

## **Trends in flexible workspace and working**

By considering the workplace as a flexible resource there may be a pot of gold for businesses if they approach the issue as a solution rather than a problem.

### **HR and FM working together**

This is where human resources and facilities management crossover to the benefit of both the employee and the business, if flexible workspace is planned and implemented properly. HR professionals are tasked with attraction, retention and motivation of the modern workforce. However, facilities management now plays a leading role in providing the right environment to support these traditional HR policies both in the workplace and at home. Both HR and FM must realise that the modern workforce does not want to be a slave to the old fashioned employment contracts that place a high emphasis on the place of work and the contracted hours. Employees no longer follow the sun in their working pattern and rarely comply with the old fashioned nine to five concept.

Research carried out by University of West of England (UWE) in 2004 revealed that employees want to take advantage of benefits such as reduced commuting, increased control over the way they work and, for those with young children, a more family-friendly form of employment. 87.1 per cent agreed that flexible working improved their productivity and 84.7 per cent felt that flexible working provided better job satisfaction.

Flexible working is being driven by employers who want to reduce costs on space allocation and improve the work/life balance of their staff. With potential savings of £10,000 per annum (rising to £16,000 in the City) for each workstation the benefits are clear. But companies don't just want to make their staff more productive, they also want to make them more creative and see flexible working as a way of achieving this. This process is being facilitated by improvements in technology - allowing employees to work anywhere, anytime, whether they are home workers, mobile workers or a mixture of both.

### **Technological advances**

Flexible workspace and working has therefore, at its heart, the opportunities made available by advances in technology, advances that have worked hand in hand with changes in management. Accessibility of information, the speed of information exchange and empowerment of increasing numbers of the workforce, reflect and enable the recent changes that are occurring in management. The flattening of business hierarchy and the move from routine processing activities to more value-added and creative activities are also assisting these changes.

Work can now increasingly be undertaken in a variety of locations and in a variety of ways.

In general terms flexible working is richer; more peripatetic; and more variable than traditional working. It is also more interactive, more people-oriented, and better able to deal with an exchange of information, all in line with the rapidly changing, more value-oriented business that characterises the developed world. Flexible working recognises that the work process is dynamic and not something that fits efficiently into the static model of a traditional office.

### **Space management**

Flexible working recognises that spaces can be (without incurring massive redundancy) used by different people over a wide range of time, thereby driving up their utilisation levels and allowing them to be properly fit for purpose.

The first major result of this is that, in spite of providing more support and ancillary spaces, the overall space budget can be reduced by anything up to 10 per cent – which, at inner city rental levels, is not to be underestimated. In addition, by being more generic than specific, this same space can be highly flexible, reducing reorganisation costs and effecting further massive savings. This is the aspect of flexible working that can be seductive but also dangerous. If incentives to bring down space costs or increase staff numbers merely result in the removal of offices and an erosion of personal space.

There is a second benefit, however, in viewing the working environment as an essentially dynamic resource. This is the way it alters the work process, changing it from something that operates in a pre-determined manner to something which can change according to circumstances and which can benefit from new ideas at all levels. The importance of interaction (the swapping of information at a formal and informal level) has been shown to be key to the process of adding value, and a more dynamic workspace is, in turn, key to this – by helping the organisation to focus on effectiveness and not just old-fashioned efficiency.

### **Increasing productivity**

Reducing on overheads by saving on space is a powerful incentive to any facilities manager. Far more powerful should be the incentive of increasing worker productivity – as any comparison of the cost of personnel overheads to accommodation overheads will show.

So the real incentive for considering the concept of flexible working should be in discovering what it can do for the organisation. But herein lies the problem. By definition it implies that it should involve all parts of the organisation – an idea that is easier to articulate than carry out. Thus, to reap the real benefits of flexible working, implementation is everything – a step-by-step process that takes time and commitment at all levels, and above all has senior management buy-in – commodities that are usually in short supply, or at least not normally within the

control of the facilities manager.

People must remain more important than things, something which does not automatically follow from the tight contract conditions of outsourced service agreements.

An irony underlines the take-up of flexible working. The concept calls for specific implementation and yet is not something that has been invented by management consultants or facilities managers. It is something that is happening by itself as people discover what is possible as the opportunity of freedom opens up to them. But this does not mean that flexible working is something that can be left to its own devices. Like a 'natural' garden, to thrive it needs to be carefully planned, tended and lovingly managed.

But care must be taken not to ignore the psychological implications of flexible working. The UWE survey found that some employees expressed concerns about becoming isolated by the lack of personal interaction with colleagues and managers. They also felt that low visibility might affect their job promotion prospects. The role of a social hub for flexible workers is vital - a place where they can remotely book the resources they need online and then dock in for meetings with clients and colleagues.

If business is still to be convinced of the benefits of flexible working, a 2007 CBI/AXA report on absence and labour turnover stated that flexible working plays an important role in reducing absence. The great majority of staff absences are genuine, but employers believe around 12 per cent are suspect. That means that 21 million working days were lost last year at a cost to the economy of £1.6 billion. The survey showed that companies who offer flexible working can lose less time to absence - for organisations of 500- 4,999 employees it was reduced by 15 per cent.

The CBI predicted "a quiet revolution" in working practices as it signed a pledge with the TUC to encourage flexible working across the UK. It supports the not-for-profit body Work Wise UK's campaign for smarter working practices, which aims to restore employees' work/life balance, reduce congestion on the roads, cut travelling times and improve productivity.

So maybe it is now time to take a serious look at both flexible workplaces and working if you really want to save money, but more importantly recruit, retain and motivate your most important asset – your employees.

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