

CIPD

*Championing better
work and working lives*

FLEXIBLE WORKING: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

From the 'nature' of the work
to the design of work

Case studies
April 2021

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

Case studies

Flexible working: lessons from the pandemic

From the ‘nature’ of the work to the design of work

Contents

Introduction	2
Coleg y Cymoedd: ‘Building a fifth campus’ – and learning a new professional skill	3
Compass Group UK & Ireland: Rethinking resourcing in a volatile hospitality sector	6
Fideres: Changing the purpose of the office in a small professional services company	9
Fujitsu: ‘No going back’ – hybrid working means the office isn’t what it used to be	12
Onecom: Managing the wellbeing and performance of remote sales and customer support staff in telecoms	15
Skanska: Establishing universal principles for very different jobs in construction	19
Wychavon and Malvern Hills: Accelerating location flexibility in multifunction district councils	22

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr Charlotte Gascoigne. We are most grateful for the support of all the organisations and individuals who participated in this research.



1 Introduction

The seven organisations that contributed these case studies were selected to provide a wide range of experiences of flexible working across different sectors, in large and small employers, in the public and private sector, across the UK. The seven sectors – hospitality, construction, education, IT, professional services, telecoms and local government – each have their own commercial, organisational and resourcing challenges and expectations, which influence the range of options for both flexible location and flexible hours. Within each organisation, both HR and operational managers were interviewed, in order to go beyond the policy and explore the practical challenges of designing jobs for different types of work within organisations.

Each case study focuses on a particular aspect of flexible working during the pandemic. Employers were at different stages of their journey to flexible working. When lockdown began on 23 March 2020, some were in the process of introducing or updating their flexible working initiatives and used lockdown as an opportunity to accelerate progress. Some employers embraced both flexible location and flexible hours, while others focused more tightly on the issue of homeworking. The principles underlying the design of flexible work, taking into account the constraints on both flexible location and flexible hours, are described in more detail in our report [Flexible Working: Lessons from the pandemic](#).

2 Coleg y Cymoedd: ‘Building a fifth campus’ – and learning a new professional skill

In a four-campus further education college, home has become a ‘fifth campus’ for teachers and learners – and teachers have developed a new professional toolkit

Organisation: Coleg y Cymoedd

Size: 825 staff; 5,000 full-time learners and 4,500 part-time learners

Location: South Wales

Sector: Further education

Operational context

Coleg y Cymoedd is a further education college in South Wales, based on four campuses and teaching a wide range of subjects, from academic to practical. Lockdown has led them to create what Vice Principal Jonathan Morgan called a ‘fifth campus’ – an online forum for teachers and learners working from home.

Of the 825 staff, around half are teaching staff, including lecturers, tutor technicians (who reinforce learning, helping learners to practise practical skills such as bricklaying) and learning support assistants. The rest are support staff, such as finance, estates and IT infrastructure. There are 5,000 full-time learners, mostly 16–18-year-olds, and 4,500 part-time learners, including adult learners retraining for new careers.

Before the pandemic, flexible working was rare, and limited to occasional personal events in exceptional circumstances. The assumption was that remote teaching would be much less effective than face-to-face, particularly for the less engaged learners and for those whose home circumstances didn’t afford a quiet and distraction-free learning space.

The problem/opportunity

In contrast to the corporate world, a completely different professional practice had to be developed for remote teaching. Some teachers described it as *‘like being a newly qualified teacher again’*: lesson planning and classroom management were totally different. Assistant Principal Neil Smothers commented that, despite having been a teacher for 20 years, *‘for me, like all teachers in the college, this is a new experience and we are all trying to get to grips with teaching online and developing ways to improve our skills and engage with learners online.’*

The conundrum was how much teaching and learning could be transferred online without loss of quality, and loss of critical personal relationships. Young learners missed contact with their friends, as well as the social and emotional development that goes with the college experience. The college, which is located in a disadvantaged area, benefited from the Welsh Government’s ‘Digital 2030’ initiative for further education, which provided them with approximately 1,800 laptops, but there was still the challenge of how best to use the technology. Although some teachers had plenty of IT experience, others had none



in either their personal or professional lives, and couldn't wait to get back to 'normal' face-to-face teaching. Some learners also had skills to learn, Smothers said: *'There's a thought that because learners these days are digital it'll all be fine, but what they know is how to use their phone, and that doesn't automatically carry across to using Windows devices, the platforms that we use. So that requires training as well for them.'*

What they did

At the start of the 2020–21 academic year, the plan was for learners to spend some days on campus and others learning at home: during subsequent lockdowns, the proportions had to be flexed. The timetable presented a logistical challenge: teachers delivered some classes face-to-face, some from home, and others (when the day's timetable involved teaching a mix of remote and on-campus groups) remotely but from campus.

