



FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible working is growing in popularity and has different meaning for different people. To many people it means part time working, to others it means working from home and to some it means being able to work from anywhere at any time of the day or night.

Regardless of the context in which it is referred to, there is one common theme. Flexible working is growing at an enormous rate. Not only is it a popular option, it is now also covered by the Work and Families Act which states that parents with a child under six or a disabled child under 18 can make a request for flexible working. From April 2007, that law was extended to include carers of adults. This places a duty on employers to give serious consideration to flexible working requests and only reject them for good business reasons.

GOOD BUSINESS REASONS

There are many. Flexible working presents a whole new opportunity to organisations. Taking the lead from the commercial world where some of the world's leading companies operate in totally flexible environments, organisations can reap benefits in many areas:

- **Capital and operation costs**
With more people working on the move/from home, less office space is required which brings savings on utility and maintenance bills
- **Staff productivity**
Reducing the travel time to and from the office increases the productivity of staff
- **Customer service**
More face to face contact with the community improves customer service and satisfaction
- **Staff morale and retention**
Offering flexible hours/working from home, improves the work/life balance for staff making them happier in their work environment and less likely to leave

While staff morale is a softer benefit which can sometimes be hard to gauge, of all the business reasons for adopting flexible working, it is possibly the single benefit which can contribute most to the performance of an organisation. When people are happy with their work environment they perform better as individuals and teams. This creates a positive atmosphere which in turn is reflected in communication with colleagues and the community. It makes for longer serving employees which only reinforces the team mentality as staff turnover is minimised. All in all, a flexible worker makes a happy worker and happy workers are committed, motivated and very often inspired to do better.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTING FLEXIBLE WORKING

To take flexible working seriously in a housing association, a cohesive strategy is needed, pulling together a number of departments. Many organisations make the mistake of considering it only as a HR project when in fact its success or failure is mostly driven by the IT infrastructure used to support it.

If it's going to be adopted, it's best to make it a strategic project and

implement it properly right from the beginning. Like anything, if it isn't easy for the user and they struggle with the practicalities of it, it won't be accepted and the organisation will gain no benefit. Taking a half-hearted approach to it will serve to cause more harm than good.

There are a number of technologies which support the introduction of flexible working and, as a strategic project, every area of IT needs to be evaluated to ensure it's capable of meeting these new demands. At the foundation of the infrastructure, it is important to have an IP based network to ensure standardisation and ease of integration. Building on this, there are the obvious considerations of laptops, PC's, mobile and landline phones but the real enablers for flexible working are the solutions provided by Citrix and Microsoft. Combined together they give the remote user or home worker secure access to the office based systems they need and the tools to be able to communicate in the most efficient way possible. Adding Cisco solutions presents the opportunity of having soft-phones, thereby removing a hardware maintenance and support burden of managing phones on desks. Supporting all of this is a Wide Area Network (WAN) with broadband connections in place for home workers.

On the application side, and very much to help with providing visibility between main offices and home offices, there are a number of contact centre applications to provide presence management and call handling to ensure calls are answered and dealt with quickly regardless of where staff are working from. This of course is seamless to the caller who will have no idea where the person is actually located.

SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

As with any new working practice or procedure, there are many considerations when introducing flexible working. Here are some of the main points to consider to point you towards implementing a realistic solution which will work well in the organisation:

1. Involve all departments at the beginning to identify the roles which are suited to flexible working
2. Work hand in hand with the HR department to ensure that all legal and personnel criteria are met
3. Choose a technology partner who has experience of implementing flexible working strategies
4. Audit the existing infrastructure to assess what meets the criteria for the new working practice
5. Assess the type of connectivity required for each person
6. Evaluate devices to determine which ones are most suitable to which job role as not all flexible workers will have the same hardware requirement
7. Create a project plan and begin the roll-out in areas where quick success will be achieved, driving organisation acceptance of the new working practice
8. Combine a portfolio of solutions to not only address the practical requirements of flexible workers but also the interpersonal requirements. Instant messaging is a practical solution while still allowing flexible workers to feel in touch with the office

Like all technology solutions, if implemented correctly the personnel and organisational rewards are great. As a new working practice, which involves changing the location of where people work from, it is even more important to make this a strategic project which involves all departments to ensure every angle is covered and to give the project the best chance of success.

TESTIMONIAL

"We have a number of our staff working from home now on a permanent basis. Office based staff also have the ability to work from home should they choose to and this is especially relevant for people who attend meetings off-site, they don't always have to come back to the office to check emails and management systems. They can access them from home. We are always conscious of the need to keep flexible workers feeling included in the world of work so we encourage them work from the office from time to time."

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