

**The positive use of internet communication
technology in business,
and its role in improving the motivation and
productivity of remote workers**

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for

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Introduction

According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), in the UK today more than 2.1 million people work from home, and around 8 million spend at least some of their working week in the home rather than the office. Technology has made this increasingly possible with numbers doubled since 1997 when the ONS first began to study this trend in the British workforce.

An improvement in work-life balance has been offered to this working population, and an increasing flexibility of the workforce has allowed many organisations to retain and use the skills of key workers where geographical fit or demands of personal life can be more easily accommodated.

Legislation has supported this changing trend, with the Employment Act's "family friendly working rights" which came into force in 2003 giving various groups the legal right to get their employers to seriously consider requests to work more flexibly. Many roles within organisations require physical presence, but in other areas actually being in the office is no longer a necessity but more of a traditional way of working which is being increasingly called into question. As well as changing hours, employers have increasingly allowed an adaptation of old-school working practices to facilitate home working. According to the DTI, a fifth of those likely to request flexible working arrangements are in the sales and customer services sectors. Managers and technology-related workers are believed to work more from home than any others, according to studies by the Teleworking Association. This change in work pattern has been assisted by advances in technology with broadband phone connections being the most widely used product, allowing the "virtual" office to become a reality.

Purpose

This paper discusses the possible effects on those groups of skilled workers using technology as a routine part of their workday, rather than the many thousands of manual workers undertaking generally low paid activity from a home location. Study by the University of Leicester indicates that such non-manual work accounts for about 80% of the work done at home, and the majority of this involves the use of ICT. According to that study 61.2% of those working at home at least one day per week use a telephone and computer to do so, and 49.5% of those who work mainly at home use a computer to do so.

Whilst working from home allows many individuals to balance the challenges of life and work, as well as geographical barriers, there can also be significant personal disadvantages to such methods of work and it is not a lifestyle that suits all workers.

Behavioural Patterns

From the human perspective, the feelings of isolation experienced by some remote workers can be significant. It is widely recognised that working alone for prolonged periods of time can evoke a lowered sense of belonging for some individuals, and this can start to undermine motivation and success, which in turn negatively impacts the success of any business. Abraham Maslow's theories of the hierarchy of human needs are well known, and a drop in feelings of belonging can be detrimental to levels of individual achievement.

Clayton Alderfer sighted the need to relate to others in his simplification of Maslow's theories known as the "ERG" theory, and those feelings of relating can be easily lost when physical human contact does not take place, and we are increasingly reliant on impersonal forms of communication such as email.

A trend in the current workplace to communicate via email instead of by voice or in person opens the floodgates to miscommunication, as the variable quality of written word and the mood of both sender and receiver are often misconstrued. Where the voice is used success of communication is increased, and when the significant power and nuances of body language can be added all humans are able to better interpret communication, and the intended messages are far more likely to be understood, correctly interpreted, and therefore more likely to be positively acted upon. Successful communication between workers is of course essential to the success of all organisations, and where workers are remote from each other finding a means of overcoming barriers can only lead to better outcomes.

Charles Handy and many others assert that satisfaction is gained from doing a job, provided that there is some freedom in determining the "what" and "how" manner in which it is actually done. Remote working allows much autonomy for workers and can therefore increase motivation, but genuine participation in decision making can sometimes be lost or diminished where communication is lacking and the workers do not feel tangible support from and inclusion with colleagues and managers. He says that "a sense of place and a sense of ownership of ideas and initiatives is necessary for our identity and commitment". Where workers can see and feel these things, achievement levels are likely to be increased, and as the communication revolution continues, the modern business world can gain advantage by being forward thinking, and adding new tools to their day to day working practises, increasing such feelings of inclusion amongst their workforces.

Technology and Remote Working

One solution which can assist in overcoming some of these barriers is to address the issues with positive use of appropriate technology. Software applications continue to be developed and improve our ability to communicate more easily. The addition of sound and video capability allows increasingly for body language to become a factor in remote communication, and thus make such applications more personal and "human" for the users. MICROSOFT Messenger, for example, has offered a cost effective way of talking over the internet without running up large corporate phone bills and even allows two people to use video connections to see each other during live conversation, but has limitations as a business application.

