

## **When your key talent becomes... a body double**

### **ABSTRACT**

The case study allows analyzing a new form of remote management by using a body double. It investigates the features of this type of tele-work and the corresponding human resource management (HRM) processes especially relevant for human resource management in the digital age.

**Key words:** telework, body double, employee's two bodies

### **INTRODUCTION**

Working remotely from one's managers or colleagues is becoming the norm in many organizations. Telework, for instance, presents specific challenges to the managerial relationship as it lowers the opportunity for informal conversations. However, new digital tools are emerging in companies in order to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interactions. The body-double is one of those.

A body double robot is composed of three elements: an iPad (featuring the head of the robot), a retractable rod (featuring the body) and a base equipped with wheels (featuring the feet). The iPad's camera and microphone provide video and audio to the remote worker. Interactions with distant colleagues are synchronous, via the Wi-Fi. The robot can also move within an office. It works on battery and is therefore dependent on its battery base for reloading. The teleworker is able to move the body double either with a joystick or with his keyboard. He is being filmed and appears therefore on the screen of the iPad. He can adjust the volume but has no way to hear

how loud he is speaking. At home, the teleworker has a dedicated screen where he can see the body double's surroundings via the iPad's camera. The viewing angle is for the moment limited to this camera's capacity (so the teleworker can not have a 360° view of the room). When standing, with its rod deployed, the body double measures approximately 5.2 feet (158cm).

In this case study, a body-double was implemented because one of the top talent had to move outside of Paris and could no longer come on a day-to-day basis in the office. However, this company does not encourage telework, as its business is focused on digital innovation (healthcare) where creativity and innovation are key success factors and often come from informal discussions in the hallways. The body double was therefore seen as a real substitute for human presence. However, it poses specific challenges in terms of management and leads to analyze the changes at hand in terms of managerial relationships (OB), the impact of digital tools on talent retention (HRM), as well as the difficulty of interacting with a machine which is deprived from certain mobility features, such as opening doors or climbing the stairs (Diversity). The case study has therefore been designed for graduate students, especially MBAs, in Virtual Leadership, Talent Management and Diversity courses.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS / TEACHING IMPLICATONS**

Taken into account the scarcity of the literature on this new form of remote management, the objective of this case study is to lead students to reflect upon their own managerial practices and how they should/ should not implement telework (and which type of telework) in their teams. We base our case on the extensive existing literature on managerial relationships, with a special focus on Leader-Member Exchange theory which has taken the lead in this field over the last 20 years according

to Dulebohn, Wu & Liao (2017)<sup>1</sup>. How do you build, maintain and enhance the quality of the managerial relationship remotely? A meta-analysis<sup>2</sup> has shown that liking and perceived similarity are the strongest antecedents to a high LMX relationship. But can you like and feel similar to a body-double?

This gives also the opportunity to reflect on processes such as anthropomorphizing in the workplace, which is especially relevant in environments where robots are being introduced.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The case study aims to improve students' understanding of the theoretical and managerial implications of using a body double on the nature of managing people at different levels (individual and organizational) and in different areas: managerial relationships, employee attitudes, diversity and inclusion, managing emotions, change management, knowledge management, virtual team building, developing virtual leadership skills. The HRM practices involved are learning and development, training, teleworking development, workspace management, integration of new comers, developing company guidelines regarding the use of a body double.

### **EXERCISE OVERVIEW**

The exercise consists of the case study (see below) that is distributed to students in the class. The class size may vary from 12 to 50 students. The timing of the exercise is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Dulebohn, J. H., Wu, D., & Liao, C. 2017. Does liking explain variance above and beyond LMX? A meta-analysis. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27: 149-166.

<sup>2</sup> Dulebohn, J. H., Bommer, W. H., Liden, R. C., Brouer, R. L., & Ferris, G. R. 2012. A meta-analysis of antecedents and consequences of Leader-Member Exchange: Integrating the past with an eye toward the future. *Journal of Management*, 38(6): 1715-1759.

- Reading the case study – 5 minutes.
- Students are put in the groups of 3-4 students to discuss the case study – 20 minutes.
- Depending on the class size, each group or few chosen groups present their responses to the case study questions. Other groups complete their responses – 20 minutes.
- Debrief from the teacher – 15 minutes.

