

FLEXIBLE WORKING: CAN HOME WORKERS AND THEIR MANAGERS MAKE IT WORK?

A KNOWLEDGE ABILITY WHITE PAPER

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The number of British employees working from home will dramatically increase if the Government's consultation on flexible working, announced February 2005, results in extension to current legislation. However, how successful will working from home be for employers, managers and employees and what resources are available to help them make it work?

In February 2005 the UK Government announced a public consultation on extending the British flexible working laws that were introduced in April 2003 [1]. In 2003, parents of children under six and disabled children under eighteen were given the right to request flexible working patterns, which included part-time working, variations in working hours and home working. Employers have a duty to consider such requests seriously.

In the first year of this law, a Government survey estimated that thirteen per cent of employees requested a change to working patterns. Eighty-six per cent of those requests were wholly or partially accepted, meaning that around 80,000 people had new flexible working patterns. Ten per cent of those requests concerned working from home on a regular basis [2].

The Government's new 2005 consultation addresses two topics: parental leave and pay and flexible working. In respect of flexible working, it seeks views on extending the 2003 rights to older children up to seventeen. It also seeks views on flexible working rights for carers in a range of circumstances. Government estimates [3] are that if rights are granted to the fullest extent envisaged in the consultation about a million employees would move to new flexible working arrangements. If the home working ratio seen in the first year is a reliable predictor, this means perhaps 100,000 further people working from home on a regular basis.

Whatever the eventual conclusions of the consultation, it is reasonable to suppose that if it becomes law Britain will see a substantial increase, perhaps even an explosion, in the number of people working from home and the numbers of managers who find themselves managing home workers.

Will this be successful and sustainable? Will home workers and their managers find that working remotely at home supports expected levels of performance, well-being and job satisfaction? What will happen if they find it too difficult and too stressful? Does the employer bear the brunt of an under-performing employee? Or must the employee once more face the challenge of balancing traditional office work with family responsibilities?

For over ten years Knowledge Ability has been delivering training workshops for people who work and manage virtually, that is, who are remote from their colleagues, peers, reports and managers and who use information and communication technology to communicate and collaborate. We have found that while remote, virtual working may look attractive from the outside, actually being a virtual worker or a manager of virtual workers has its special challenges.

Many of these challenges are hidden from those not experienced with remote, virtual working and so are usually not addressed by employers establishing home-based virtual working (that is, teleworking) programmes. While the more formal aspects of teleworking are the subject of widely-available advice concerning legal, health and safety, taxation and (some) technology and work organisation aspects, for example from the UK Department of Trade and Industry [4], there are deeper issues which largely remain unaddressed. These concern management, communication and social processes and personal reactions to working remotely and working from home. In our surveys and investigations of virtual working, we have found particular issues to be these:

- o Trust: establishing trust between a manager and a home-based virtual worker to combat suspicion that working at home means slacking or abuse of agreements; similarly feelings of envy in office-based colleagues that it is a perk denied to them and concern that they will pick up additional workload.

- o Work management: organising and specifying work in terms of results so that it can be accomplished without detailed management supervision; formalising process for reporting problems and exceptions; avoiding confusion and lack of coordination.
- o Information management: ensuring that a remote team member is provided with the same access to formal and informal information as their colleagues in the office.
- o Social and team aspects: isolation and detachment experienced by those who are remote ("the loneliness of the long-distance worker") and potentially lack of motivation and engagement with team goals and timescales.
- o Visibility and development: the propensity of managers and office colleagues to see remote workers as out of site, out of mind; concern by remote workers that they are harming their career advancement; concern that they are missing out on training and development.
- o Communications: problems ranging from the realities of technology support for home workers, through lack of availability of or skill in using up-to-date collaboration tools, to reluctance to communicate through technology.
- o Time management: for the home-based virtual worker, being capable of working effectively without the rhythm of the office; dealing with family and friends' belief that they are fair game to be interrupted; feelings of guilt leading to excessive working hours.

We were surprised by the consistent theme in our discussions with remote workers that they feel that many of the above problems arise from their own personal deficiencies or lack of competence. They shouldn't, of course, be blamed: rarely have they the experience to see that these problems are common human reactions to working remotely and collaborating at a distance. But as a result they are often reluctant to seek help from their managers, human resource experts, or external sources. Rather they suffer in silence, believing themselves at fault.

Managers, we've found, have mixed attitudes to managing remotely. Only some are open to the fact that there are new skills and approaches to be learned. Unfortunately however many hold the view that managing at a distance can't be very different to managing face to face. So they manage as they would someone in the next office, or at least try to.

