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Remote Worker Rule Gives Employers Flexibility

By Guennadi Moukine

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A new law allowing companies to execute employment contracts in electronic form opens access to additional labor pools, permitting employers to hire staff in other cities without opening a local branch, a human resources expert said.

President Vladimir Putin signed the amendment to the existing Labor Code last week. It introduced a new article on digital signatures, allowing parties to sign labor documents electronically.

Companies are now able to discuss positions with new candidates over the phone and then simply send them a contract by e-mail. The prospective employee would then sign the document with a digital signature — an encryption program that verifies user authenticity — and email it back to the company. The final step would be for the employer to send a hard copy of the contract back to the employee by registered post within three calendar days of signature.

For example, if a Moscow-based IT firm finds specialists in Kaluga, it will now have an option to employ them as remote workers, without having to set up a local office there or asking them to relocate to the capital.

"We welcome the change," said Vera Mashkova, the HR director for HP Russia and CIS. "However, it is still to be seen how the new law is put into practice." HP is studying the law in order to identify possible pitfalls, and looking forward to the release of implementation notes from the Labor Ministry, she added.

Companies are now able to send employment contracts to job seekers by e-mail.

Mashkova also said the experience in dealing with remote workers could not be blindly borrowed from other countries. The new rule takes into account the nuances of existing hire practices, like the *trudovaya knizhka*, or employment history booklet, she said. The law specifically says that employees are not obligated to have their remote jobs inscribed in the document.

"This amendment extends employers' hiring options, rather than giving employees a right to work remotely," Mashkova said. "It allows companies to hire professionals in other cities without having to set up a local branch there, but it does not give people a choice to work from home if the position requires their presence in the office."

The explanatory note that accompanied the law said this form of employment has the potential to lower employers' costs of renting premises and at the same time increase employee productivity while they work in a more comfortable environment and save on transportation costs.

"A sizable part of Russia's population is tired of working in the office," said Vladimir Gorbunov, chief executive of Workle, cnews.ru reported. Gorbunov's view is very relevant, since his firm is an internet startup that serves as a virtual employment agency, linking those who want to work from home with employers seeking such staff. Its website states that it has set up more than 150,000 workers in this mode.

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