### **CASE STUDY: When your key talent becomes... a body double**

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Paul has just fallen again and is lying face down. As usual, Paul says nothing. It's the second time this month. One of his subordinates immediately rushes over to pick him up.

"Can you see me? Is everything ok?" he asks in a loud voice.

"Yes... I'm fine. Nothing broken, I think," replies Paul.

Paul hastens to take his usual place where he can watch his whole team. Since his transformation, few people come spontaneously to see him anymore. At lunchtime, no one asks him to join them. During coffee breaks, he is also left on his own. Yet he is one of the most appreciated managers in the company and a great colleague. But...

Paul is rather odd-looking, with an iPad for a head, a pole for a body, and wheels instead of legs. Paul is a remote manager who physically manifests himself through a robot.

By early afternoon, Charles, the CEO of Withings, marvels at the sound of Paul's team's laughter. Only Paul can build such a spirit of cooperation from a distance!

Charles remembers their lunch nine months ago when Paul broke the news: "My wife

is being promoted to hospital director.” “ Congratulations! She earned it!” exclaimed Charles. “Yes... but the clinic is 300 miles away.”

It took Charles a few seconds to gather his thoughts. Paul was one of his best managers, one of his experts and a key actor in the company. Everybody knew him. Everybody came to see him for technical advice. His team was always ahead on their projects. A solution had to be found: he couldn't afford to lose Paul! People like him had enabled the company to get where it was.

A French start-up, launched in 2009 with 10 people, Withings has quickly become one of the world leaders in connected health devices, with flagship products such as a connected body scale and a Swiss-designed activity tracking watch. Each product has been a success, winning prestigious awards at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. With 220 employees in 2016, and offices in Boston and Hong Kong, the company has had to transform itself, but is keen to keep its start-up culture where physical proximity and interactions are key success factors. Fully aware of this, Paul announced his conditions for staying: “No way I'll be managing by Skype. I want everyone to interact with me just like they did before. No click between us.” So far, Charles is very happy with the solution they chose: replacing Paul with a robot four days a week. This “double” allows Paul to move around and interact, without actually coming to the office every day.

Paul: “Every morning I sit in my bedroom —my office at home— I turn on my computer and the iPad. I connect and start my double. Then I roll in to say hello to everyone in the company, well almost everyone because I'm confined to the 3rd floor! Of course, there are some frustrations: I can't climb the stairs, I can't open doors or call the elevator. At first, I was hoping to maintain informal contact with my team and others. I had imagined I would accompany them during coffee breaks, for

instance. But I gave up quickly. It's impossible to follow a conversation between several people: too difficult to adjust the sound and very tiring to talk through the iPad. "How was your weekend?" It's not the same! I finally found my spot down the hall from the open-space, which allows me to be visible to everyone and to see my team. I have become quite fond of my double! And I depend on it, since I only come to the office on Wednesdays. Last week, I was even able to do some of my performance appraisals remotely. I just had to ask Alice what she thought of this new arrangement.

"To be honest with you, Paul, I was a little apprehensive at first, but it works pretty well. You really managed to keep your leadership role. I couldn't believe it! I enjoy the regular meetings we have, where we really take time to discuss things. It feels as though you are even better organized than when you were here. I got so used to your double that, last Wednesday, I was really surprised to see you in person! The problem is, when you do come in, you're always in meetings, so we don't get much time with you anyway. But since we've been working together for three years now, it wasn't that hard to get used to your telepresence robot. Between you and me, I think it's harder for Marc who works on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and has an ongoing project with you. And sometimes I wonder what would happen if we were to get a new team member. Or even someone new in the company who might not benefit from your presence and guidance as we did. Pretty hard to establish a rapport with a robot, don't you think?"

The CEO is very pleased. It was a brilliant way to keep Paul in the company! But working with a robot raises many issues. For example, yesterday, he overheard a conversation between two employees who said they would also like to work remotely. No way they're going to become a company of doubles!

**Questions:**

- How can he make sure that Paul remains the exception?
- What managerial / HR issues are raised?
- What are their implications in terms of human resource management?

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

The session will be a shortened version of the case study teaching in class. We propose to distribute the case, make participants read it, let them answer the questions first and then debrief. The session may last from 30 to 60 minutes.