



Out of sight, out of mind by Nick Clayton

The current rush to mobilisation is forcing organisations to consider means of bridging the growing physical gap between themselves and their people. What's more, it has shifted power towards the employee in a way that few foresaw.

In many industries there's really nothing new about remote working. In mine, journalism, mobility has been a vital part of the business for centuries. Only the technology has changed. People didn't believe me, but when I used to work for The Scotsman in Edinburgh you could still see the old 'doocots' (that's Scottish for dovecotes) for the homing pigeons at the top of the building. In the days before the telephone, pigeon post was the fastest way to get vital news (...well actually, football match reports) back to the office.

In the 1950s my father was Middle East correspondent for The Daily Express. He had access to telegrams, telexes and an erratically-functioning phone system. In fact, one of his treasured possessions was a dog-eared folder of yellowing telegrams from his editor congratulating him on various stories and telling him where they would appear in the newspaper. This is because he wouldn't see his work in print until weeks later.

Of course, in those days remote working, especially abroad, was exceptional – although many of the problems haven't changed. Half a century ago my father's boss recognised the danger that members of staff who were away from the office can seem – and feel – very isolated. Out of sight can be out of mind.

Sending all those telegrams kept my father feeling a vital part of the team, which he was. The difference now is the way an increasing number of people are working away from the office not because they have to, but simply because they can. My father was based in Cairo as that was the centre of Middle Eastern political intrigue. I am based in Ibiza because predominantly my work is carried out using the phone or the internet. I could be just about anywhere. It's my choice.

It's an important distinction. On the one hand, there's a business decision to have people working remotely – whether alone or in a branch office. On the other, it's the employee or perhaps the contractor making the decision. Not everybody thinks the move to mobility is necessarily in the best interests of a company.

Power to the workers

Steve Moore, CEO of workforce management rostering and scheduling software specialist Rostima, believes that operating in a country with nearly full employment is imposing increasingly punitive constraints on UK organisations. 'In a bid to attract and retain key skills, pressure is mounting to allow workers to dictate their own working practices, from flexi-time to remote working. For many organisations this is creating an untenable shift of power towards the employee – and drastically affecting profitability.'

He says that few organisations know if allowing these employee demands is delivering any tangible impact on service levels. They simply hope that the strategies are having a positive effect. He believes organisations can regain working efficiencies by combining the workforce schedule with true workload requirements.

Underlying this is rapidly developing technology all heading in the same direction; offering access to data any time, any place, anywhere. Smartphones, notebooks, tablet PCs, ultra-mobile PCs, even desktop PCs are becoming the same under the skin. All offer ways of connecting wirelessly to the internet and thereby to the company networks. But these different forms can create different working practices and even offer potential savings and improved efficiency.

Unforeseen benefits

At a recent mobile computing conference in Paris organised by Dell Computers, Dr Martin Mueller, Director of IT for Intel EMEA, said that around 84% of Intel's workforce is now using notebook computers connected by wi-fi and the company would soon move to 100%. 'The first thing we noticed when we set up the wireless network was that there was never any room in the cafeteria any more. People can work anywhere there's a space.'

An unforeseen benefit has been the increased popularity of the technical support department. Previously, a technician would go to a crashed workstation and find a Post-It note stuck on the monitor saying that the user had gone for coffee. Why hang around if you can't work? Now, if somebody's notebook crashes, they simply take it straight to technical support who swap it for a machine that will at least meet their minimal, requirements for internet access and email. A couple of hours later they can collect their repaired machine.

According to Dr Mueller, the technical support desk is having to get used to the new experience of people saying nice things about them. Of course, you would expect Intel to be an enthusiastic adopter of mobile technology. It has a vested interest in supporting developments that help it sell more of its products. But there are risks and challenges in adopting a new way of working.

Testing the virtual team

The idea of building 'virtual teams' using the best experts available without concern for geographical boundaries is immediately appealing to just about any organisation. But how can a team function effectively when its members don't see each other regularly? And, just as important, how can the team's effectiveness be measured?

American psychologist Norman Maier, a specialist in the analysis of team dynamics, talked of 'quality of analysis' and 'quality of commitment'. The latter is particularly problematic in a virtual environment because it relies on human interaction, including body language, eye contact and 'chemistry' – all of which are hard to replicate through electronic communication. Indeed, using email and text messaging is estimated to remove at least 75% of the content of communication. Videoconferencing is an improvement, but it's still inferior to face-to-face communication.

Recently, organisation analysis specialist Verax introduced what it claims is the first software designed specifically to test the effectiveness of virtual teams and to suggest remedial measures where necessary. It uses what it calls a 'Team effectiveness Inventory' (TEI). 'Clarifying and ensuring understanding – among all team members – of the team purpose and goals is key to fast team maturation. It may sound obvious, but in over 90% of teams studied through TEI, there is typically little consensus at the outset about purpose and goals,' explains Verax Chairman Keith Bedingham.

The lack of a clear strategy is a common problem in the introduction of mobile technology. That's often because it happens in a piecemeal way and is driven from the bottom up. As increasingly sophisticated mobile communications devices such as smartphones and notebook PCs become available and affordable by consumers, they expect the same facilities from their employers. At the same time, there's a new generation of employees who've grown up with mobiles, texting and games consoles.

Presence management

'Few companies have great success in fully integrating mobile because there's this view that it's just a bolt-on to an existing infrastructure. Taking a wider view of the communication issues that staff experience on a day-to-day basis is vital to getting any sort of communications strategy right,' explains Liam O'Malley, a Sales Specialist in voice and mobile for O2 Centre of Excellence Data Partner, Affiniti.

At the moment, a large amount of time and money is wasted as staff use a multiplicity of devices to try and track colleagues down to see if they are available. Apparently, the most common business text message is: 'Can you talk?'

So part of this strategy is something known as 'presence management' which allows users to see which is the most appropriate means of contact – whether that's via landline, mobile, text or email. For instance, a mobile address book can be set up which indicates when, say, a customer is in a meeting – thus showing that a phone call would be inappropriate.

The possible downside of this is the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. Sports psychologist Professor Graham Jones of the business performance development consultancy, Lane4, believes the concept of the mobile workforce has value, but a terrible cost to it too, especially the risk of management suffering information overload from always being 'switched on'. 'Mobile managers must learn to switch off – in all ways,' he argues. 'It's vital to call time on the working day and to switch off your mobile, your laptop and anything else that connects you to the office, even if it's just at weekends and on holidays. They need to set an example of leaving work on time and taking their holidays. They should also create effective handover notes and show that they trust their staff to get on with the job while they are away, by giving them responsibility and not phoning in to check up on them.'

That's where the future of mobile working should lie. It ought to be liberating. I certainly can't complain about the freedom it gives me to work from Ibiza. But I can't discount the anxiety of not knowing whether people are talking about me or, even worse, not talking about me in the office.

Equally, used with sensible guidelines, a BlackBerry or other wireless device offers the estimated 30% of managers who don't take their full holiday entitlement, the opportunity to take a break, relaxed in the knowledge that they won't be totally out of touch. It all comes down to being the master not the servant of technology.