

This case study illustrates:

- the importance of preparation in introducing new ways of working
- senior / board level support is critical for success
- senior management affect behaviour by their actions
- consistent and constant communication of key messages maintains momentum
- managers are committed to managing employees through delivery of customer-focused outputs.

The company has a large number of staff working from home. Not all jobs are suited to home working, but all are capable of working flexibly. Flexible working is really about individual employee choice, within the paramount objective of meeting customer requirements.

This case study focuses on the introduction of home working, how it operates in practice, what some of the challenges are and how they are overcome.

Preparation

Demonstrating the business case was a pre-requisite for board support for the home working strategy. Surveys of desk occupancy rates indicated that significant financial savings could be made, since desk occupancy rates were found in many cases to be less than 40%. Recurring office accommodation costs per person were calculated against the one-off set-up costs, and this was used to indicate potential savings.

Prior to the pilot programme, a survey of jobs was conducted to determine occupations that might be appropriate for home working, along with an assessment of equipment, technology and furniture. Volunteers were sought and the pilot was initiated.

In certain skill areas the idea of working from home quickly became the natural way of doing things. In fact, in the research laboratories the scientists often had the very best and latest computing equipment installed at home rather than in the office; home was where they worked on their ideas whereas the office was where they went to interact with their colleagues and bounce ideas around. The "office" became a social interaction place not equipped like an office at all but rather a series of bistros and lounge areas.

Implementation Issues

A major sticking point in implementing home working was the attitude and skills of some line managers. Old methods of management, focused on inputs (i.e. monitoring

time subordinates spend in the office), are inappropriate for mobile working. Managers in this company have to put the customer at the centre of decision-making. They also have to comply with staff-driven flexible working.

So long as customer needs are met, staff choose to deliver work how and when they choose. Managers used to often find it difficult to define outputs. It took them a while to work out how to reward outputs rather than inputs, which of course they could no longer see as clearly.

People in different occupations were found to have varying experience of working from home. There was a relationship between personal characteristics of the job holder and the nature of the position occupied. A personal assistant confident of his skills, and capable of working autonomously, was contrasted with that of a secretary. The personal assistant knew when to act independently, when to ask for help, and was comfortable working from home. The secretary's role is changing as managers increasingly do more administration for themselves, and no longer require their gate keeping services. Having been physically present as a barrier, the secretary found it difficult to work from home. She preferred to be in the office, lacking the confidence displayed by the personal assistant.

It was noted that the need for social support for those who work from home changed over time. At the beginning when people were getting used to working at home, they came into the office regularly to meet with colleagues. As time progressed, this need lessened and people opted to work from home as a normal mode of work.

Senior managers have significant influence in allowing people the choice of breaking old habits. Making public statements turned into mantras, which gave people permission to behave differently. Senior management set examples by their own behaviour.

The company is achieving critical mass of behaviour and expectations through constant communication. The intranet also provides a means of recreating virtually the "bumping into each other" that happens in offices.

Outcomes

This company is nearly at the point where flexible attitudes to work are "in the blood". Productivity of home workers is 15 – 30% greater than office-based colleagues.