The 'fifth campus' required staff to learn how to teach differently. Staff were redeployed to teach each other new IT skills, Morgan said: *'We pulled some staff out of their normal teaching role, to create a digital training programme for staff. Some of that was at a very basic level: this is Word, PowerPoint, Teams, this is how you share your screen. And then up to the learners being able to submit their assignments through Teams, marking via Teams, managing a classroom.'* Fortunately some areas of the college had already trialed Teams, *'so to be able to then share that experience across the college, and get buy-in, has been a massive advantage'*. Working with the IT team, these 'digital champions' made tutorial videos, recording examples of good practice, and set up a SharePoint site to field colleagues' questions – anything from *'I don't know how to turn the computer on'* to *'I'm struggling with how to engage learners remotely.'*

Assistant Principal Karen Workman commented that *'you can't just take what you would do face-to-face and deliver it online. It just doesn't work. I think many of our teachers have recognised that the key is in the planning.'* Smothers also pointed to the need for creativity: those who thrived in the new blended environment *'are probably the ones who are more happy to experiment, prepared to try things. Because ultimately, this new way of teaching is starting from a whole new baseline. It's a paradigm shift.'* Teachers have *'experimented with all sorts of online quizzes, chatrooms, tutorials, OneNote. Class folders have disappeared, so everything now goes into OneNote, so a tutor can have access to learners' work and put individual work into learners' folders at any time.'* Lecturer Dorian Adkins teaches construction: he made videos of himself doing plumbing work and uploaded them for his learners to critique: *'Using the whiteboard function within Teams, we can collaborate on things, there are apps to aid collaboration as well, so it's not so much of a one-sided lesson.'* He has developed new learning and revision materials, particularly online quizzes, using tools such as Socrative and Kahoot. Real-time feedback and interaction could also take place online, using interactive tools such as Padlet, which allow learners to post responses on a common page, so that, in Workman's words, *'the teacher could see, as the learners were typing, what was coming up. They were working individually, but as a group, so the teacher didn't need to go round and ask everybody what they wanted to say, because she had it all on the screen in front of her.'*

Smothers noted that online teaching could sometimes be more targeted at individual needs, and allow learners to try things out without fear of ridicule: *'Lecturers can see exactly what they're doing in real time, to check who needs support, which then allows them to go into a private chat if one or two are struggling. There's privacy for that conversation, whereas in class, that automatically brings attention to them. So learners are perhaps less afraid to make mistakes online, because if they get it wrong, it doesn't matter as much as in class.'*

As with any job, teachers had to analyse which activities could be delivered remotely, but it wasn't just a case of doing practical or collaborative activities face-to-face: classroom management had to change too. Adkins commented that *'whereas this time last year, my classroom management might have been more focused on the lads who were balling paper up and throwing it across the room, now it's the ones who are turning on the PlayStation instead of the laptop.'* Smothers believed that the two delivery methods had different advantages: *'Face-to-face is great, because we get the interaction, and the wellbeing side is good, but there can be more chatter. If I have the same group remotely, then it's more focused. They haven't got people to bounce off in class, so engagement has improved with certain groups,'* although of course this only works when learners have the space and self-discipline to avoid home distractions such as siblings, pets or TV.

However, personal relationships with students could suffer: one group of Adkins' learners *'are in for their practical sessions on a day that I work from home. So I only see this group for maybe two hours face-to-face a week. By this point in the year, I usually know everybody on a first-name basis, I know what their interests are, where they're from, what their background is. I'm struggling to reach that with them at the moment.'* Workman's job as Assistant Principal (Learner Experience) means that she often spends time *'walking around the campus interacting with learners and staff. If I see a learner sitting on their own, I'll just go and have a chat to them. It's theoretically possible to have such conversations remotely, but it just isn't the same.'* Workman added that the lack of these informal conversations also affected her own wellbeing and job satisfaction: *'For me, being on campus is about being with the learners and being with the staff. I like working with the people I work with. I like seeing the staff. I like seeing the learners. I guess that does give me a better sense of wellbeing.'*

Outcomes

While approximately 10% of the college's staff could not work remotely at all, by the start of the 2020–21 academic year, the remaining 90% were operating the blended (hybrid) model, albeit on the understanding that continuous learning on the new approach would be needed. Morgan predicted that *'realistically, it'll take us this year to change the way we do things, pick up all the good points, and replicate the things that work.'* The effectiveness of the enforced trial surprised many: Adkins commented that *'it's been a real eye-opener for me. If this time last year, you'd told me you'd be doing all your theory lessons from home, but the learners will still be completing the work, I don't think I would have believed it.'* Digital technology could provide a wider variety of learning styles in future, as well as greater inclusion for learners whose home circumstances, illness or disabilities made regular attendance difficult. There was universal agreement that staff would not go back to travelling between campuses for meetings – with environmental as well as time benefits.

Workman agreed that there was no going back to a purely face-to-face model, partly because of the extra skills learners were developing: *'As part of preparing them to be adults, we would be doing a disservice to them if we stopped doing blended learning completely, because they may go to a university which will carry on with blended learning, or a job where they will expect you to be able to communicate online. So I don't think we can stop.'*

HR Director Julie Rees predicted an increase in flexible working requests, because staff surveys showed that hybrid working improved wellbeing: *'Lots of staff are enjoying the mix of some days on campus and some days at home.'* However, challenges remain, especially timetabling that facilitates the work–life needs of teachers while also maintaining the quality of learners' experience. Smothers concluded that the 'fifth campus' was here to stay: *'Do I think you can beat face-to-face teaching? Probably not. The research says that staff enjoy it more, learners enjoy it more, and the benefits are greater. But is there a place for remote learning? Absolutely.'*



3 Compass Group UK & Ireland: Rethinking resourcing in a volatile hospitality sector

What does work-life balance mean in shift-based environments where there's a business need for flexible resourcing?

