Flexible working: the end of 9-to-5

The benefits of flexible working have been widely discussed. But the long-term implications are just as important. Once you implement flexible working, there's no going back.

The workplace is changing. Flexible working has become the norm in most organisations. And the benefits are clear: more productivity and job satisfaction, lower costs and easier recruitment and retention of good people.

But once a flexible working strategy is rolled out, there's no going back. The effects are long term. A remote workforce has a different culture, and it needs a different management style.

Our experience

We found out first hand when we asked 2500 people to work away from our head office earlier this year. The aim was to test if we are ready to deal with the disruptions expected from the summer's Royal and sporting events.

The response was positive. Most of our employees said they were just as productive as when they were in the office. And overall, they saved nearly £9000 and over 2000 hours, mostly from reduced commuting. A quarter said they would feel more comfortable working remotely in the future.

The experiment only lasted a day, but we're still seeing the effects of it. Since then, we've seen more people working remotely. And it's changing the dynamics of our workplace.

A changing culture

Perhaps the biggest long-term effect of flexible working is a change in the culture of the organisation. Everyone is different. Some people will embrace flexible working and show big improvements in productivity and job satisfaction. Others will resist the change. They may be less comfortable blurring the lines between work and play.

Flexible working also needs a change from top management. Some managers will adapt easily to having their employees work remotely. But others may resist the change, preferring to keep a keen eye on their workers.

It's important to make sure that everyone understands what's expected of them. Some training and support will be helpful for anyone who feels unsure about working remotely, or managing people who do.

Adapting infrastructure

People aren't the only part of the business that will need to adapt to accommodate flexible working.

The organisation's IT and communications infrastructure must be sound enough to support remote working. And new hardware, such as laptops and tablets, may be needed for people who haven't worked remotely before.

Some employees may decide to use their own devices. This raises issues of security, liability and responsibility. Clear flexible working and bring-your-own policies will help people to understand exactly what's expected of them.

A long-term decision

Implementing a flexible working strategy can make a big difference to the productivity of an organisation. But the decision should not be made lightly. It requires a lot of thought and planning, as the implications will be long term.

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