# Is Remote Working the Way of the Future?

How times have changed. It wasn't that long ago when we all left home in the morning, commuted to the office, did our day's work, then returned home in the evening. Historically, there was little option. The tools of the trade from typewriters to paper-based documents were all based at the office, and if we needed to talk to a work colleague we met face-to-face. Many businesses had satellite offices, but the principles remained the same with telephone lines and the postal service as a convenient way to keep in touch.
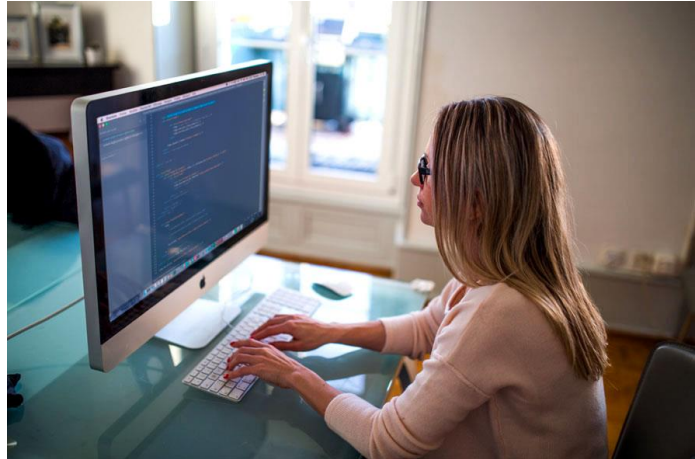
The advent of the personal computer in the 80's began the revolution. Data could be stored digitally and the concept of the paper-free office loomed on the horizon. However, it was the development of high speed broadband and cellular technology which was the major driver to change. The exponential growth of mobile phones, tablets, e-mails and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) really opened the door to a totally new way of working that is more productive and benefits both the employer and the employee. With features like instant messaging, hosted software available anywhere via the 'Cloud', video and online collaboration, even location becomes less important.

According to the latest statistics from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), out of a UK working population of 31.7 million, 4.3 million (or 13.6% of the working population), now work from home. This includes both those working full time from home and those using their home as a base and visiting clients and customers elsewhere. Remote working isn't suitable for those working in factories or manufacturing companies, but a survey by YouGov Omnibus found that among UK office staff, more than half (54%) are currently able to work remotely.

So what are the factors that have led to the growth of remote working?

Cost

From the employer's perspective, cost saving is probably the biggest driver. Office space doesn't come cheap, especially in popular urban locations where rents and business rates can be prohibitive. Add to that the costs of desks, chairs, computer systems, phones, heating and

lighting, there is a significant cost burden to an office-based workforce. Even if the employer provides a laptop, mobile phone and pays the employee's broadband costs, the savings achieved by working remotely can be considerable. It means the main office can be downsized and overheads reduced which results in a positive effect on the bottom line.

For the employee, the cost benefits are equally significant. Not all employees are able or willing to walk or cycle to work, and whether using public or private transport, the cost of commuting is estimated at an average of £150 per month per employee. That represents a very easy way for employers to provide a salary increase in real terms without increasing company expenditure.

Work-life balance

A better quality of life is probably the biggest bonus to the employee. For single parents, carers or families with both parents working, time flexibility and being able to manage work commitments around parental or caring duties can be a huge benefit. Avoiding the daily slog of commuting not only saves time but avoids the stress that accompanies rush-hour traffic and crushed public transport. Provided there are no deadlines, working hours can be flexible, being conducted in the early morning, evening or weekend if needed, something which isn't always possible when working in a central office. Not only does having control of their working lives provide employees with a better work-life balance, it also gives them a greater sense of responsibility and enhanced employee engagement. Research has found that two out of five working adults would accept a pay cut in return for more flexible hours.

Productivity

An overwhelming 91% of respondents in one survey[1] said they're more productive when working remotely. This may seem a paradox, but when you take into account time wasted on informal, friendly chats and minor interruptions in the office, despite such distractions only taking a couple of minutes to deal with, studies have shown that it can take up to twenty

minutes to regain concentration afterwards. When working remotely, employees can manage their own workload, working at optimal times, factoring in breaks and keeping themselves focussed. Some of us are early risers, and others hate getting up at the crack of dawn. If based at home (and as long as colleagues have been informed), working between the hours that align with your internal clock and natural rhythms enables you to utilise the period of time when you feel most motivated and productive.

A study by Staples[2] found that employees who worked from home experienced 25% less stress. If additional work is required for an urgent task, it's easier, less stressful and less disruptive to put in the extra hours at home than working late in the office. Fewer distractions, being able to work at optimal times and at one's own pace together with a greater sense of wellbeing are all contributing factors that increase productivity when working away from the office environment.

Geographic location

If staff don't have to travel into the office, it opens a whole new world - literally. Provided there are good broadband links and a cellular signal, there is no restriction on where employees can be based. It provides virtually unlimited access to talent so employers can recruit the very best staff, while remote employees can work for the ideal company no matter where they are based, even if located abroad. Employees may want to move house for personal reasons, but being able to offer remote working means their valued skills can be retained within the organisation, and it reduces costly staff turnover.

Reduced absence

Minor ailments such as a bad cold or a sore throat may not inhibit the ability to work but can lead to absence from the office to avoid passing the problem on to colleagues. Working from home means employees can look after themselves, but still get the work done.

Studies have found that remote workers take fewer days off due to illness than on-site workers.

The downsides

But it's not all roses; there are negative factors that need to be taken into account. The most significant challenge of working remotely is creating a community within a workforce. Working in different locations often means that employees also work alone. Virtual employees don't have the chance to talk to each other at the water cooler or go out to lunch together to develop a close working bond. A recent white paper[3] found that employees who feel like part of a community in their workplaces are more productive and better at working in teams.

One solution is to provide a 'Slack' communication channel for company banter, dedicated channels for project teams, and hold regular phone or Skype meetings so people can discuss work "in-person." Encouraging and organising opportunities for your team to meet in person and socialise will help them to bond and build real relationships, meet new employees and stay up to date with changes in the office environment or procedures.

Some employees may struggle to establish boundaries between their personal and work time, and this often results in overwork rather than underperforming. As the act of leaving the office is missing, it can blur the boundary between work and personal time. A recent study by Cardiff University[4] found that more than a third (39%) of people working remotely often work additional hours to complete their tasks, compared to less than a quarter (24%) of those in fixed workplaces. A simple solution is to have a dedicated work space with a door to close which effectively differentiates the two. This can also help focus concentration and reduce or remove domestic distractions.

While it's easy to see who's in and if anybody is absent when everyone works in the office, it's not the same when some of the staff work remotely. However there are time and attendance systems such as Bodet's Kelio Mobile which allows remote employees to clock in and out via their smart phone or tablet. You can also use a PC or laptop. That way managers always know who is available if they are needed for an urgent task or a phone call needs to be transferred. It also means that the issue of burn-out due to over working at home can be prevented, since alerts can be triggered when a set level of working hours is exceeded.

A 'work anywhere' culture isn't suitable for every organisation, but with careful management, a structured approach and the correct technological solutions, it enables organisations large and small to look at new ways of conducting business that benefit both the employer and the employee. Remote working can deliver a happier, more motivated and engaged workforce with significant improvements in employee health and wellbeing. As well as increasing

productivity, it also reduces absenteeism and staff turnover, as well as providing access to the largest talent pool.

References

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