Organisation: Compass Group UK & Ireland

Size: 45,000 permanent employees, plus 10–15,000 on temporary contracts

Location: Sites around the country, but more concentrated in the south-east

Sector: Hospitality: catering

Operational context

The hospitality sector embodies the idea of flexible resourcing or 'employer-led' flexibility. A wide range of employment contracts, including part-time, flexible, temporary and zero-hours contracts, are used to meet the business need for variable working hours. Staff turnover is high, averaging 30% across the sector,¹ and in some businesses over 60%. Many people work in the sector for short periods, sometimes while studying or working in a second job. Expectations of work-life balance may be different from other sectors: unsociable hours often go with the territory, pay is generally at the low end, and the work-life needs of staff are assumed to be taken care of in the fact that they stay with the company. The sector has also been hit hard by the pandemic, with more workers being furloughed in hospitality than in any other sector of the UK economy apart from retail.²

As a leading player in the hospitality sector, Compass operates in several different markets: part of the business is government-led – providing catering for hospitals, schools and defence establishments – while the rest works with private companies, including corporate catering, conferences, sports and leisure events. In addition to catering, which makes up the majority of the business, there is some work in front of house and waitressing, plus cleaning and facilities management. Compass has low staff turnover for the sector, at 21%, which Chief People Officer Donna Catley attributed to the choice of shift patterns on offer. A lot of staff are part-time, and they tend to be 'pinned' to their local area – looking for local work.

Levy UK is the sports, leisure and hospitality business of Compass Group UK & Ireland, providing catering on sites including Premier League football clubs, international rugby stadiums, tennis and horse racing events.

The problem/opportunity

While some parts of the business offer regular, local part-time employment contracts – for example, providing school lunches from 11.00 to 14.00, which suits parents particularly well – the sports event business needs variable labour. Large sports events may require the swift recruitment of thousands of staff, and then standing them down again afterwards: most staff are on temporary contracts, with a small group of permanent managerial staff.

¹ <https://www.deputy.com/gb/blog/retaining-british-hospitality-workers-how-the-uk-can-avoid-a-crisis-in-the-hospitality-sector>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-january-2021/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-january-2021#employments-furloughed-over-time-by-industry>

When the pandemic hit, the need for flexible resourcing intensified. Although 60% of the business stayed open, with catering staff in hospitals and schools classified as key workers, the sports events business was shut down overnight. However, Compass had also spotted an opportunity for redeployment.

What they did

Before the pandemic, Jon Davies, managing director of sports catering arm Levy UK, had already identified that the ad hoc approach to event resourcing using temporary staff had downsides for the business: *‘Colleagues were turning up to do a job and then they would go off and do another job for someone else. The USP that we have is our standards, and it was unfair to ask them to meet those standards because, in reality, they were working multiple jobs for multiple different employers, having to find shifts to try and make sure that they had enough income in that week or month to fill the gap. And for my clients, there was a lack of consistency, in terms of seeing the same people, the same faces. So it was starting to add up to a bit of an issue, for all parties.’*

Pre-pandemic, Davies had started to work on a solution in which the different units within the sports business might share temporary staff, all trained to the same standards, *‘my own internal resource platform, in effect’*. The business benefit was smoothing out the peaks and troughs of demand: at the same time, by pooling staff across a larger number of units, staff could be offered a greater choice of shifts, with huge benefits for work-life balance. The approach could also maximise income for those who wanted more work: a Leeds University student could do shifts in the Leeds area during term time, and then go home for the holidays and work in the Birmingham area.

Then lockdown hit, and Compass – which prides itself on having a fast, entrepreneurial and agile culture – accelerated their redeployment efforts, extending it to their permanent staff. Now, rather than moving people between sports venues and events, the need was for people who had worked in football stadiums to work in hospitals. Although the nation’s sports programme was cancelled, the demand for resourcing in hospitals grew exponentially, and Davies got together with his colleagues in the healthcare business, Medirest, setting up a taskforce which met daily to *‘match supply with demand, making sure that we had management cover and trying to patch together more sharing of best practice, because traditionally, we were quite siloed in our sectors’*. The business rationale for crossover resourcing was immediate and huge. Chief People Officer Donna Catley commented: *‘It’s been a revelation for us. Two bits of the business, healthcare and sports, are talking to each other in a way they never did before. It’s broken down organisational barriers that had grown up naturally over time.’*

There were some HR challenges. Compass was not immune from the need to furlough staff as the hospitality sector was hit hard by different waves of lockdown. Those staff who moved to healthcare from the sports business required additional, specific training for the new working environment, for example around health and safety and PPE. But the overwhelming feedback was that those who swapped to the health sector gained a huge sense of pride and purpose during the crisis. Most stayed in catering, although a few changed to portering and (non-front-line) cleaning. *‘The flexibility of our people is extraordinary, and inspiring,’* said Catley. Davies saw the business benefits of this redeployment for maintaining his staff during the pandemic: *‘When the sector comes back to life, I’ll need all of those good people back in the business, keeping that skill base and core knowledge, running those venues, running those events. So if we cut to the bone, we kill the business. Redeployment has really enabled us to keep people employed, keep them engaged.’*



While permanent staff have been redeployed, the solution for temporary and incremental staff has been to develop the internal resource platform, now rebranded Constellation. Davies described the key benefit for these workers as *'having the ability to work when you want to work. Because of our different sectors and different mix of businesses, we have a need for staff at different times: the demand in corporate offices is majority nine to five, but the demand in sports events is very much evenings and weekends; the demand in healthcare is much more 24/7. So by having a personal relationship with someone that's in Constellation, we can work a shift pattern with them that can be flexible week to week or month to month to give them the work that fits their work-life balance and their personal commitments.'* Another key element of work-life balance for many shift-based workers is the regularity or stability of their shift pattern, not just for a stable income, but to fulfil regular non-work commitments. Davies hoped that, given the wide range of options available, *'colleagues will then be able to say, "Look, it would be ideal for me if every week you could offer me shifts on a Tuesday daytime, Wednesday night and Saturday afternoon.'"*

In tough economic circumstances, there is no difficulty attracting people to work in hospitality, so zero-hours opportunities may be attractive, although Catley said that Compass *'doesn't support zero-hours strategically or philosophically'*. If a regular pattern of work emerges, staff will be offered minimum guaranteed hours and some contracts may become permanent.

