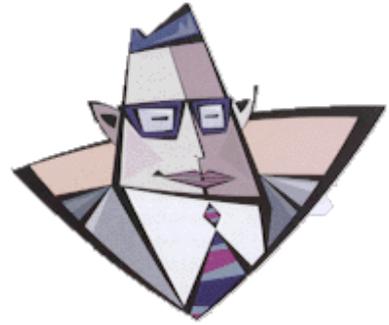

Keep it formal for maximum flexibility



The big challenge for managers in the new millennium is learning how to get to grips with an increasingly flexible workforce. Paradoxically, it calls for a more structured approach to management. By Erika Lucas



IN an office in Epsom, a social worker has just 'touched down' at a 'hot' desk to pick up her emails and make some calls before visiting a client. In a spare bedroom in Leeds, an AA operator is logging the details of a breakdown call and sending a patrol vehicle to the rescue of a stranded motorist.

As we start the new millennium, our working lives are on the brink of revolution. Thanks to technological advances, many people's work can literally be done any time, any place, anywhere. Research suggests that already around a quarter of the UK workforce carry out at least some of

their work at home. Mobile workers - who report having no fixed base - account for around seven per cent of those in employment.

The benefits to organisations, in terms of improved productivity, staff retention and employee motivation are well documented. But although the virtual office may well be helping organisations cut overheads and gain competitive edge, it is also posing many management challenges.

How do you create trust, communicate effectively and foster teamwork with a group of people who could be working anywhere from their dining room table to an airport lounge? Just what are the skills and qualities managers need to confront these new challenges?

The consensus among the experts seems to be that there is no new magic management formula. Just more of the good management practice we should all be applying in the first place - but often ignore due to the luxury of close contact with people in the office.

Take interaction with colleagues as an example. A problem shared over the office photocopier is a problem halved - or so the old adage goes. But is a snatched conversation with a colleague in the corridor really the best way to tackle a thorny work issue?

"You do solve problems by discussing things on a day-to-day basis with people in the next door office but if you think about it, that's pretty badly organised really," said John Stredwick of Luton Business School. "We always think of the great things we have solved by those discussions but what we forget is what we didn't deal with because people weren't around or didn't have time to talk. It really isn't any more efficient to have people in the same room."

Setting boundaries

The experience of organisations that have already travelled down the flexible working road is that sound performance management systems, which ensure everyone knows exactly what is to be achieved and how it will be measured, are critical to success.



"People need to be given clear objectives about what they are expected to deliver and in some jobs the outcomes are more clearly definable than others," said Christina Evans, an associate at Roffey Park. "But what's also important is providing the opportunity for the individual to flag up if they are struggling with an issue and need support. It requires conscious time and effort on the part of the manager to check out regularly how things are going."

This kind of openness and clarity can help to create the all important trust between managers and their 'remote' employees. Those who have been brought up in the old 'eyeball' school of management sometimes struggle with the concept of monitoring an employee whom they can't see. There's always a sneaking suspicion that instead of tapping away furiously at their computer, the individual is feet up in their fluffy slippers, watching Richard and Judy.

This atmosphere of distrust doesn't only cause the manager sleepless nights - it can also have a negative impact on the employee, who adopts the home-based version of the jacket on the office chair. Many remote workers will tell you how they feel the need to be constantly available - rushing to pick up the phone at the first ring in case their manager thinks they are sunning themselves in the garden.

"Trust must be a two-way issue," said Mike O'Dell of BT, an organisation which has 2,000 people based at home and a further 16,000 occasional teleworkers. "The manager must trust the teleworker and the teleworker must trust that their manager knows they are working, that they are adding value to the organisation and as long as results are delivered, does it really matter if the odd half hour is spent in the garden?"

Managing virtual teams



Teamwork is an area which managers often fear will deteriorate in a virtual office environment. **But according to Dr Laurence Lyons of Henley's Future Work Forum, the experience of most organisations is that teams actually become more effective - partly because distance forces them to become more organised about the times they do get together.**

"If you know that you are only going to be in the office one day next week and you have a meeting, you are going to plan that meeting much better than perhaps you normally would do," he said.

The challenge for managers is to put structures in place to ensure regular meetings actually do happen - and that those meetings are rich in opportunities for people to interact and be stimulated and motivated.

