



How To Make Home Working Work

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Many of our clients want to explore opportunities for home working. They have 2 main drivers:

1. reduce office costs by reducing space requirements and all the associated expenses that flow from it
2. ease recruitment by offering more attractive terms, and opening up options for recruiting outside their immediate locality.

In addition many knowledge workers are frustrated by time wasted travelling and, as they increasingly see others working from home, they begin to expect this as an option from their own employer.

In the best examples, homeworkers can create a more focussed and effective environment than their office-based counterparts and can enjoy a better work-life balance so increasing their motivation and output.

In addition, home working can have a more fundamental and positive effect as it requires roles, processes and outputs to be more clearly defined. In order for people to work effectively at home it needs to be clear exactly what they need to do and how to judge their effectiveness. These are basics that managers often fail to clarify but, in an office environment, we get away with it. For home working, it's just not good enough.

Home working problems

However, when badly executed, home working can reduce efficiency and effectiveness. Meetings deferred until everyone's in the office can take weeks to organise; new starters can't lean over and ask the person next to them so they invent their own ways of working.



CEO's Briefing

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And Friday home-working can mean that Friday gradually becomes part of the weekend. Thursday can become the new Friday!

Good management has traditionally relied on seeing what's going on – when people are working from home it's not so easy to spot issues, underperformance or, even, fraud. Teams who don't work together can lose their commitment and morale!

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Who can't work from home?

For companies trying to drive innovation and experimentation, dispersing your workforce can be the last thing you want. New ideas often come from chance meetings or informal discussions in the office; for many people being creative is part of working together and novel solutions are “sparked off” when chatting with colleagues.

Or where roles are uncertain or ambiguous, people are best co-located so they can work issues through, iron problems out, and evolve how they work.

And, obviously, machine operators, car mechanics and chefs have to go to the factory, workshop or restaurant. It's madness to suggest all staff can work from home.

But, increasingly, in first world economies, employment is dominated by knowledge-work and administration. These kind of workers have historically spent their days in office buildings because this was the only way to gain access to the systems and information they needed to do their job, and it was the efficient way to collaborate. But new technology has gradually eroded this efficiency calculation for many of these workers.

The basis of successful home-working is a cultural commitment

Firstly, in our experience, to make this change work there has to be a commitment to making home working normal. Often managers who believe in home-working find it works, those who don't will find that it fails. Funnily enough they get what they expect.

Good managers wander around the office, chat to people, and provide support, energy, advice and coaching as part of their normal management. These things are needed more than ever for home workers and managers need to make changes to achieve the same end when their people are remote.

Home workers have to be fully part of the team, fully involved, and fully effective. Changes will be necessary to enable this. These changes cannot be considered optional or “nice to have”.

Of course technology is critical

There are 6 critical aspects to technology to support home working

1. Homeworkers need effective technology and connectivity to allow phone, video, online chat, txt and (of course) email! Office phone networks can be integrated with home workers very simply using SIP technology so staff at home can take and make calls as if they were in the office. Managers must make an effort to normalise using Skype (or similar) for video, and applications like Teams, Slack or WhatsApp allow people to chat easily as if they were sitting next to each other.

2. People need access to all the business applications they would have in the office. If these are modern web applications then it should be relatively simple to implement them for home workers as well. If not, then special technology like virtual desktops may be needed - this is not rocket science but it must be done well and cost-effectively.



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3. Traditionally, workers share and collaborate naturally in ways we don't even notice: whiteboards, post-its, paper documents and files around the office. Or just seeing what other people are doing, talking to each other, and helping out. A major effort needs to be made to adopt technology to replace this, otherwise office workers continue to be the “real workers” and homeworkers are simply “on the outside”. Files must be electronic and they must be stored in shared locations, for example shared folders or Sharepoint. Products like Trello, Basecamp or Wrike are free, or low cost, and can be used to share work and ideas and to make everyone's work and progress visible to all.

4. Home workers may need remote support to make their technology work. They may need onsite tech assistance occasionally, there must be provision for new kit to be sent to them, or returned by them if necessary. They may need help with their router even if it's nothing to do with the company. Put simply, getting all this stuff working well is in the company's interests.

5. Security risks are greater for homeworkers because the IT team may not properly oversee their equipment, they may use their own devices which the company doesn't control, and lower physical security at their house (or Starbucks!) may expose company property to being stolen. This might be physical property or data. Security policies must be amended appropriately and rigorously enforced, and additional measures (such as 2 factor authentication) may be necessary.

Changes to management

Management style has to be adjusted in some fundamental ways. Some of these are not easy and run counter to the way many people traditionally work.

Most importantly, jobs need to be fully and properly defined. We all know that's good anyway, but – let's face it - we very rarely do it well. What are people supposed to do, what is the limit of their authority, what is their expected output and what is the measure of their success?

Traditionally many managers make loose judgements about who is doing their job well based on who we see working hard and who appears competent. We also see who is contributing to ideas and who makes the difference when there are problems. And we make subconscious presumptions based on how people conduct themselves and how we see them deal with us and their colleagues.

But all of this will likely be biased towards office workers and against home workers. Home-workers are likely to be less valued and they are likely to be assigned only routine work. Unless specific steps are taken home-workers may find they miss out on opportunities to contribute, to advance their skills, and to progress their careers.

We believe that 6 key steps mark out the organisations who make home working successful:

1. People's jobs, their responsibilities, objectives and success measures need to be clear and up to date.
2. Managers need regular, probably daily, discussions with their whole team (both office and homeworkers) by phone, video or similar. The aim is to make sure everyone is included, up to speed, and focussed on their priorities.
3. New starters need extra help, for longer, to ensure they know how to do their jobs well and work successfully with the rest of the team.
4. Managers need regular, perhaps fortnightly, discussions with the whole team about how the work is going, what's working and what isn't. Teams should create simple online “how to guides” where they can record and refine decisions and agree improvements.
5. HR basics need to be sorted and seen to be fair. Home workers need an effective

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and safe home office but who pays for a decent chair, printer ink, and broadband costs? Is home working the same as flexi-working? How are holidays and sickness policies affected?

6. However well homeworking is organised, there is no substitute for face to face working. Effective organisations make occasional face to face working part of the routine.

Improved disaster resilience

Companies that have implemented home working effectively and that run their IT in the cloud are far more resilient than office-based companies when disasters strike.

This is rarely talked about, but is a very real benefit of home-working.

We have seen companies brought to a standstill by floods, chemical spills and power failures, or more mundane problems like heavy snowfall. For most companies this will lead to major disruption and can have a material effect on financial performance if it persists for more than a few days.

But companies who have implemented home working are largely immune to this kind of issue. If home working routines have been established for some, then the disciplines and facilities are probably in place to allow everyone to work at home for a limited period but for all critical work to continue largely uninterrupted.

Bringing it all back home

So, homeworking can be a significant source of cost saving, it can unlock recruitment opportunities, improve staff satisfaction and improve resilience to disasters.

But it needs to be done well. It must be embraced by leaders, properly supported by IT and good management.

If you'd like to discuss how IT needs to support a home working initiative in your business please get in touch. We'd be delighted to help.

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