions in our role as their IT service partner. Our customers who are already using things like Aareon CRM as a tenant portal or app have been telling us how helpful this channel is for communications with tenants or owners. Other

customers are much more interested right now in the introduction of other solutions that can digitalise processes. One of our top priorities is to be there for our customers and provide them with the best-possible support during this crisis. As part of this work, we are providing our Wodis-Sigma and SAP® and Blue-Eagle customers with Aareon Cloud Connect for telecommuting work: Browser-based remote access to the Aareon Cloud facilitates the use of these ERP solutions from any location that has an Internet connection. These services ensure that customers will be able to continue their business processes from home offices.

How are you dealing with customer events and your training programme?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: Our “small” events are now being successfully held digitally. We are digitally continuing our training programme as well. Our design thinking workshops are also offered virtually. We – reluctantly – cancelled the Aareon Congress a little while ago. We are now looking forward to carrying out our new plan for the Aareon Congress next year. We hope that we will be able to hold our Aareon Forum in November as scheduled. In the meantime, we plan to use a range of different communication formats.

What impact is the corona crisis having on the work world and the housing industry? How is it affecting the digital transformation?

Dr. Manfred Alflen: The work world is becoming more digital – and that includes the housing industry. In the past, there might have been a sceptic or two in this regard. But such people can certainly see the advantages and opportunities of mobile forms of work right now. They make it possible for economic life to continue and avoid coming to a complete standstill. The importance of digitalisation is being clearly highlighted by the crisis, but not just in the work world. In the area of education, I think some things could be done differently – or could continue to be done differently – if digital teaching and learning were integrated. In short: The corona crisis is giving digitalisation a boost that is unlike any thing we ever imagined, and this boost will continue long after the crisis ends.