

The Demise of the Desk Hugger

How the shift to mobile working is affecting HR practices and impacting on the UK's long hours culture

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Introduction

The nature of work and business operations is changing: intense competition, higher expectations of customer service and globalisation have put pressure on organisations in both the public and private sector to increase efficiency, as well as the quality of their products and services.

Mobile technology has huge potential to enable businesses to thrive in this rapidly changing environment and to achieve the necessary streamlining and efficiency gains to survive in the current economic climate. Mobile working is also serving to challenge the culture of long hours which has become so widespread within UK business. Employers increasingly understand that productivity and performance are not linked to the number of hours that staff spend at their desks and that remote workers can be just as effective as those in the office.

This paper will highlight the benefits of mobile working for both employers and employees. However, buying a few mobile devices for staff and allowing them to work away from the office is not a guaranteed win-all investment for businesses. Instead, a measured and well thought out mobile working policy is required in order to ensure that the organisational and cultural changes which inevitably result from innovative working practices do not have a negative effect on the business. Mobile working can have a dramatic impact on the morale and culture of a workforce and throws up some serious implications from an HR perspective, unless the right procedures and processes are put in place at the outset.

This report examines the challenges of mobile working for organisations and provides practical advice for those considering implementing a mobile working policy.

The move toward mobile working

Mobile working is growing in popularity and many more employees are working away from the office, and at a greater distance. The CIPD engagement survey found that only 55% of employees spent all their working time in the workplace (Truss et al 2006). Mobile working is not new of course, and many jobs have always entailed spending large amounts of time away from the office - long distance lorry drivers, sales people and maintenance engineers, social workers, and police, for

example. However, new mobile technologies have made working at a distance viable for many more kinds of jobs and this presents many opportunities and some challenges for employers.

The benefits to the business

A major benefit of mobile working lies in increased flexibility, and 51% of employers in a recent survey from T-Mobile said that they value new staff being able to quickly adopt mobile technology and work effectively from remote locations. Almost one half (47 per cent) of all SME owners have considered implementing a flexible working policy within their organisation as a means to reduce overheads to meet the challenges of a slowing economy (Vanson Bourne).

Flexible working enables employers to make better use of employees' time by reducing the need to travel to and from the office to report back, collect information or to discuss a task or problem. Customer service can be improved as mobile workers have instant remote access to files, records, data and colleagues, enabling on the spot diagnostics, estimates and analysis. Workers are able to respond flexibly to the demands of the job, by being available in person, on-line, or on the phone, factors essential for gaining competitive advantage. They can also feedback vital up to date information for managers and co-workers improving the speed and quality of decision-making. The task of co-ordinating jobs and people can also be managed more efficiently, especially when changing circumstances require last minute changes.

Attracting and retaining talented staff can also be assisted, for instance by avoiding the need to lose staff in cases of relocation, or allowing them more flexibility managing their time in order to get a better work/life balance. Indeed, a survey from Vanson Bourne showed that 46% of SMEs use mobile technology as a means of attracting and retaining staff.

There are also less obvious advantages. Mobile workers are often doing vital tasks at the interface with suppliers and customers and clients, building relationships across the organisation, and acting as ambassadors, and trouble shooters. Employees freed from the office have more opportunities to forge wider and more effective networks and alliances based on personal contact (Sparrowe et al 2001), and these relationships are essential to doing business in many cultures (Hofstede 1991). They may also have more direct experience of other parts of the organisation and the external environment, so that they have a wider, more strategic perspective on their role.

The benefits to the mobile worker

There are significant rewards for mobile workers-the freedom of being out of the office, not being closely supervised, and experiencing a variety of work environments and social interaction. While they may have fewer opportunities to make their mark in the office, mobile workers can meet and impress managers in other parts of the organisation, and potential employers outside such as suppliers and clients, thus opening up more opportunities to gain experience and for career progression. Moreover,

getting out and about can make them an important source of information, which used skilfully, can greatly enhance their status and value to management (Jemison 1984). In addition, having a wide network and understanding the organisation and external context is essential to developing the strategic perspective necessary to get into senior management positions.

Mobile working offers the prospect of addressing the UK's notorious long hours culture. A national CIPD survey found that only just over 50% of employees said they were able to achieve the correct work/life balance (Truss et al 2006). It is still common for long hours working to be taken as a sign of loyalty and commitment. However, there is some indication that attitudes are changing - 59% of employers surveyed by T-Mobile said that they do not consider how late employees stay in the office as an indication of how hard they are working with only 16% saying that they did. Further, only 25% said that they reward those who work late or out of hours more than staff that just do their normal hours.