A higher step in this type of technology is MICROSOFT Live Meeting, designed for business use, and coupled with applications such as Arel Anyware, allows multiple user high quality voice and video communication over the internet. With 15 concurrent users included per licence, it can be a very cost effective answer for organisations wishing to minimise some of the negative aspects of home working. In volatile and fast-moving business environments, such "free" methods can be used to increase the regularity of communication between members of a team, and keep a dispersed workforce in touch in real time.

For example, as a project develops which is being worked on by employees spread around the country, all are able to strive towards common goals and react quickly to changing client needs. The ability to simultaneously share documents and plans visually on each person's PC wherever they are located, to discuss them in real time, with one presenter making changes ready to answer a demanding customer could bring significant commercial advantage over another organisation who might have to wait for remote workers to "happen" to check email, and then "choose" when to respond. Priorities can be channelled by an effective manager, bringing people together instantly over the internet to discuss and resolve complex issues in real time. A single "click" from all participants can gather a vote or poll to agree a best course of action in moments once all have had an opportunity to give their input.

A good manager can use this type of technology to great advantage, bringing together a virtual team in seconds. With video linkage, feelings of genuine team contact and intimacy can be created, and a team can feel realistically involved in activities. It could be argued that the increased sense of belonging which naturally derives from this verbal and visual intimacy will help in increasing the sense of belonging and shared values experienced by a team of people who perhaps cannot physically be in the same room on a regular basis.

Once the use of an application like Microsoft Live Meeting has become commonplace to the workforce, the ability to link together in just "two clicks" can become as second nature as walking five metres across an office to see a colleague and quickly resolve a question or issue in a personal manner.

Increasing feelings of inclusiveness for workers in turn can increase their natural sense of loyalty to the team and the organisation, raising levels of productivity and mutual support. Once individuals have adapted to, and embraced the technology involved, it can be used to cater for various types of individual, providing open forum discussion. For those who might hesitate to ask questions or offer opinions in a physical meeting situation, Microsoft Live Meeting has capability for people to type and submit questions privately or publicly. These can be addressed by the presenter, or perhaps a nominated co-presenter, allowing a large meeting to continue to flow while individual comments are addressed. Individuals can also register their "mood" as the meeting progresses by means of colour coding their identities, which can give the presenter an indication of the speed of communication which might be appropriate, and also change his/her leadership and presentation style to gain the maximum benefit from the meeting itself.

Commercial Benefits

- Significant cost saving. Organisations spend large amounts of money on travel costs for remote workers in order for them to attend (oftentimes brief) meetings in person. Appropriate use of virtual meetings can vastly reduce this outlay. An added benefit of this could be the additional financial ability it gives organisations to increase flexible working options, and thus attract higher calibre workers without impacting the bottom line.
- Work time saved. If remote workers spend less time travelling to physical meetings they are available to perform their jobs and pick up on actions immediately a virtual meeting closes.
- The ability to react quickly to changing customer demands, while still maintaining full remote team involvement through instant "personal" discussions.
- More effective and personal man management of geographically dispersed teams.
- Improved sense of belonging and relatedness to the organisation for remote workers increasing natural productivity levels.

Summary

The virtual office may not yet be ready to replace the physical office entirely, as there are many jobs that still require physical presence in a fixed location for practical reasons. There is also a strong argument for the benefits of periodic "get togethers" of remote workers to maintain good working relationships amongst colleagues. However, doubts were cast over the benefits of email only relatively few years ago, and it is now considered an essential and 'basic' business tool. In the same way, using virtual meeting technology in an appropriate and positive way definitely offers financial and operational rewards to the forward thinking business, and it is set to become commonplace as the workforce becomes more flexible, and good employers take advantage of all available applications to maximise their commercial and human edge over competitors.

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