The Flexible Route To Productivity

Tony Angel, managing director of Edifice, considers the impact new ways of working can have on employee performance and corporate productivity. But is there more to it than simply creating the right office environment? And whilst the days of the territorial approach to space allocation may (just about) have gone, how effectively have we embraced the whole gamut of "new ways of working"?

Hot-desking, hotelling, touchdown, free address, agile working… all these terms and more are in common use within corporate organisations these days. But it wasn't long ago, in relative terms, when office politics still revolved around the number of windows in your cellular office. And (more recently) I well recall working in a "flexible" office environment where we had to crawl under the desk in order to locate the whereabouts of power and network sockets, and where – in peak periods – members of the same team were sitting on different floors because there simply weren't enough free address desks in the building. Yes, the company saved on property costs; but no-one relished working in such an inefficient environment and the inevitable consequence of bad planning was that individual worker productivity suffered.

It was interesting that a survey published by Metro Design Consultants in early 2008 found that 47% of respondents considered their offices to be in need of change. Further, it was found that the effects of the working environment are far reaching, effecting staff morale and retention as well as business growth (and that's not to mention the embarrassment that was expressed by a high percentage of respondents, caused by their view of how visitors and clients would perceive their surroundings); interesting because there's no question in my opinion that getting it right can bring a host of benefits to both organisation and individual alike. These include:

- **For the organisation**
    - better asset utilisation/lower capital cost
    - attraction & retention of key skills/knowledge workers
    - more flexibility in location strategy
    - driver for/enabler of cultural change
    - increased staff productivity
- **For the individual**
    - reduced travelling time/unproductive periods
    - better work life balance
    - increased autonomy and empowerment
    - greater ability to function efficiently
    - increased output/effectiveness/productivity

Providing the right office environment for staff to function at optimum levels seems like a no-brainer, doesn't it? However, isn't it about time that we started looking beyond the

obvious and the quick win (i.e. space planning) and more at the bigger picture that defines the way we work?

The Chartered institute of personnel and development defines flexible working as "the length of time an employee works, where they carry out the work and the pattern of working…" This clearly goes far beyond space planning and hints at issues that directly impact what we tend to think of as the work/life balance. In a recent survey, CIPD considered the perceived effects of flexible working, concluding: -

- Retention is most likely to be affected positively as a result of implementing flexible working practices. One in three survey participants (27%) perceive flexible working to have had a major positive effect on retention and a further half (47%) believe it has had a positive effect.
- Two-thirds (70%) perceive employee motivation as having benefited from the implementation of flexible working practices.
- Over half of those surveyed believe that recruitment has benefited from the implementation of flexible working practices.

With that in mind, then, it was perhaps somewhat surprising to learn from the survey that "respondents estimate that just over a quarter (26%) of their employees currently make use of flexible working arrangements". Why the low take-up? The report findings suggest the answers…

1. **Operational pressures are the most significant constraint for organisations when implementing flexible working practices.** This includes concerns about damage to service levels and ensuring continued productivity. Evidence elsewhere in the survey suggests that, while concerns in this area can act as a barrier, in reality they are not always born out… customer service levels and productivity benefit from flexible working practices in most organisations. This is likely to be as a result of careful planning and management regarding employees' take-up of flexible working.

2. **Line managers' ability to manage individuals working more flexibly and the attitudes they have to flexible working practices are also major constraints**… which emphasises the importance of line managers in translating formal policy statements into practice.

3. **Senior-level support is a significant factor when implementing any major initiative.** The current survey's findings demonstrate that this still poses an important challenge for many organisations with regard to introducing more flexible working practices.

4. **Organisational culture is also a significant factor … For organisations with a 'command and control' style of management, flexible working practices can be seen as a threat to management authority.** Close supervision and managing employees on

the basis of their presenteesim (ie time spent at their desk) is difficult to reconcile when operating more flexible working arrangements. For these to be effective, a more participative style is needed and the relationship between employee and employer requires more trust.

That last point rings some bells for many, no doubt, and its evidence that the cultural change required to successfully implement flexible working practices is still a major obstacle.

I recall, many years ago, working in a cellular office where – if, for example, I was reading lease documents or contracts – I'd make myself comfortable in an upholstered chair usually reserved for visitors. People passing my door would look in quizzically because I was the "wrong side" of my desk, and would occasionally ask what on earth I was *doing*. It was clearly inconceivable that I could just have chosen to be comfortable whilst I worked. I also know offices even today where staff will get up at the crack of dawn, sleeping many hours less than they need to *and* missing seeing their kids and partners at breakfast, just to be seen at their desks hours before the working day officially starts. For the brownie points, you understand?

And let's think for a minute beyond the manner in which organisations adopt (or don't adopt) flexible working and think about other issues that affect staff productivity – issues on which I've written in the past but that are worthy of re-emphasising her again. For example, assuming a working day of 8 hours then every worker that spends an hour a day on non-business related activity loses in the order of 12.5% potential productivity. That's 12.5% off the organisation's bottom line – but it happens all regularly in virtually every office I've been to or worked in.

One answer to this is to think creatively about the way in which services are provided within the workplace, based on the premise that everyone has a life outside work and that life can – and will – impinge upon the working day. From that premise, doesn't it make sense to make it as easy as possible for staff to deal with those issues outside of the workplace as efficiently and unobtrusively as possible? But how many organisations have really taken that concept on board? When specifying and tendering services, how many organisations think about additional facilities that will seriously increase their people's productivity by enabling them to manage their time, and their affairs, in a holistic way?

This takes me back to the introductory section of this article, and for me, at least, reinforces the view that we have some way to go before we truly understand the possibilities that are open to us. These possibilities are driven by technology and globalisation, but they're also becoming more and more important to individuals looking to plan their careers and make an informed decision about their employer of choice. If we're to be successful – as individuals, as organisations and as a centre of world commerce – in an ever-more competitive world then we have to do more than consider the way in which desks are

provided within an office shell. We need to think about people as assets, and we need to embrace cultural change. Then, perhaps, flexible working will achieve its potential.

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About Edifice

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