

This case study illustrates:

- how people become accustomed over time to different ways of working
- the paramount importance of robust technology and swift support when technology does fail
- how the experience of remote working is affected by the nature of the work being performed
- the need for social support
- the effect of different cultures within organisations, and how they can be harnessed to support home / remote workers.

Background

A pilot home working initiative initially implemented in this organisation in 1994 has now become an established way of working. In common with other organisations, the impetus for the home working initiative derived from rationalising property. There were previously three offices, but there is now only one. Administration and support staff are office-based. All other personnel work from home.

Issues Arising

Despite initial moans and objections to the pilot initiative, there would be strong resistance from staff to any suggestions that they should revert to traditional office-based working. It may be that staff would like to see improvements in the scheme's operation but widespread acceptance is associated with work-life balance issues.

Robust and stable technology was identified as being of paramount importance, along with rapid and effective support when things go wrong. Given these requirements, it was noted that affordability might be an issue for some organisations and indeed presents a challenge for this non-profit organisation, which has to pay market rates for IT support personnel. Personal PCs of home workers, and network issues are the main sources of technological weakness.

The experience of remote working is affected by the nature of the work being performed. Two groups within the organisation show the contrast: case managers (the majority) and senior advisors. Stress for case managers arises from the production elements of the job. Case managers have to prepare cases to be presented at court hearings, which have fixed dates. Case managers have a standard loading of cases, and the pressure is continuous.

The case system is entirely computer-based, so computer system failures compound the stress. The other group of home workers, the senior advisors, do not experience the time pressures and have more social content to their work.

Case managers communicate through the national intranet, and regional intranet. They lose direct social contact and this can be problematic in dealing with difficult situations. Co-located colleagues offer emotional support, empathy and are sources of knowledge.

Besides robust technology, a major enabler of home working is the requirement for managers to understand people's social needs, and to provide opportunities to create social interaction. For example, arranging meetings such that they turn into social occasions is a tactic commonly deployed. Managers have to make the effort to maximise social contact, and to budget for it.

It is difficult for employers to have control over the hours people work. People working from home work long hours, and report less sickness. It may be that people work through sickness, where they may previously have felt unable to face the journey to work they do now feel able to work at home.

People who work within this organisation have values and ways of thinking that are very close, and there is a lot of support from like-mindedness. 'Clans' develop that are influenced by the nature of the work. New employees break into and are inducted into the culture, through training and gradual introduction to home working.

The benefits for employees and the organisation can be significant, so long as robust technological and social support measures are in place.