
UPDATE: WINTER 2006

London commuter trains are running at 4.3% over capacity during the morning rush hour, according to recent figures from the Department for Transport. Even before they arrive at work, commuters are showing visible signs of stress, with raised blood pressure and tense posture.

Add in the inevitable winter time disruptions due to adverse weather conditions, and it's not surprising that in 2004 1.8 million workers chose to work from home according to the Office for National Statistics.

Working from home is good for your wallet too. According to a recent YouGov poll, the official average salary is now £22,248 but costs such as transport, snacks and clothes are taken into account reduce this by £2,278.

Employers are also waking up to the potential costs savings of home working. A recent survey estimated the average cost of central London office space to be £23,500 per employee per year, while space in Reading costs £17,800 and Leeds £17,200 per year.

And, according to a recent article in the computing press, many organisations are finding the traditional one desk per person policy very inefficient. Having 20% more staff than

Creating an organisational culture that supports home working:

If your organisation is keen to promote more home working, start by taking these steps.

- **Know who your existing home workers are**

Establish whether they're at home full time or ad hoc; where they work; which work is done from home and the employee's profile.

- **Know your organisation's culture**

Is it hierarchical or does it have a flat structure? How comfortable are the management team with people working out of sight? Are all managers equally in favour of supporting it? Is home working viewed as a benefit to employees or the organisation?

- **Determine whether there's a business reason for improving take-up**

Is it to attract a more diverse group of employees; to make better use of technology; to enable employees to reduce commuting times; to reduce office costs?

We've developed a checklist to support home working. For a copy send us an email with '10 points to homeworking' in the header.

desks and encouraging hot desking is more common.

Public Sector interest in home working is also growing, partly driven by Whitehall efficiency targets resulting from the Gershon Review.

The new Disability Equality Duty being introduced for the public sector at the end of 2006 will require more creative solutions to ensure disabled people are treated equally at work. And home working is good for the environment - reducing carbon dioxide emissions from commuter journeys.

While technology enabling home working has been around for some time, organisations still face cultural and behavioural barriers. Many of our clients now offer home based working as part of their flexible working policies. Take up by employees tends to vary depending on whether the organisation has introduced home working for business reasons (for example to reduce office costs) or whether the request for home working comes predominantly from employees and is motivated by personal reasons.

Corporate mindsets still need to change – not just among line managers and staff, but also among Facilities Management and IT departments providing essential supporting infrastructures.

Growing use of wireless gadgets can exacerbate long hours working according to recent research conducted for BT. According to them laptops and mobile phones are the most popular devices, with PDAs and smart phones such as blackberries coming a close second.

Only 62% of employers providing these gadgets back their actions with a formal 'working from home' policy. Without a policy and proper training, there is a risk that staff end up working longer hours, to the detriment of their work-life balance.

Fujitsu Siemens recently reported that two in five employees planned to log on to work emails over the Christmas holiday - so the risk seems very real to us!

Employees often ask to work from home when expecting an important delivery or a call from a service engineer. We were amused to read a recent newspaper report suggesting at least one gas company is addressing the problem with a 24-hour service.

A couple in Bristol, whose gas supply was switched off at 10:30 am so that a gas leak could be mended, were told at 5:00 pm that a gas fitter would visit them shortly.

By 11:00 pm, with no sign of the fitter they went to bed, only to wake the following day to find a "sorry we missed you" card, timed at 3:30 am on the doormat!

A gas company spokesman said: "our business operates on a 24-hour basis (and) our engineer did return to the property (but) as there were no lights on ..left a card to advise he had visited but made no attempt to wake the customer."

HR needs to take a bigger role in managing people in virtual teams

according to Professor Anne Anderson, a psychologist at the Glasgow School of Business and Management.

A potential benefit of technology is that staff can have meetings when working in different countries but there's a risk of people becoming desensitised to cultural differences.

According to Professor Anderson, new technology and virtual team working affect the way people communicate, which can hamper creativity. HR needs to consider whether employees have the skills to work in these new ways, and provide training if necessary.

Home or Remote Worker?

In our work with clients, we're increasingly differentiating between home workers and remote workers. We believe this is a necessary distinction as technology makes it possible to work any time, any where.

The challenges and issues facing an employee (and her employer) who has a dedicated space at home in which to carry out her work are very different from those facing the peripatetic worker. The question of what work can be done off-site is also likely to be answered differently.

For example, confidentiality will be a much greater concern where the employee is accessing a wireless network in a busy coffee bar, than where he is working from a secure computer at home. On the Health & Safety side, the risks of skeletal or muscular injuries are likely to be greater in the first location.

Over the last five years we've worked with a range of clients to develop appropriate home and remote working policies. If you think we can help you, please get in touch for more information.

Facilitating flexibility through training:

HalsAllan works with clients to develop and implement sustainable working practices based on flexible working arrangements and harnessing technology in positive ways.

In addition to providing specialist consultancy advice and support, we offer an established portfolio of strategic flexible working, diversity and work-life balance workshops.

For employers wanting to explore home and remote working issues we'll be offering the following open workshops in 2006:

Managing the remote workforce looks at the challenges of managing teams of teleworkers, part-time staff and those working non-standard arrangements; and identifies the broader skill sets required by managers if they are to do so successfully.

Restructuring for better balance is a half day workshop providing strategies for re-designing your workplace to take advantage of new and sustainable ways of working.

Details of our full portfolio of workshops - all of which can be tailored for presentation in-house - can be found on our website.