

Technology for flexible working

Many law firms are looking at ways of improving the work life balance of their staff, driven largely by a desire to increase staff retention. Often a key part of this strategy includes focussing on working mothers, and in particular on finding ways of not losing them entirely following maternity leave. Whichever angle they are approaching it from, the aim is to increase the flexibility of work to allow people to fit it better within their own life. It has to be said, it is unlikely that firms are looking to achieve this by reducing the actual amount of work expected!

Fairly obviously, technology has a huge part to play in this and can enable major changes to working practices. Given this, it is odd that many flexible working policies are designed by Human Resources departments (or partners managing with HR responsibility) who then approach IT with a list of requirements. Not surprisingly among the good ideas there are always several that are not cost effective and at least one that is technically impossible. (On a separate note, there is an important discussion about where the technical costs of flexible working are accounted for: if the aim is to increase staff retention, then surely some offset against the recruitment and possibly training budget is logical?)

What happens if we look at the problem from the other direction, and ask what technologies are available today that can deliver cost effective improvements to people's quality of life? Can these make it possible for some people who could not in the past have managed a full time professional career to work within a firm?

The main answer to this is mobility, or more specifically the removal of geography from the delivery of IT. The advent of broadband for the home and the availability of reasonably priced mobile voice and data services has changed the way people can work by not requiring them to be in the office (or go to the office) to work. When it comes to flexible working, this can make a huge difference where a small amount of work is required at an uncertain time. For example an email is expected from a client that will require a short period of attention as soon as it arrives, but it has not arrived by the end of the 'office hours'. Previously, a lawyer would have had to remain in the office until either the message did turn up or it became clear that it was not going to. Now, the lawyer can go home and get on with their own life, and will regain several hours of the day with no loss to the firm.

Similarly, but more difficult to get accepted by firms, part time workers can maintain much more of a full time presence if they can arrange to be contactable when not in the office for matters that would otherwise hold up work. Usually, a quick question to answer or clarify a point can make a world of difference to the staff in the office at little cost to the part time worker at home (especially if the question can be posed by email or voicemail so that it can be answered in a reasonable time but not necessarily instantly, which may not be

convenient). Much of the problem experienced with this form of working is with the full time staff in the office: either they are afraid to contact someone at home, and hence work stalls, or they contact them about trivia that could wait and remove the flexible element. It should be noted that such 'I can be contacted on my day off' arrangements must be agreed with the staff concerned; in some cases they may simply not be able or desire to mix work and home life in this way.

The availability of broadband has allowed most firms to consider home working in one form or another. It is best to consider three different forms of this. The first is 'overtime at home', perhaps writing or reviewing a document. This provides a good benefit, and usually makes few technical demands as the work is confined to a laptop taken to and from the office. The second form of home working is for office staff who work perhaps one day a week at home. There is a significant gain to the individual, who not only regains the travelling time, but can be at home to let in the plumber, accept parcels and other activities that are impossible when full time in the office. On the other hand, they need more technical resources as most of the firm's activities need to be available to them.

Finally, there are the full time home workers. This is much more difficult to achieve. Not only do they require access to all the firms systems without exception (the previous group can usually work around a system that cannot be made to work remotely by doing that work on a day they are in the office) but these individuals also need additional systems to include them in the life of the firm, compensating for the fact that they are not in the office. Basic communications systems are now easy to set up, but most people would recommend that full time home workers have access to video conferencing to enable them to be more in touch with the office.

To enable true home working, firms need to make sure that all IT systems that are implemented, including the practice management system (PMS), will work over in a high latency, medium bandwidth environment. In general the easiest and best solution is for web based applications to be used, although other options are possible. Where 'traditional' high bandwidth/low latency applications are in use, Windows Terminal Services or Citrix makes a good point solution.

A second aspect of effective home working is implementing working procedures that are online and do not involve the handling of physical documents or paper forms. Most firms have seen the benefits of removing restrictions of physical tape from dictation, and the same advantages also occur in everything from client inception to holiday requests. Implementing these types of on line procedure will require some form of generic workflow engine

In conclusion, work life balance, and hence staff satisfaction, can be greatly improved today in most firms by implementing certain technologies and policies. These must be developed jointly by the IT management and the personnel management to create a joined-up solution that actually works. In addition, those areas of the firm that are still using paper based

procedures that 'don't need changing because they have worked for the last 20 years' need to be shown just how much the world has changed in that time.

Adam Westbrooke is the managing director of Firstcourt, an IT strategy and management advice company specialising in helping professional services firms. For more information call Adam on 0870 350 3660 or see <http://www.firstcourt.co.uk>.