Distant working encourages employers to focus on outputs rather than time spent in the office, and this combined with the time saving potential of mobile technology, might be expected to reduce the pressure to work excessive over-time. Furthermore, mobile working facilitates flexible working time patterns as well as cutting down on commuting and business travel. The development of low cost communication technologies mean that working from home for all or part of the week on a regular basis, or occasionally to deal with contingencies is a viable option. Research has shown that the flexibility to reconcile the demands of work and home are often more valued than reduction in the actual amount of time spent working, and a significant factor in staff satisfaction, recruitment and retention (Charpentier et al 2006; Palmer 2004), and that it cuts down on absenteeism (Burke and Cooper 2008).

What are the challenges of mobile working?

Mobile working has great potential to enhance performance, and to transform the way we work. Where working at a distance is well established it is unlikely to raise any issues, but in workplaces with little previous experience it can present a challenge.

When workers spend significant amounts of time away from the office some of the usual indicators for performance - a reassuring presence and visible activity - are not there. Moreover, it can be much more difficult to pick up on the less easily identified things that affect performance such as tension with co-workers, bullying, early signs of depression, stress, or alcohol or drugs abuse. So it is not surprising then that the T-Mobile survey found that 54% of employers find it difficult to appraise the performance of mobile workers, and that Vanson Bourne found that 33% of SMEs are concerned about productivity, and 40%, the security implications of allowing employees to work away from the office.

Employers understandably may fear a loss of control with the consequent negative impact on performance. Managers may also find it more difficult

to manage staff effectively. The 2006 CIPD engagement study established a clear link between employee performance, engagement, and intention to stay and their estimate of managers as fair, treating them with respect, keeping them informed and giving opportunities for upward feedback (Truss et al 2006). Meeting these criteria is much more difficult if managers do not meet staff on a regular basis. Building trust and engaging staff from a distance needs a different approach, and one less based on personal contact. Maintaining a shared culture is also more difficult, and staff identification with the organisation and its values can diminish (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, and Garud 2001). In addition, it may take longer and more effort to socialise new staff into the culture of the organisation (Morgan and Symon 2002).

While the experience and circumstances of mobile workers varies, there is plenty of research showing that employees with a reduced presence in the workplace may be at a disadvantage (Edwards and Robinson 2005; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2003). Remote workers can be at risk of being overlooked and undervalued (Sidle 2008). They may not be given challenging, new, or complex tasks because it is more difficult for managers to monitor performance, or because they are not at hand when the opportunity comes up. Managers establish relationships of trust more easily with staff with whom they interact frequently, whose performance they have witnessed, and who are always to hand. Thus, distant workers may be less likely to be asked to act in place of a manager, supervise or train other staff, join committees or be selected for innovative projects. Many of these activities are critical experiences for learning and career progression (Mihail 2008). Managers and employers also lose out because it reduces the pool of staff they can rely on to take responsibility, and the skills of mobile workers may be underused and less developed.

Mobile working can also impact on office-bound colleagues and teams. Working relationships may suffer if mobile staff are not seen to contribute or to support their colleagues, and resentment can grow if they are thought to be out "swanning around" and getting all the exciting assignments. This can result in lack of co-operation with the mobile worker and/or unjustified negative feedback to their managers. Generally, effective team working can be harder to achieve without face to face interaction, and team leadership is more demanding.

Not being around colleagues also has its penalties, and workers may miss the social support of co-workers which is a primary source of job satisfaction and well being (Guest 2002). There are also fewer opportunities to learn from others and to engage in networking and social activities that give access to information, opportunities, innovative ideas, clients, senior staff etc. Systems of communication are often informal, and it is harder to keep up with what is going on, or to get consulted. Mobile staff may miss the technical support of colleagues and managers. They can be uncertain about whether they are doing the right things, and without other colleagues for comparison it is difficult to know whether you are working hard enough and achieving adequate results.

Finally, while mobile technologies used creatively can improve work/life balance, they can also make things worse by enabling people to work at anytime and anywhere –including at home and on holiday. Work can intrude on home life as it is more difficult to draw a line round working time and it is tempting to make yourself available at all hours. This is a gift for the workaholic, but can put undue pressure on individuals and families (Green 2001). A great deal of research has shown that long hours working can lead to stress and ultimately reduces worker efficiency and service quality, and increases absenteeism and turnover (Cousins and Tang 2004, Burke and Cooper 2008). Managers and colleagues may also make unrealistic demands as they lose sight of the distant workers workload, or do not understand what their job entails.