Sometimes, said Dr Lyons, it's simply a case of formalising what used to take place informally. **"If you have a senior management team that needs to work closely together and kick ideas around, that can still happen but what we are finding is that management teams are now thinking this through and planning in a more formal way the kind of meetings that used to be spontaneous."**

Managing communication

Making sure the lines of communication stay open outside of scheduled meetings is another challenge for managers with remote teams. Electronic communication certainly provides the means but having the right technology in place isn't always enough. People also need to be confident not just about how - but also when to use it.

Hertfordshire County Council - one of the pioneers of flexible working in local government - found that some of its staff struggled with the transition from face to face communication. "One of the issues some people found difficult was that when a colleague was working at home they felt they shouldn't get in touch with them because they were 'disturbing' them," said personnel manager Mary Lowten.

"They found it really hard to treat working at home or working remotely from another site the same as working in front of colleagues. We needed to stress that although they couldn't walk up to people, they could pick up the phone or email them and that was OK. It worked up the management hierarchy as well. Middle managers found it very difficult to ring up their bosses when they were working out of the office. So we found managers almost had to say 'it's OK for you to contact me, I am at work'," she explained. Becoming more discerning about the use of new communications technology is also likely to be a key issue for managers. **"We are moving from something that's familiar into a new style of working and we sometimes have to reflect and make sure the option we are choosing is actually a sensible one," said Dr Laurence Lyons. "Should it be an electronic conference or do we just need to get two people together? In the past there have been limited alternatives but as we move forward there will be more choices and we need to be a bit smarter in thinking through which choice we take."**

Consultant Christina Evans believes the growing trend towards remote working means organisations will also need to rethink their policies about restricting use of email. "A lot of organisations audit email but if you are working remotely, email is a very good way of just keeping in touch with people, although it won't necessarily always be wholly business-related," she said.

Managing relationships

Although in most cases management skills need little more than fine-tuning to cope with flexible working, management style often needs a complete overhaul. Flexible working calls for flexible managers - people who can cope with uncertainty, ambiguity and can help their teams keep one step ahead in the face of constant change. This means managers need to become leaders, coaches and facilitators - rather than top dogs who just tell everyone what to do.

The AA - one of a growing number of service organisations creating virtual call centres - found that remote working particularly highlighted the importance of some of the softer management skills.

The organisation has a group of around 60 operators who, with the help of sophisticated switching technology, handle breakdown calls from their homes. As part of the performance management process they are visited by their manager, at home, once or twice a month.

Lance Bowie, internal business consultant with the AA, has been monitoring the project - and has noticed a definite shift in management approach.

"When you are managing a team of 20- 25 people in a call centre there will inevitably be some that you naturally gravitate to and others whom you have less rapport with, and in this situation it's very easy to skim over the relationship," he explained.

"This changes significantly when you enter the home-working arena, because you are there on their terms, the relationship is on their ground and you have to develop a relationship with that person that is based on their needs. It's a shift from management of the team to management of the individual."

This transition can result in managers having to deal with some difficult situations that they probably wouldn't encounter in the workplace. Bowie cites the example of home-based operators who may be experiencing a personal problem, such as the break down of a relationship. "In a work environment

this might not even come out - or if it did you could keep it at arm's length, but in the home these issues do come out, and managers need to understand how to deal with them."

Support for managers

This example highlights the need for not just training but also support mechanisms to help managers deal with some of the issues arising from flexible working.

Surrey County Council, in the process of implementing a major flexible working initiative, have put a comprehensive package of measures in place to make sure managers don't feel 'all at sea'.

As well as a wider management development programme, it organises a series of workshops specifically for departments who are about to take part in its 'Workstyle' programme.

One workshop, for example, helps managers prepare to manage remote teams and gives them the opportunity to share views and experiences with colleagues who have already gone down the flexible route. Another session involves the whole team in thinking through the issues they face as remote workers. The council is also developing a managers' toolkit, which contains resource materials and exercises for managers and their teams to go through.

Steve Daniels, director of group human resources at Ulster Bank - who will be speaking at the MDI conference and exhibition in June (see page 30) - believes providing this kind of support is vital if flexible working initiatives are to be successful.

"Without doubt, the critical ingredient in ensuring that flexible working is successful is the manager who acts as the conduit between the employee and the organisation," he said. "Given the accelerating pace of change, it is essential that organisations invest in and develop their managers for success rather than chucking them in at the deep end in the hope that they will learn to adapt. For those businesses committed to flexible working, this should include a fundamental review of the role of a manager in the new world of work, which includes the need to question whether the title of manager is still relevant and applicable for those individuals who are coaches and facilitators of flexible workers."

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