



Making flexible working work

Flexible working is good for employers, staff and customers alike. Today, effective technology is available to give staff access to the same experience at home as they would have in the office – without sacrificing security or the ability to communicate effectively with colleagues.

Ask around the average office and the one thing everyone will agree on is that flexible working hours creates happy employees. Sharp managers are realising that it can also improve customer service and extend the time your 'Open' sign is up.

For many, the office is a vital place for meeting colleagues and exchanging ideas. But there are times when it would be cheaper, more convenient and more productive to work somewhere else: on the train between meetings; in the van after a service call; accessing current stock availability at a client's site; or reading e-mails at an Internet cafe. Besides, emergencies do happen: wouldn't it be great to deal with that last-minute proposal from the comfort of your sofa rather than having a late night at the office?

What's sauce for the goose...

The days of rigid hierarchies in the office and a strict nine-to-five are long gone. Flexible working – the ability to work anywhere at any time – has potential benefits for everybody. For the employer, it means staff can use otherwise 'dead' time to do productive work: they can provide more responsive customer service and make better-informed decisions in real time. The company may save on office costs through needing fewer desks, or be able to expand without seeking new premises.

Flexible working is popular with staff, too. Young people in particular have grown up with mobile phones, instant messaging and social networking Web sites, and expect similar flexibility in their job. Research for Microsoft by the Future Laboratory found that, for almost half (48%) of under 25s, the offer of some flexibility in working hours is more appealing than a higher salary.

Young parents, middle-aged elder-carers and older people on inadequate pensions may be equally enthusiastic, and allowing flexible working can make the difference between their employer retaining their skills and experience or losing them for good. Another piece of research for Microsoft found that 91% of all workers would like to work flexibly, and for 73% the ability to do so is a deciding factor when choosing a new job.

Customers, too, increasingly expect their trading partners to be easily contactable and fully informed. In a survey for communications company Avaya, 73% of Britons said they would be more likely to choose a business supplier that made its staff available outside normal working hours, and more than half would pay extra for the privilege.

With so many proven benefits, more businesses would implement flexible working if only they believed they could make it work. The major objections usually boil down to practicalities and people. How do you provide remote staff with the resources they need, and how can you be sure they're working if you can't see them doing it?

The digital ball and chain...

"Many companies find that vital customer, supplier, product and business information is often 'trapped' at the office and available only when employees are at their desks," says James McCarthy, Windows Mobile® marketing manager at Microsoft.

It has been theoretically possible to access such information from laptops, mobile phones and home computers for some years, but this often required arcane and complex (not to say expensive) technology, and for many smaller firms it simply wasn't worth the hassle.

“What’s important is that people and information need to be accessible without thinking, as though you were still connected to your office network regardless of where you are,” says Mark Deakin, Microsoft’s product manager for Unified Communications. Indeed, that’s what Unified Communications means: reaching someone by whatever means works for both parties, with a minimum of fuss.

...and the digital bolt-cutter

Today, the necessary technology is not just readily available, but also reliable and increasingly cost effective. Any business that uses Microsoft® Exchange Server (2003 or later) already has the ability to deliver e-mail, calendar and contacts securely to a huge range of mobile devices. Most workers have broadband Internet access at home, and for around £15 a month you can connect a laptop to mobile broadband so it’s always connected: on trains, in cafes, on customers’ premises etc.

“All this information is backed up,” says McCarthy, “so if you leave your phone in a taxi your information is secured by PIN and replaceable very easily on a new device. Try that with a paper address book!” Windows Mobile supports data encryption on portable devices, and even has a ‘remote wipe’ facility that can delete data from equipment that has been lost or stolen.

Most firms start by ‘mobilising’ the basics of e-mail, calendar and contacts. Once this has bedded in, they can move on to applications specific to their own business and the role of individual workers so that, for example, salespeople can access Customer Relationship Management solutions such as Microsoft Dynamics® CRM, service engineers can search for technical data via Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server, and executives can work on shared documents or take part in virtual meetings with Microsoft Office LiveMeeting.

Unified Communications (UC) software enables workers to check their colleagues’ current availability and contact them via the most immediate and least intrusive method – for example, instant messaging or phone if they’re free, e-mail or voicemail if they’re busy. By providing a single inbox for all e-mail and voice calls, UC allows workers to better manage their correspondence and removes the need for complicated communications systems.

A new approach

The other key flexible working issue, managing people when you can’t see them, is a matter of both trust and technique. The technique is to judge workers by ‘output’ rather than ‘input’, i.e. what they achieve, not how long they spend doing it. For some it’s fairly straightforward – how many widgets a salesperson sells, how many boilers an engineer fixes – although for others it requires more time and thought.

Trust depends on the relationship between the flexible worker and their employer. But our enthusiasm for flexible working is often matched by a sense that this is a privilege we are anxious to keep. A study by Coventry University Business School found that people only managed to do five hours’ work in an eight-hour office day, but they did the full eight hours in the same time at home.

And flexible working can make people more motivated and more productive, according to Tom Stewart from System Concepts, an international expert on people and technology: “If workers have the freedom to explore different ways of working, they’ll be less stressed, more effective and more productive. Also, giving people more choice is empowering, raises morale and improves the relationship between employees and their bosses. It’s a win win”.

“Ultimately,” says McCarthy, “work should be not a place you go, but a thing you do.”

Case study: Flexible working in action

Flexible working is often regarded as the preserve of 'knowledge workers' such as executives and salespeople. But the benefits can be just as great for technical staff such as service engineers and delivery drivers.

"There's usually information relevant to these people's jobs that's trapped in one or more office-bound IT systems," says David Perry, head of marketing at Cognito, a Microsoft Certified Partner specialising in mobile workforce management solutions based on Microsoft Windows Mobile. "If you can extract that information and give it to them in easily digestible form you can make them much more effective."

Gas-fired heating manufacturer Alpha Heating Innovation has both sales personnel and service engineers on the road, who use BlackBerry handsets to view their day's pre-scheduled activities. But the company wanted greater flexibility, including the ability to alert salespeople to ad hoc courtesy calls required while on the road, and eliminating the necessity for service engineers to update job details back at home.

The company commissioned a solution from Cognito, based on Windows Mobile. Sales agents can now update CRM records in real-time via their Windows Mobile PDAs, and service engineers can receive job schedules and directives on their PDAs from the back-office service system.

"Engineers can now receive and reply to task-based data," says Greig Dendor, systems manager at Alpha Heating Innovation. "This has removed the need for manual entry into the back-office system and has reduced the scope for errors in coding as a result of illegibility."

The Windows Mobile environment enables salespeople to access CRM, reducing back-office administration and increasing levels of customer retention. "Agents no longer upload information from home at the end of the day and are able to receive actions remotely which can be immediately addressed," says Dendor. "The solution has transformed the way we see our workforce and it has paid for itself in efficiencies."

"There's a lot of horsepower in Windows Mobile that enables you to do clever things like this," adds Perry. "The touch-screen support is particularly good, and it supports a very broad range of hardware, from PDAs to large-screen and ruggedised devices."