Outcomes/next steps

The pandemic has accelerated the move to flexing permanent staff between, rather than within, the company's thousands of units (each unit being a particular sports venue, hospital or corporate office): functional flexibility, with a multiskilled workforce able to work in different types of unit, will offer opportunities for greater temporal flexibility for workers. *'Instead of asking, "Can we achieve flexible hours in that one unit?", the question will now be, "Can we aggregate to a region, mixing up businesses which currently don't speak to each other?"'* said Catley. That new approach to resourcing is expected to lead to greater choice of shifts for staff and better work-life balance.

Once the hospitality sector is back on its feet, Constellation is also expected to expand, offering better work-life balance for temporary workers too. During the pilot phase, Davies will combine and share feedback from the account managers of units where colleagues are placed, to build up a picture of each individual's capabilities and performance. From the staff perspective, *'the feedback from the employees themselves has been very high. And the success metric for us will be having a really low turnover of staff within Constellation.'*

4 Fideres: Changing the purpose of the office in a small professional services company

Maximising flexible location: good communication when everyone's remote

Organisation: Fideres Partners

Size: 22 people

Location: City of London

Sector: Professional services: economic consulting

Operational context

Fideres is a highly specialised economic consulting firm. The company's aim is to identify corporate and financial wrongdoing through economic analysis and bring that to the attention of international law firms and regulators. The work is very technical, involving large amounts of quantitative data analysis: the consultants are all economists, computer scientists or mathematicians, many with master's degrees and some with PhDs. Most of the staff are young, typically between their 20s and mid-30s.

Before lockdown, staff were used to remote videoconferencing with clients, and company policy allowed working from home one day a week, but this wasn't particularly commonplace: Director Russell De Souza commented that *'even if once a week someone would work from home, the rest of the team would be in the office, so it did have the feeling that most people were in the office most of the time.'*

In terms of flexible hours, there was already a culture of flexing the start and end of the day, both for work-life balance needs and to enable meetings with US clients in different time zones. While some staff made use of this, many also worked traditional office hours, and core hours of 11.00 to 15.00 were in place.

The problem/opportunity

The type of knowledge work done by Fideres could hardly be better suited to working from home, or indeed to flexing hours; as De Souza commented: *'In terms of our client needs, there isn't any specific need to be in the office or producing from very set hours. A lot of the work that we do is quite internally focused.'* The consultants' work is also mostly highly plannable: they speak regularly to clients, but have a good deal of autonomy over when those calls take place.

However, when the pandemic enforced total, five-days-a-week homeworking, something was lost from team communication. Head of People and Culture Kate Bicknell commented: *'There is no substitute for that soft social interaction that happens by default, when you are in the office together. There's something that just isn't the same. And we haven't found that magic button to replace it yet.'* Even for extremely motivated, high-performing knowledge workers who are *'really engaged in the subject matter'* Bicknell said, *'Some of that energy that you get from being together as a team, it's much harder to replicate when you're at*



home. And this really surprised me actually. It's not impacting on their work, the deadlines still get met, the quality of work is there, but there's a sort of energy around it, an excitement, a feeling, when you're in the office. We noticed a slump. There was also an impact on brainstorming. The informal dialogue and information-sharing that happens naturally when employees are together takes a lot more effort when employees are working remotely.'

What they did

The work done by Fideres consultants is very data-heavy, sometimes requiring several screens at once. At the start of lockdown, there was, in Bicknell's words, *'a bit of a scramble'* to get everyone kitted out to work from home, shipping IT equipment from the office, buying more screens, keyboards and laptops, and giving staff an allowance to purchase desks and chairs if needed. But once that was sorted out, the focus moved to the communication issues.

Five-minute daily stand-ups at the beginning of the day, company-wide, kept everyone in touch with colleagues and projects. Initially, many staff dialled in using just audio, but then *'we changed to video and there was an instant improvement, being able to see people's faces'*.

Fideres also tried to replace the lost team camaraderie with online social events, such as lunches and short weekly breakfast meetings, *'just for people to have a coffee and a chat'*. While uptake was good at the start, *'Zoom fatigue soon set in and attendance kind of petered out,'* reported Bicknell. Pub quizzes have proved more popular, *'because they're fun, and they're not work-related. They're ad hoc, as opposed to constantly feeling like you should be in a particular place; they're just a bit more spontaneous. I think they work better, for our group of employees at least.'*

Bicknell designed and delivered training for line managers on virtual communication, focusing on how to use different communication channels, and how to deal with people who might be struggling with working from home. Another element of the training was *'the process of dealing with change, the stages that you go through when change happens, so that managers can then identify that in their team.'* An external coach was also available to support staff with the challenges of the new working environment, focusing on self-awareness and understanding their own working behaviours.