Others have a sneaking suspicion that it does involve different skills and processes. However they think that they should be able to work out how to do it and that to seek advice or training is to show a lack of resourcefulness.

And there are those managers who reject the idea of virtual working out of hand. One factor that research shows will be important in managers being happy with their staff working at home is trust: A 2004 survey for Vodaphone [5] of 300 UK businesspeople found 98 per cent of

employers agreeing that they have to trust employees to work efficiently when they can't see them. But surveys of managers' attitudes to remote working show that this trust may be missing.

- o A 2002 survey [6] for the communications company Nextra of 1000 UK human resource directors found that a quarter felt that senior management did not trust staff to work flexibly.
- o On the other side of the world, a 2004 survey for Toshiba in Australia and New Zealand [7] of 600 managers and staff found nearly half saying that teleworking was not permitted in their organisations because employees could not be trusted.
- o Back here, a 2005 survey for business communication providers Inter-Tel [8] of 400 human resource directors of UK SMEs found only one-fifth unequivocally saying that they trusted staff implicitly to work from home.

However, the Vodafone study referred to above got an opposite response:

- o Seventy per cent of employers said that when they heard someone say "I'm working from home" they did not think this was an excuse for a day off.

So this is a mixed picture — clearly a variety of experiences and attitudes are colouring employers' / managers' assessments of whether remote workers can be trusted to work remotely. Nonetheless we can ask:

- o How many employers in the UK today are (or will be, if the legislation is extended) rejecting employees' home working requests because they believe that staff cannot be trusted?
- o How many more requests would be granted if employers were confident that their managers could manage effectively at a distance and create secure trust-based agreements with home-working staff? (In a 2005 survey of 585 UK human resource professionals, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found "Line managers' ability to effectively line manage [sic] flexible workers" to be the third-greatest constraint on implementing flexible working [9], and subsequent comment centres this in remote working.)
- o How many managers are or will be managing remote workers badly because they don't recognise the need for new remote management skills?
- o How many remote workers are or will be turning in reduced performance, and feeling isolated and stressed, because they haven't been taught how to make a success of working from home?

Confirmation that training for remote workers and their managers is seen by remote workers themselves as an effective remedy comes from a survey conducted by the IBM Institute for Business Value and the Economist Intelligence Unit of 351 remote workers across Europe [10]. In response to a question that asked what actions would make remote working more productive and a more satisfying working experience,

'Almost one in four indicated that training would be among the top three ways a company could help remote workers, while one in three stated that managerial training would be among the most beneficial forms of assistance. Comments from one survey participant suggested that companies should "provide training and mentoring on the challenges of working remotely" while another offered that organisations should "train managers to appreciate and understand remote workers." '

Meeting the need identified above, Knowledge Ability offers two training workshops:

- o *Managing Virtual Teams* teaches managers of remote, virtual workers (including members of virtual teams) how to manage at a distance, specifically addressing the issue of creating high-trust arrangements.
- o *Working Remotely* is for all types of remote, virtual worker, including home-based workers, and equips them to make this new way of working a personal and professional success. It specifically highlights the importance of home workers being trustworthy and not abusing arrangements made with their employers.

Recognising that home-based virtual workers (and their managers) can find it as inconvenient to travel for training as it is to travel for work, our workshops are available through both remote and face to face delivery. Remote delivery employs our proprietary *Learning by Wire* instructional methodology, which combines private study with live, instructor-led interactive sessions and online interaction.

References

[1] *Work and Families, Choice and Flexibility, A Consultation Document*. UK Department of Trade and Industry, February 2005.

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[4] *Telework Guidance*. UK Department of Trade and Industry, August 2003.

[5] *Loyalty at Work. What Does it Mean Today?* Vodaphone 'Working Nation' report, March 2005.

[6] *Flexible Working – Business Benefit or Personal Perk?* Nextra UK report, April 2002.

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[8] *Flexi Working Index 2005.* Inter-Tel report, May 2005.

[9] *Flexible Working, Impact and Implementation, An Employer Survey.* Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, February 2005.

[10] *The Mobile Work Experience - A European Perspective.* IBM Institute for Business Value executive brief, 2005.

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Comments on this paper are invited. Please contact the first author.

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Knowledge Ability's courses in Virtual Teaming and Remote Working are described here www.knowab.co.uk/wbw2c1.html. Brochures are available on request. We also provide bespoke training and consulting on flexible and remote working.

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