Despite drawbacks for some, many mobile workers do not suffer any of these difficulties, and are highly motivated and make rapid progress in their careers. The T-Mobile survey also found almost one third of managers did not perceive assessing their performance as a problem. The potential problems can be avoided by careful management, and giving some thought as to how to avoid the pitfalls and make the most of the opportunities offered.

Remedies and Solutions

What can be done then to maximise the benefits of mobile working? The guidance given below is based on good management practice applicable to all workers. However, the special circumstances of mobile workers mean they are much more important, and cannot be left to chance. There will be hidden benefits for everyone because it makes managers and staff think more strategically and deeply about how they work together.

From the employer's point of view, mobile working is an investment in the long term health and competitiveness of the business. The cost of equipment to support communication is low relative to the returns it can bring but exploiting its full potential does call for further investment. Staff will need some training, and changing the way they work takes up staff time. Motivation is a critical factor in success and it is very important to communicate the reasons for embarking on change, and to explain the benefits it will bring, and to allocate sufficient resources to secure the best technical support for mobile working.

Managers and mobile workers have to work hard together to make mobile working successful and they are rarely given specific training or guidelines on how to do this effectively. However, most of the action required is based on standard good human resource management practice. The behaviour of line managers has been shown to be a key factor in individual and organisational performance. They also have the primary responsibility for performance management in which setting targets and appraisal play a major part. Thus much of the advice is aimed at them and they may need training and support in order to manage effectively in this new environment (Grimshaw 2004). However, remote workers must also take responsibility for making mobile working effective, and co-

workers in their turn have a part to play. The introduction of mobile working therefore requires a rethink about work and working relationships for everyone. Here are some things that have been found useful:

- The task of performance management will be more challenging because it has to focus on outcomes rather than time. Both parties have to think through the implications for how the worker carries out their job and how they are assessed. This is best started as part of the usual appraisal process.
- The first step is for the mobile worker and line manager to meet to review what activities the job involves, how it may change over the coming appraisal period, and how it fits into the wider company strategy and targets. They should discuss and agree objectives, how they may be achieved and measured, and the resources that are needed in order to achieve them. In particular to focus on any barriers to performance raised by remote working, discuss solutions and identify the things which have been helpful.
- While the degree of specification may vary with role, it is vital to get detailed agreement on objectives and how performance is to be assessed. Without clear objectives and measures, neither can tell whether the mobile worker is doing a good job. Clear objectives and agreed measures are the best antidote to manager insecurity at not seeing a given employee working under their nose every day. They can also help to ensure that the mobile worker is not taking on unrealistic workload and know what is expected of them in terms of performance. When in doubt, they can look at how an individual is delivering against agreed objectives.
- The next step is to agree ways of reporting back on progress and outcome- the type of information or data required frequency and so on. Mobile technology offers a number of ways in which measurable performance can be reported on a regular basis. Information fed in can be stored and shared in order to keep managers and co-workers informed of progress. However, interpretation of these data and picking up on the qualitative aspects often requires discussion by phone or face to face.
- Keeping in touch through regular reports, meetings and interim appraisals should overcome managers' fear of loss of control and reduce the ambiguity about the role and performance of distant workers. While maximum use can be made of remote means of communicating, organising meeting points throughout the year is particularly important in order get a more detailed discussion of progress, complex tasks or issues, and to deal with any worries on the part of either side. This may happen on an ad hoc basis, but it is important to set aside some specific times to ensure that it does not get forgotten under the pressure of other business, and prompts to do this can be written into electronic diaries a year ahead.
- As with all employees it is critical that mobile workers have a clear skills and career development plan that includes not just formal training but the full range of work based activities they need to undertake in order to retain and develop their skills and progress their career. Assigning mentors who will advise and coaches to train

are an effective means of achieving this. If they are team members it is also a good way of linking the distant worker more closely with the team. However, co-workers need to be given recognition for any extra workload this imposes. It is important that distant workers understand that ultimately they have to take responsibility for their own career development, and to take positive steps to acquire the skills they need. Staff can seek out mentors outside their own department or organisation, and identify appropriate training and development activities to suggest to their managers. They should make efforts to stay in touch with colleagues to keep abreast of changes that have implications for their own skills requirements. Further, they also have responsibilities to support the learning of others and to pass on the knowledge they have acquired.