At the team level, too, De Souza said, *'We've had to have more structured communication. So we need maybe something fixed in the diary each day, to bring everyone up to speed. We've had to make an active effort to speak even more regularly than maybe we need to sometimes.'* De Souza tried to keep up to date with the work of his team of ten people using project management software but found that *'some of the information that was kept on that board was stale, so I did have to follow that up with direct calls, to check in and say, "Look, I see this on the board, let's update it together." It wasn't as effective as it was when it was face-to-face.'*

Kate Bicknell agreed that, overall, managers needed to make more effort with communication when the team was remote. This applied most obviously to their direct reports, but also to *'people they wouldn't necessarily talk to in their day-to-day work. Managers have been encouraging cross-team working, deliberately putting people on a project together, partly to improve the outputs – for example if someone else knows more about a particular client's preferred report-writing style, or has greater expertise in a particular technical subject – but also to ensure that information-sharing and development continues remotely.'* Managers also shared their understanding of everyone's needs at management meetings, which began to focus more on individual staff: *'The management*

team get together to talk about individuals and how they're doing, whether they're feeling okay, noticing how they're looking. Then we discuss ways to involve them. It can feel a bit odd ringing people up who you normally wouldn't talk to but it's important to maintain that cross-team communication.'

Outcomes

Working from home has been so successful that the company has downsized the office, capitalising on the expiry of their lease in November 2020 to design a better workspace for a young workforce which has missed social interaction with each other. The new office, said Bicknell, was *'primarily for social interaction – team meetings, one-to-ones with your line manager, candidates, awaydays. A group space rather than a workspace.'* There will always be space for people who prefer to be fully office-based, but De Souza considered that the majority of people would want to continue working from home at least some of the time, perhaps with a hybrid arrangement of remote working days and days in the office, depending on their personal circumstances and the needs of the job. The office then becomes *'a much more inviting and enjoyable experience'*, designed to establish the social contact that will help both staff and the consulting business thrive and drive the creativity that is harder to replicate through remote working. Bicknell reflected that, *'While we all missed the social interaction that an office provides during the pandemic, we also acknowledge that an open plan office is not always best for work that needs quiet and concentration, so hybrid working we hope will provide for both sets of needs, and support introverts and extroverts alike.'*

At the same time, Fideres has moved to web-based collaboration (SharePoint) which facilitates sharing information and provides a repository for a learning and development library where staff can use the company's subscriptions to different learning tools and access internal online training. The shift to the paperless office, and to remote performance management, continues with the use of project management software for setting learning and development goals, linked to fortnightly manager one-to-ones and quarterly development reviews. Microsoft Teams is used comprehensively, not just for video meetings but also to manage and communicate the availability of remote workers, and for direct messaging.

As the new way of working settled in, the employee feedback committee ramped up from quarterly to monthly meetings, with two employee reps feeding back to HR, partners and managers with any concerns from employees about how to navigate the pandemic. Bicknell admitted that *'we don't have all the answers yet'* but said the key was to be open to feedback and continuous improvement, talking to everybody and listening to any concerns. She expected that some new initiatives would continue after the pandemic, particularly the use of management catch-ups that focus on people and their needs. De Souza thought that they had adapted and *'found a way that works, and that resonates with a lot of our employees. I get the feeling that they enjoy this new way of working.'*



5 Fujitsu: ‘No going back’ – hybrid working means the office isn’t what it used to be

In-depth wellbeing support, tailored to individual needs, provides a good basis for designing hybrid working patterns

Organisation: Fujitsu

Size: 6,700 staff

Location: Multiple locations across UK, including staff embedded in customer sites

Sector: IT services

Operational context

Fujitsu is a large IT services company, providing IT support to customers in both the private and public sector. Pre-pandemic, the workforce was distributed across multiple sites, with some staff embedded in customer sites, using customers’ IT systems. Fifteen per cent of employees were contractually based from home. Job types include IT designers and developers (based in the office but working closely with customers to develop services), mobile engineers (travelling to customer sites to provide in-person IT engineering support), as well as remote, telephone-based technical support.

A wide range of informal and occasional flexible working was in use before the pandemic, covering not just flexible location, but flexible hours too, where the work was suitable. The approach, said Kelly Metcalf, Head of Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing, was based on ‘a *relationship of trust between the individual and their line manager*’.

The problem/opportunity

An established approach to employee wellbeing meant that Fujitsu had a head start when the pandemic hit. As the early spirit of ‘we’re all in this together’ turned into five-days-a-week homeworking, with no opportunity for face-to-face contact, Fujitsu recognised that a much more proactive approach was needed, to promote communication, avoid social isolation, and maintain engagement. As Metcalf said, ‘*even though we are very familiar with working using Teams, talking to our colleagues regularly, there’s a sense that it’s just not the same connecting with people virtually.*’

There was also a recognition that, while some people adapted easily to homeworking, others found their wellbeing profoundly affected, so the organisational approach was to teach managers to dig beneath the surface and find out what worked for each individual. This laid good foundations for considering how hybrid working could be designed in the office of the future. Metcalf predicted that the post-pandemic office, with many of the team not physically present, ‘*is not going to be the same experience. If people choose to work remotely more of their time, we will need to be clearer about the purpose of the office. We will need to be deliberate in planning how we use our offices and our time together, to ensure people can realise the benefits of in-person collaboration, social connection and team engagement.*’

What they did

Ten days before the imposition of the first lockdown, Fujitsu implemented a ‘trial lockdown day’, after which many employees simply continued to work from home for the duration, although security restrictions and the nature of the work meant that 10% continued to work in the office and on customer sites.

