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In an increasingly globalized and “flat” business world, traditional hierarchical business models will find their processes and inherent deliberation a major constraint. Here, Marie Puybaraud and Anne Marie McEwan describe their work developing a “Global Mobility Network” at Johnson Controls Global WorkPlace Solutions. The article describes a new model for networks that are freeform in nature and whose success is dependent on light moderation.

ADAPTING TO THE DYNAMICS OF A GLOBAL WORKFORCE

Creating a new model for working with the Johnson Controls network

By Dr Marie Puybaraud, Johnson Controls Global WorkPlace Solutions, and

Dr Anne Marie McEwan, The Smart Work Company



Dr Marie Puybaraud

is director of Global WorkPlace Innovation for Johnson Controls Global WorkPlace Solutions. Dr Puybaraud manages the R&D program in facilities management, real estate and workplace innovation, to understand the way we work and how we collaborate in the workplace today and in the future.

This article is the story of how the Johnson Controls Global Mobility Network (GMN) came into being, what the network is about, and how it approaches the complex and rapidly evolving set of topics that make up the globally changing workplace. We propose that its loose, experimental approach and soft-touch facilitation might provide a model for effective talent management of senior staff.

The global business environment

According to recent research, flexible working in the UK is becoming a normality, although it remains focused on time rather than place. Resistance to flexibility of *where* people work is still a feature of many UK workplaces. Nevertheless, we think that physical mobility of people in the workplace is set to become unremarkable.

Organizations in the UK are learning to accommodate patterns of movement between the workplace, home and client sites, and current management reticence about mobile working is likely to be overcome in a pragmatic response to the demands of young, scarce, skilled workers who are demanding a new reality from work.

As we considered the wider link between the business environment and working practices, we realized that a more pressing set of global issues

related to mobility are impacting on workplace design. The business environment is currently being shaped by fundamental global economic, technological and demographic shifts whose far-reaching effects are just beginning to be felt.

Global mobility for talent

For example, global competition for scarce, well-trained knowledge workers is creating physical migration of people to places where their talents are in demand. Highly skilled migrants are likely to be young, and their entry into the workforce will help to make up for the deficit of home-grown talent. Growing diversity on multiple fronts, including culture, age, communication styles, and differing attitudes to using communication technologies are creating a significant challenge for managers and workplace practices.

Global mobility for the economic sector

This change is related to the global mobility of talent. Thomas Friedman’s contention that the globalized world is flat¹ reflects the opening up of economic opportunity enabled by internet technologies. It is a view Richard Florida challenges as partly correct; according to Florida, the world is “spiky”.² What he means by this is that despite electronically-enabled, distributed, remote working, the prominence of place remains. He speaks of a “new geography of creativity” and links increased physical concentrations of people to the shift from industrial sectors to high-tech, knowledge-based and creative content industries.

The Johnson Controls Global Mobility Network

is a forum for senior IT, HR and FM experts. Its objective is to create a trusted environment for members to learn about mobility from each other’s perspectives, to exchange experience and expertise, and to hear about the latest mobility research. www.facilitiesinnovation.co.uk/fi/html/home.asp?page=71

● KEYPOINTS

Global mobility of work

As well as talent being on the move, work itself is relocating. Globalization and networking technologies are enabling firms to use the world as their supply base for talent and materials. IBM's Chief Executive, Sam Palmisano, claims that the very nature of corporates is changing as activities are now being located where they are best done.³

Global mobility of economic opportunity

Western corporates shifting their centre of gravity, (as the *Economist* puts it), to the emerging economies are experiencing highly competitive local labour markets, the need to contain rising labour costs and the need to innovate to head off threats from local corporates. These businesses learn quickly and present stiff competition. As these local corporates grow, a two-way acquisition and relocation of businesses from the growing economies is likely.

Global mobility of collaborative relationships

Business structures are fragmenting into dense, highly-connected networks; the boundary-less office is here, with the formation of partnerships and alliances among businesses and the fragmentation of supply networks.⁴ These collaborations might be entirely virtual, or a mixture of virtual and face-to-face – within and across organizational and national boundaries. However, it's known that alliances and partnerships have a high failure rate.

Improving the network model

Johnson Controls Global WorkPlace Solutions provides a range of services to global clients on flexible, sustainable workplace design. The research the company commissions under the Global WorkPlace Solutions Facilities Innovation Program – of which the network is one research strand – provides insight into how dynamic global environmental factors influence workplace design, including how culturally determined working practices and physical workplace design interact.