Effective communication is at the centre of any strategy for the management of distance working. Managers have to learn different ways of communicating with remote staff, and ensuring they communicate effectively with colleagues. Co-workers also have to learn new ways of relating to distant colleagues, and of sharing information and knowledge. This will entail having an overall communication plan for everyone. New technologies provide a vast array of ways of staying in touch, many of which can be accessed through mobile devices.

Intranets and e-mails are now routinely used to keep in touch with staff, and they can contribute to building a common culture. Morgan and Symon (2002) concluded on the basis of their research that when used correctly they can facilitate shared understanding and help remote staff to view their company as alive and exciting. For example, newsletters and briefing papers can be prepared and distributed at little cost. However, they can be counterproductive if recipient become overloaded with information, the message is incoherent or the content is irrelevant. Deciding on what and who to include is a complex issue. It is difficult to identify what each party needs to know. Managers and mobile workers and co-workers need to be aware of the problem and together devise ways of overcoming it together. Once they have broadly decided who needs what and when, distribution lists and filters can be set up to target recipients more precisely. There is also the temptation to rely on e-mail as the main form of communication, now that it can be picked up anywhere on a mobile phone. It is easy for misunderstandings to arise when voice and visual cues are absent and time can be wasted with endless fruitless exchanges that a simple telephone call could resolve. Difficulty of getting hold of people is often the reason for not calling, but calls can be planned and put into electronic diaries. New technologies offer a variety of ways of knowledge sharing enabling face to face virtual contact and conferencing, online discussion boards, document repositories, data files and so on- but individuals have to be motivated, and often require training, in order to get the most out of them. Both office bound and mobile staff have to be very disciplined about using the new systems, reviewing them regularly to ensure that the information passed on is both relevant and timely, and that no one is left out.

Channels for upward communication are an indispensable part of any internal communication system, and can be used to consult, elicit ideas and gauge attitudes to change. For example, regular surveys can provide valuable benchmarking information, to monitor the response to change over time and to identify problems in specific areas. The mechanics of running them are simple, but the same rules on relevance and targeting apply, and used too often or with poorly framed questions response rates can be very low. Further, it is important to be seen to take the information gathered seriously and to act on it so the final part of the communication cycle –feedback on what you have done or a rationale for not doing it–provides an incentive for staff to take part.

Remote working can pose a challenge for team building and leadership, and observing the guidelines above is particularly important. While classic team building activities, the away day, Christmas party and so on, can assist, different ways of relating have to be embedded into the routines of work. Virtual teams, where everyone is in effect a remote worker, are more likely to rely on the many technological solutions available, but where the majority of the team are office bound there may be less motivation to adopt them. However, they also need to devise a communication strategy to ensure that remote workers are supported and can contribute effectively. For example, there is no reason for distant workers to miss meetings when a telephone conference can be so easily set up on mobile phones. Participants may be in a motorway car park, overseas, at home or in another office, but none needs to be excluded from the discussion. Electronic diaries can be shared so that each team member knows where an individual can be contacted, and they can also gain an appreciation of what they are doing. The distant team member has a special responsibility to keep the diary up to date and to advertise how and when they can be contacted. It may be helpful to involve other team members in the remote workers appraisal process or in 360 degrees appraisal (although this has to be carefully handled) or to have a team appraisal, and to discuss how everyone can work together to achieve common objectives. In this way team members gain a better appreciation of each other's role and expected contribution, and how that might be assessed. This, combined with the actions above, can result in more effective teams.

New ways of working may on occasion provoke resistance (Grimshaw 2002). Breaking away from established routines often means extra effort at the outset, uncertainty and sometimes fear. Keeping staff informed, consulting them and involving them wherever possible and providing support and re-assurance have proved to be the best way of dealing with this. Where new skills and techniques are required formal training is useful to get started, and appointing enthusiastic colleague "experts" as coaches and team leaders has been shown to be a very effective way to get staff to change and to exploit the full potential of new technologies. A clear demonstration of the advantages to be gained through innovation is one of the best incentives to change.

Conclusion

The benefits of mobile working are many, but it is important businesses consider the possible challenges thrown up by introducing a mobile working culture. Mobile operators need to work with businesses to get the right policies in place to harness the full potential of mobile working. Businesses also need to invest in managing the change involved effectively. Much of the advice contained in this paper is based on established good practice in managing people. If the introduction of new technology stimulates employers to introduce better ways of managing their workforces, not only will they reap the full benefit of investment in mobile technology, but there will also be the bonus of enhanced staff performance. Staff may also benefit from a better work/life balance and greater job satisfaction.

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