In the early days of the pandemic, the strong focus on staff wellbeing translated into a weekly webcast for people managers, attracting 600–700 managers a week for briefings on the latest government guidelines and the impact on people policies. But over time, said Head of Workforce and Workspace Carla Hall, the focus changed to *‘smaller groups and much more individual checking in, because of the wellbeing angle. We were worried about how people were coping – and as a manager, how do you pick that up? What are the signs if people are struggling?’* Line managers were advised, said Metcalf, *‘that they should be checking in with their people daily, ideally, and that’s checking in, not checking up on them, keeping connected with people and how they are feeling. There was an emphasis on manager contact and understanding each person’s different circumstances. And we’ve carried on doing those, slightly less often now, as a really effective way of engaging with all of our people.’* Managers could use this information to work out *‘whatever flexibility is appropriate. Come and ask the HR team to help you, but otherwise, you as managers are empowered to agree whatever is right for that person as you balance the operational needs and their individual needs.’*

Fujitsu managers were offered training on how to manage virtual teams. Hall highlighted the importance of questioning techniques in particular: *‘If I said, “How are you?”, you’d go, “I’m fine.” It’s a natural reaction. But how as a manager can you get past that, to get to, “Tell me more.” These techniques force you to think about how to operate differently.’* Fujitsu training is mostly optional because, in Metcalf’s words, *‘mandatory training switches people off a little bit,’* but in order to encourage participation, *‘we get some brilliant advocates, promoting how it’s benefited them. And then we reinforce the training through our Fujitsu Management Accreditation Programme, which involves feedback from a manager’s direct reports about how effective they are in supporting wellbeing, and that feedback then forms the basis of a manager’s personal development plan.’*

Head of Workplace Services Adam Regler agreed that *‘for me as a manager, and as a leadership team, we have had to really think about how we communicate. Sometimes what our teams need most is someone just checking in with them and asking how they are, and not just asking them once, because they may be a bit shy or embarrassed to share that they are having a tough day. And those meetings tended to move into who was at home today and what the family were doing, or what sports people are interested in, what music people are listening to, and what techniques people are using to help them through.’* Internal surveys showed that this focus on wellbeing is highly appreciated. Another senior manager reported that *‘I’m getting some of the best responses I’ve ever got about the interaction from management, which is really nice to see, especially when there’s so much anxiety about.’*

Recognising that parents and carers were under particular pressure during the pandemic, Fujitsu provided an extra week’s paid carer’s leave during 2020 and 2021, to be taken as and when needed. This has been taken up by nearly 1,000 colleagues. Another central initiative, *Work your Way*, acknowledged that it can be hard to remember and allocate the time to take breaks when working from home. Metcalf described this, combined with a variety of virtual social events, as a bid to replace the social and wellbeing interactions *‘that happen more naturally in the office, because you’ll sidle up to somebody and say,*



“Oh, do you want to go and grab a coffee?” That sort of break isn’t constructed really, it just happens as part of your working day.’ Work your Way is a company-wide calendar invitation in two different one-hour time slots every week: the offer is to ‘pick one of them, and in that one hour, get away from work, do something that makes you feel good. That might be going for a run, or a walk, or reading a book, picking up the phone to a friend, whatever, but just build that downtime into your day.’ Critically, the company also provided a centralised calendar invite and budget code for the time, to give a clear sense of permission for all employees to book the time. Sinead Graf (Portfolio Manager, Digital Transformation Services) commented that this was quite a radical approach, distinguishing it from many other wellbeing initiatives which line managers might perceive as costly: ‘What was really helpful about this one was that the time allocation was centrally funded.’

Outcomes

The focus on understanding of individuals’ needs put Fujitsu in a good place to create hybrid jobs post-pandemic. And the demand is definitely there. Eighty-five per cent of Fujitsu employees said they wanted to keep flexibility in their jobs post-pandemic, with most wanting to flex their location between home and office. In September 2020, 73% of employees said they felt able to effectively manage their work-life balance, up from 68% in December 2019. Staff felt well supported by Fujitsu and their managers, manifesting in an 11-point increase in employee engagement between December 2019 and July 2020.

Attitudes to flexible working have seen a radical change: Regler suggested that *‘we have mostly got to where we would have been in 2025, but in just a few months. I think it has really demonstrated to people how flexible we can be. Commuting is a big drain on people’s productive time and working from home can be more productive. So I don’t see 100% of people returning to the office. Maybe it will be 50% dedicated back in the office, and 50% having a flexible one or two days, slightly more or slightly less.’*

Even those employees who are embedded in clients’ offices, using high-security IT systems, can, said a senior manager, *‘be more flexible than we had ever believed. I think we’ll be more like 80% in the office, whereas before we were more than 99% in the office. A lot of individuals are working really well from home, why bring them in? I think we’ve got a golden opportunity to make it better for the environment, and better for the people.’* The right balance of hybrid working for embedded workers will also depend on each client’s own working practices: Regler thought that *‘if our customer has, let’s say, only 50% of users in the office, then we may need to match that with 50% of our team.’* Graf agreed that hybrid working will be led by customer needs, but also suggested that Fujitsu was already leading by example and would continue to do so post-pandemic: *‘What I’m hoping is that customers will listen to their people, and their people say, “Look, we’ve worked with Fujitsu virtually for the last year, we’re going to carry on.” And we can influence our customers by saying, “Our employees don’t need to be in the office because they’ve got all of these tools available.”’*

6 Onecom: Managing the wellbeing and performance of remote sales and customer support staff in telecoms

Maintaining energy and motivation when a team is remote: understanding personalities and the nature of the work

Organisation: Onecom Ltd

Size: 400 people

Location: Head office in Hampshire; five other locations across the country

Sector: Telecoms

Operational context

Onecom is the UK's largest independent business telecoms provider, selling business communication solutions, mainly to SMEs. With a mostly young workforce of twenty- and thirty-somethings, the culture, said Head of Human Resources Parysa Hosseini-Sech, is a family one, with an emphasis on both high performance and having fun.