With talent management and employee engagement currently being two of the biggest challenges facing organizations, effective businesses understand that meaning and values engage people. Communicating a clear vision with which people can align becomes crucial, and one way of communicating vision and values is through workplace design. Workplace amenities and the ambience created send out signals about how employees are valued.

The evolving workplace raises fundamental questions about how businesses can prepare for

- In global organizations today, employee needs, networking needs and overarching business needs are becoming more fluid as business structures are fragmenting into dense, highly connected networks that may function virtually and are without boundaries.
- In order to begin to understand this significant change in the workplace, the Global Mobility Network was launched, with the broad aim of bringing together senior executives from a diverse range of fields – large corporates, academia, small and medium-sized enterprises, independent consultants and experts and so on – to provide a basis of research and, more importantly, provide a forum to share experience and insight.
- Such networking opportunities are beneficial in many ways, not least for the concentrated, high-quality knowledge sharing that takes place among senior people, which itself reinforces the proposition of informal networking throughout their own organizations.

increasing complexity, fluidity and unpredictability. Creating workplace environments and working practices that are attractive to skilled people is emerging as a crucial strategic response.

We therefore decided to relaunch the network as the GMN to explore and understand the practical implications of the different aspects of global mobility, particularly the implications for integrated workplace design.

The Global Mobility Network

Workplace design, as we think of it, is the intersection of the physical premises and how people interact with their physical surroundings and with each other. It is a complex, emergent interlinked and interdisciplinary field of knowledge. The rest of the article will focus on why we think that inter-organizational learning partnerships, like the GMN, are highly effective in negotiating and managing complex multidisciplinary fields of knowledge, and why the model may well have value as a component of a talent management strategy, especially for senior executives.

Who are the members?

Attendance at network meetings, of which there are three a year, is by invitation only. Network members are senior executives drawn from large corporates, SMEs, academic research networks concerned with workplace design and work organization, universities, regional development agencies, independent consultants with specialist knowledge (such as IT and occupational psychology), and other bodies concerned with workplace issues (for example, the speaker at the last meeting at the end of September was from the Equal Opportunities Commission). Broadly, we can say that members have IT, HR and facilities management expertise.

The members are either known to us personally and drawn from our extended professional network, recommended to us by existing members or come



Dr Anne Marie McEwan

is CEO and founder of The Smart Work Company, which helps senior executives to understand the implications of global workplace trends and then designs and facilitates action learning programs to manage the transition to new ways of working.

“EXISTING CONTROL MENTALITIES, IT SEEMS, NEED TO SHIFT BEFORE SUCH INFORMAL, UNMEASURABLE MECHANISMS FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE CREATION ARE CONSIDERED. THAT FEELS LIKE A REAL SHAME TO US”

- to our attention through different media. In all cases, we invite people to attend because we believe they would find the proposed topic for discussion relevant and useful. Although Johnson Controls is seeking research data, we're extremely mindful of the fact that we are asking busy senior people to contribute their valuable time and knowledge to the network meetings. We therefore make every effort to understand what creates value for the members and provide it for them.

We cannot know for certain whether people will connect at a personal or professional level. We hope this will happen, based on our personal knowledge, and indeed it seems to be the case that people do connect. We bring people together who really ought not to be together.

Meeting and network structure

Meetings are held three or four times a year, for half a day, usually including lunch. We limit attendance to 20 people to facilitate the conversation; we find this number creates a critical mass that creates energy in the room, and limiting the size of the group to an intimate number promotes participation.

Prior to the event a topic is chosen to explore and loosely prefacilitated to prompt thinking before the meeting. On the day, the research perspective is presented through a short introduction from a guest speaker. We then break into dialogue groups to discuss the topic and get the practitioner's view, taking into consideration the research and members' own experience. The topic is presented as a key question. Observations and key points are typically recorded on Post-it notes and located on a map for each group. All groups reconvene for feedback. The data from all the groups are collated visually onto a mind map to preserve the richness and complexity of inter-related observations. A formal whitepaper is also produced to add to our growing portfolio of actionable knowledge.

