

Making remote working a reality

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Remote working is becoming increasingly important to the business world, as employees see the opportunity to work from home as a very attractive way to ensure a better work-life balance and to avoid the stress of the daily commute. But what problems does this pose to an enterprise's IT systems and how can employers trust their employees to work effectively and securely, when they are no longer shielded by the office environment? In this uncertain economic climate, many enterprises now view remote working as a vital way of reducing the costs associated with supporting staff in an office environment and also as a non-cash incentive to reward particularly successful employees. There is also now a legal obligation for enterprises to provide remote working solutions to their employees: those employees who have children under six years old or who have a responsibility for caring for spouses or partners are now legally entitled to request remote working options from their employers.

Tangible business benefits

Some of the benefits associated with remote working include:

- An increase in productivity among remote workers who are able to achieve more without the distractions of the office environment. Indeed surveys and pilots recently conducted by IBM Canada (where about 20% of its workforce telecommutes) indicate that employees can be as much as 50% more productive when they work in telework environments.
- While at the same time the cost savings can be impressive - with telework, AT&T saved \$3,000 per office for a total saving of approximately \$550 million by eliminating or consolidating office space people no longer need.
- Remote working is also greener and saves energy too: the average UK commuter travels 2,906 miles a year, and spends 8 hours a week - 47 working days a year - on commuting and business journeys (Source: National Travel Survey 2005).

Challenges facing the HR Department

Despite the numerous benefits of remote working, there are still many enterprises that are hesitant to fully implement remote working practices. Remote working poses particular problems to managers and HR Directors to whom the lack of immediate face to face interaction can often cause uncertainty about the best management structure and style to employ with staff not in the office. This lack of direct interaction immediately highlights the need to choose people who will be effective remote workers, and can be trusted to work diligently and accurately without being regulated by managers of team-members. HR Directors can also encounter difficulties when trying to effectively monitor things like workload and performance if they have no way of physically checking in with their employees.

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Another key obstacle to remote working is the obvious security issues posed by having large numbers of employees taking sensitive data off-site and of that data potentially falling into the wrong hands. We seem to read another story every day about a data breach – be it a lost or stolen laptop, a misplaced USB key or an unwitting employee putting a company’s entire database up for sale when they sell what they deem to be a redundant hard drive on eBay. Customers, children, taxpayers, criminals, soldiers, even spies are all human and the sensible approach must be towards assuming a breach will happen some day and formulating an approach that will deal with it effectively.

Technology is providing solutions to overcome these obstacles

Remote working is made all the more possible today due to the advanced level of technology that currently exists. Collaborative working, streamlined communications systems and next-generation technology devices mean that workers have all the resources they require at their fingertips, and no longer need to feel entirely detached from the office environment or fellow workers. Sensitive company data can also be secured using advanced encryption technology to safeguard access, and remotely wipe data in the event of loss.

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Although businesses may claim that in order to introduce the necessary technology solutions required for an effective remote working strategy they need to have extensive IT departments and a comprehensive grasp of computer programming – thankfully, this is no longer the case. There are companies today, who are providing remote working technology solutions and who have made a point of simplifying the IT behind their technology to allow any company – no matter what their size or IT expertise – to be in a position to offer highly accessible and straightforward IT solutions to support a remote workforce.

Technology can answer many HR Directors’ concerns about their ability to implement flexible working. Remote working solutions exist today that offer virtual private network facilities which enable the creation of collaborative working rooms where employees, who may be separated by hundreds of miles, can work together on a document as if they were sitting next to each other. Combine this with the advanced communications capabilities that exist today and employees can be in real-time, constant communication with their colleagues – this allows employees to feel as though they still have the support of co-workers wherever they may be located. These methods of collaborative working, combined with the setting of specific objectives, mean that employers can keep an eye on their remote workforce and ensure that they are not feeling isolated and are remaining productive.

Furthermore, any organisation that is prepared to allow their employees the freedom to roam off-site while carrying sensitive company data, needs to ensure these employees have technology that is secure enough to be fully protected in the event of loss. There are already devices on the market that use SIM technology to provide secure access, and which, if lost, can be immediately frozen and if necessary, have the data they contain wiped off remotely in the same way it is used by the finance sector when it enables banks to put a stop on stolen or fraudulently used credit cards.

In conclusion...

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Remote working offers numerous benefits to the organisation and to the employees themselves, in terms of work-life balance and reduced costs. Although there may appear to be barriers to implementing remote working, these can in fact all be answered by the technology solutions that exist today. Solutions which enable the HR department to stay in contact with remote workers, and ensure that they do not feel too isolated, but also that they are fulfilling their targets and still adding value to the company. It is time HR Directors fully embraced this modern trend, confident in the knowledge that the technology exists to ensure it will be a successful, secure and ultimately profitable step forward for the business and its employees.