The company's offices are distributed across the country – in Hampshire, Telford, Cardiff, Brighton, Essex and Leeds – so a certain amount of remote or distributed working was already happening before the pandemic. However, in telesales and customer service teams, both organisational policy and management preference required that work was done in the office, and not from home. Hosseini-Sech was keen to change this mindset, but acknowledged that *'it probably wouldn't have happened pre-lockdown. As much as I believed it would be good for us, I knew that I would come up against a lot of challenge.'*

The problem/opportunity

A heroic effort from the company's IT team meant that, before the lockdown was enforced in March 2020, 99% of staff were set up with laptops to work from home. The company had also recently rolled out a new telephony platform as part of their long-term business continuity planning – particularly important for their telesales and customer service staff.

For some personalities, although the work can theoretically be done from home, there can be a loss of energy when working remotely. About half of Onecom's staff work in telesales and customer service: in general, although not exclusively, they tend to be more extroverted personalities. Hosseini-Sech suggested that difficulties in performing when working from home might be *'because they are quite social individuals, so working on their own, they couldn't draw energy off of other people around them'*. These jobs are also very team-oriented, and highly structured, in terms of tasks and the timing of the work: *'They have quite an organised day when they're in the office. I think some people as well just struggled with focus and attention in their home environment. I guess it's self-discipline.'*



What they did

Right from the start, the cultural support for homeworking came from the top, said Hosseini-Sech: *'We had twice-weekly all-hands calls with our CEO, who was sharing updates but also driving that strong message that work is important, but family is more important.'*

There was a push to ensure that people still connected and had fun, not just with frequent team-based calls, but also with cross-team and cross-organisation initiatives.

At a team level, in addition to the usual pub quizzes and virtual drinks, one senior manager was *'really keen for no one to feel isolated, which I thought could happen quite quickly. So we introduced a lot of games, a lot of fun. We've had murder mysteries, we've had a scavenger hunt. There is a game going on today, where everybody's sending in photographs of certain things in the house, and the rest of the team have to guess whose house it is. We've had supermarket sweeps, we've had Play Your Cards Right. Although it felt a bit uncomfortable to start with, when we did the murder mystery ones, we'd actually dress up, and the people that were quite reticent, all of a sudden, they were putting on the best accents or building a backstory.'*

At the company level, Onecom also embraced the 'gamification of exercise', with regular cross-company active challenges. An Office Olympics raised money for charity, while a three-week Active Challenge had staff uploading steps data to a company dashboard which showed who else was competing, and how teams were doing over time. An employee with fitness expertise ran remote 15-minute HIT workouts every Tuesday morning, enabling people to break up their day and take exercise. There was already a tradition of 30-minute masterclasses, run by employees, for employees, on a wide range of topics. These shifted to virtual delivery and have increased in number, as well as attendance, while the focus has shifted to wellbeing. One was on bipolar and anxiety, run by two staff who opened up about the challenges they faced; another was on returning from maternity leave, and what it meant for parents and non-parents alike; stress management was covered by the company's mental health first-aiders; another was on nutrition for a healthy brain. All are interactive discussions which encourage cross-organisation communication, replacing informal water-cooler and corridor chats while also providing social contact and interesting content.

In among all this fun, the company takes high performance seriously, and performance measurement is highly sophisticated, using a wide range of measures, customised to the type of work being done. Head of Mobile Telesales Kane Dugan manages a team of 55 telesales agents based in two locations. Performance measurement might appear obvious in telesales – ultimately, each agent has a target to bring in a certain amount of business – but Onecom also pays close attention to wellbeing: *'We do a lot of call monitoring to understand when an agent is not as enthusiastic as they normally would be or is not their normal self. The tonality within their voice, you can hear that they may have had a bad day. So we monitor that on a day-to-day basis and if we see dips, we'll engage with them to say, "Do you need support? Is there anything more that we can do for you?" The managers are very skilled at this, they know their agents, they understand them.'* Software is used to analyse call transcripts, with key information highlighted so managers can assess where more support is needed. Personality assessments are used to work out how best to motivate each individual, while monthly performance dialogue reviews offer an opportunity not only to assess how the individual is performing, but also to offer support and training.

These performance indicators enabled Dugan to measure the impact of homeworking on the productivity of his team: rather unexpectedly, he found that about two-thirds of agents

are more effective at home, while 20% are about the same, and 10% are less productive. The younger, less experienced and less successful sales people struggled most when working remotely, because *‘they miss the office support, they miss being able to chat to their manager for a quick pick-me-up.’* He suggested that perhaps it was harder to absorb *‘the emotions and the drive over a video link’*, so those who relied on others for their energy and motivation might find it harder to perform at home.

