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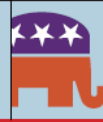
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The benefits of barriers

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Flexibility is the future

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Flexible working – allowing staff to work from home either occasionally or permanently – is becoming increasingly popular, at least in principle. How can it be rolled out in practice?

The benefits are obvious. For the worker the cost and stress of the commute is eliminated. Even on a good day getting to work can be draining, and the slightest disruption, especially in peak hours, can bring the whole system crashing down. Staff fuming from a bad journey to work may not be your best ambassadors.

Flexible working in many businesses can also be planned around lifestyles and family commitments. People can return to work after career breaks, and may be happy to work split shifts to cover peaks, something that is virtually impossible when they have to 'go' to work. For 24-hour operations like call centres, it also means you do not have to ask staff to arrive in an otherwise deserted area late at night, which they may regard as unacceptably dangerous.

For the business, the direct savings are the rental, heating and lighting of the workspace, not to mention the costs of the coffee machine. There are more subtle economic benefits too: Research shows that flexible working contributes greatly to staff retention – while a typical call centre will see a 20 per cent annual staff turnover, this is halved when you allow staff to work from home.

There is an environmental argument for businesses, too, by helping eliminate a lot of journeys often in cars with a single occupant. It may be hard to quantify the precise impact on your carbon footprint but it is a clear statement of green intentions.

What are the downsides? Is it true that staff working from home are less productive? The obvious answer is that it depends on the staff. Sales and marketing teams, for example, are used to working wherever they need to be and setting their own motivations. They almost certainly resent the routine office days for paperwork and are likely to be happier doing that from home – or from an airport lounge or a Starbuck's convenient to their next meeting.

For call centre and support operations the answer is less clear. For some, the immediate sense of community springing from a team in a room will be too valuable to risk – ringing the bell as a sale is made or a target reached only works if you can all physically 'high five' each other.

Technology can retain the team spirit in many applications though, even if people are not located together. In the US there is a customer care business called VIP Desk which supports premium brands and their affluent customers. It has no call centre: All its staff work from home, and this freedom allows it to attract the best staff.

Enabling staff to be as productive in their homes as they would be in the office – often more so because the watercooler conversations are eliminated – and making them feel part of a team depends on a solid technical infrastructure.

The good news is that this is now both practical and affordable. The key component is universal access to broadband. Using secure data communications and Voice over IP (VoIP) technology, a worker at home, in an airport, or in Starbucks, will have precisely the same look and feel as they would in the company's headquarters. The computer screens will react in the same way; telephone dialling - internal and external - will be the same; and tools like presence management are still effective. A single broadband connection carries both voice and data to the worker.

No-one manages and motivates staff today by standing over them. Targets are set, and computerised tools are used to track performance. For support staff in a call centre, these targets will include the optimum number of ingoing and outgoing calls, response times, percentage of issues resolved, and so on. These metrics can be implemented in a unified communications system, which means that staff are monitored and performance evaluated in exactly the same way, wherever they are.

All of which would count for nothing if the costs of rolling out a unified communications infrastructure and supporting home working, outweighed any potential savings. But the good news is that it is affordable too.

Because everything - secure data and digital telephony - is transmitted over the broadband circuit we already have, all you need at the remote location is a computer and an inexpensive headset. The unified communications software licence for the workstation is the same whether it is installed on a computer in a call centre or on a sales manager's laptop.

A good supplier will offer the whole system on a per-seat basis, so you can scale your operation up or down very quickly in response to business changes. The supplier will probably also offer it on a software-as-a-service basis, hosting the servers on your behalf so the business does not need to invest heavily in centralised IT and all the air conditioning and support it requires.

In the 21st century, flexible working should be a standard choice for the modern business. It reduces cost, decreases staff turnover and most important it helps make companies more efficient and effective, by using technology to take the communications to the worker, wherever they are.

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