A recipe for success

Theoretically, we view the GMN as an example of Ashby's principle of requisite variety in action. Variety is a measure of complexity, and the principle

states that only variety can understand and address complexity. In other words, the complex and interrelated set of global issues affecting workplaces can only be understood with a multidimensional, multiperspective approach to the exploration of workplace themes. The network is beneficial to the sponsoring company because it's a vehicle for creating rich knowledge and research data.

The network members have a range of personal and business objectives for attending the meetings. There's seldom any sense of an immediate and pressing business need; rather there's more of a desire to take time out to understand issues for personal development. The infrequency of the meetings means that this is a viable option for time-pressured senior executives.

Suitable atmospheres and environments

As far as the members are concerned, they have told us that the research outputs in the form of the written documents we produce are less valuable to them than the experience of engaging with peers who have different experience and perspectives from their own. The energy created by the conversation is the consequence of an experimental "it goes where it goes" approach to the conversation, which is facilitated with the lightest of touches.

The meetings are characterized by informality, a lot of laughing and intense engagement. The casual meeting of the network cofacilitators and the fact that they work well together influences the tone of the meetings.

A senior executive talent management model?

As outlined earlier in this article, the workplace is having to adapt to dynamic and concurrent forces in the global business environment that are leading to complex patterns of mobility. These forces often lead to conflicting and contradictory outcomes that coexist simultaneously. Global workplace trends were the subject of a recent conference at the University of Waterloo (www.2017.waterloo.ca).

One of the keynote speakers, Roger Martin, proposed that in our rapidly changing and uncertain global business world, the ability to reconcile contradictory ideas – having an opposable mind that is able to see the architecture of a problem and see how the bits fit together – will be one of the key skills needed by the next generation of leaders.⁵

It is imperative that businesses understand what is happening in their external business environment. They need then to further identify which of these external trends are most relevant within their own business contexts, and interpret how trends are

likely to impact on internal functions and groups, and external partnerships within the wider ecosystem of suppliers. Beyond the imperative, though, is the quality of engagement that the network can generate when members trust and are at ease with each other. We have said that the GMN members participate mainly for personal development, and not from any sense of urgency.

Gaining executive support for unusual networks

We believe that creating space for senior executives to come together to hear about trends is beneficial in many ways. These busy people do not have time to source, never mind read and keep up with, workplace trends. Having researchers source and summarize this information is already a benefit. Being able to take time out to explore the significance of these trends with peers from different bits of the organization or partner organizations provides the richness of perspective and the opportunity for whole-problem thinking that Roger Martin speaks about.

There's a further potential benefit that we can see. The network of peers model could be applied throughout the organization. Once senior executives have experienced personal benefit from participating in strategic workplace networks, they could champion the establishment of a similar system of networks throughout the organization.

The most recent of the Towers Perrin surveys of employee engagement, published in October 2007, received 88,600 responses from organizations in 18 countries. Its broad summary findings include the observation that employees are not primarily motivated by money, that they are willing to invest discretionary effort, and that leaders are failing on vision and openness. There is a gap between what employees are willing to contribute and the opportunities they are given to invest in learning. Given the widely evidenced difficulties of attracting and retaining skilled employees globally, this negligence in engaging employees in learning and discretionary effort seems reckless.

Relations to shadow systems


Exploratory learning networks, freeform in nature and facilitated with a light touch, would seem to offer one mechanism to increase employee engagement. The organizational theorist Ralph Stacey speaks about legitimate and shadow systems in organizations.⁶ The legitimate system is the officially sanctioned distribution of roles, authority and resources. The shadow system is where those who have who have not been included in the legitimate system take authority for themselves. The shadow system can be either destructive or creative.

It seems to us that the creation of exploratory networks is likely to contribute to a favourable organizational climate that encourages creative, collaborative behaviour.

Accepting multilayered, complex dynamics

We have attempted to describe the complex and rapidly evolving set of topics that make up the globally changing workplace, and to suggest that the loose, experimental approach and soft-touch facilitation of the GMN might provide a model for effective talent management of senior staff.

Although this seems to us entirely appropriate, feedback received from senior executives outside of the network indicate that there may be difficulties in promoting participation in such experimental and undirected networks. We were presenting our thoughts on the network to a gathering of senior knowledge management directors at a KM thought leaders conference. The response we received was, "That sounds great but we would never be allowed to fund and support something so fluid with no measurable outcomes."

Existing control mentalities, it seems, need to shift before such informal, unmeasurable mechanisms for talent management and knowledge creation is considered. That feels like a real shame to us. 

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