Dugan also noticed a difference between his inbound and outbound telesales teams: while the new business team makes outgoing calls – cold calls – the existing business team is dealing with incoming calls from current customers. The inbound team have generally dealt better with homeworking, perhaps because the outbound team needs *‘the buzz of being together’* to get motivated to engage with new customers – and to deal with the inevitable rejections that come with the job: *‘If they’re in the office and they have a negative call, for instance, they’ve got a colleague next to them, so they can sound off a bit with someone who understands. Ultimately, the other agent will give them a lift and say, “Come on, next call.”’* Those dealing with inbound calls, on the other hand, *‘don’t have to motivate themselves to find new contacts, potentially make 10–20 calls before getting through to someone’*. And without the distractions of the office, the inbound calls get answered more quickly when the teams are working remotely.

The work of the telesales team is highly structured across the team, with working hours and breaks arranged to ensure that there is always a minimum number of agents available to cover calls. Dugan described it as *‘a well-oiled machine’*, but during lockdown he made one change to the way that work is co-ordinated: *‘We’ve added in extra touch points throughout the day, just 15 minutes, for anybody who wants to discuss things. Anybody can join but it’s more of a, “What have we done this morning, what do we need to do within the next session?” It’s really just a chance to get everybody together, to not lose the idea that, “My friends and my peers are still around me.” It breaks the day up rather than nine hours’ worth of solid calling out, not being able to speak to other people.’*

In customer services, as in the telesales team, the tasks and the timing of work are also closely managed, with working hours arranged to meet customer service level agreements, and break times agreed across the team so that incoming customer calls are always answered. Customer service managers use a range of monthly indicators to keep track of performance, weighted to reflect business needs. There are targets for outgoing calls and emails, but also a quality framework, developed years before the pandemic, covering things such as timely fixes, providing correct information, updating systems, getting feedback from customers, and accurate order-taking.

Ownership of team targets, and progress towards them, was a key concern for customer service agents working from home. In a physical contact centre, agents could see and hear what other people are doing – and could also see a live screen, updated with numbers of calls and missed calls across the group. The equivalent for homeworkers was the dashboard provided by the new telephony system, which appeared on individual screens. In addition, a Teams group was set up to send messages asking for help if any individual’s workload got particularly busy and, as with telesales, short twice-daily team video calls were added to maintain team spirit.

The adoption of detailed productivity indicators before the pandemic created confidence that homeworking could work and, during the pandemic, provided proof that the productivity of homeworkers was just as high. Managers could trust that the work was getting done and focus on maintaining individual staff wellbeing.



Outcomes

Hosseini-Sech noted that the enforced trial of homeworking convinced some previously sceptical managers: *'There were managers who had always firmly believed that remote working would not work in their area, but who are now actually converts to the idea. I was really surprised about how much support there was for it, and very few naysayers.'* For the future, she thought it was important to recognise individual needs, and acknowledged that *'what we had before was a one size fits all, where everyone's office-based. In future we need to find the right balance of home and office work for people.'*

Before the pandemic, Dugan admitted to being one of those managers who thought it wouldn't work, but his lockdown experience convinced him that, *'As long as an agent is in the office for a minimum of one day a week, I think that's a fair cop, in particular for the people that have shown that they can produce working from home.'* He felt that at least one office-based day per week would *'give them that sense that we belong to a team. It's a time to get the support on site, live, in person. It gives them a sense of ownership in terms of what we need to deliver as a team. It's the sense of, I belong to this company, I belong to this team. I'm not just an individual on my own, I have a support network.'*

7 Skanska: Establishing universal principles for very different jobs in construction

Avoiding ‘them and us’ when some jobs can’t be done from home

Organisation: Skanska

Size: 5,300 people

Location: across the UK

Sector: Construction

Operational context

Construction is not a sector that obviously lends itself to flexible working. Apart from the few who have desk jobs in head office, most construction workers – from programme directors and site managers to bricklayers and steel fixers – are used to flexing their location to suit the needs of the business rather than their personal needs, working (and sometimes living) for months or years on one site, and then moving to another site. Being on site is, said Executive Vice President Harvey Francis, part of the attraction of the sector: *‘A lot of people join the industry because they love the environment on site, the excitement of working on a physical construction project.’*

Much of the work is not only location-specific, but also time-specific. Historically, flexible hours on construction sites have tended to depend more on meeting the needs of the business (employer-led flexibility) than the work-life needs of the (mostly male) staff: the sequence of the project plan determines which tasks need doing when, and each task is highly interdependent with other people’s work, so the opportunities for flexing hours are limited.

On top of these challenges, the pandemic hit the construction sector hard, as only a small proportion of the work could realistically be done from home. However, construction was also one of the first industries to be allowed back to work, so the initial focus was on making construction sites COVID-secure. This huge task meant reducing the numbers of people on site at any one time, as well as introducing one-way systems, enlarging rest areas and replacing thumbprint-based access control with card-based systems. While many people in construction were furloughed, this varied company by company, and at Skanska the majority of people continued working.

The problem/opportunity

When assessing opportunities for flexible working, construction workers can be divided into three different groups. There are office-based workers, based in the corporate offices, but most of Skanska’s staff are site-based workers, some of whom are site-office-based (engineers, design managers and quantity surveyors, working out of portacabins at the edge of a construction site), while others are site-based (doing physical work such as pouring the concrete or laying the bricks). In reality, many of the people based in site offices need to spend a significant amount of time on site.



During the pandemic, there was a danger that the construction workforce would split into different tribes, with those who couldn't work from home resenting the opportunities afforded to those who could – and those on furlough facing a different set of benefits and challenges altogether. Programme Director John Birch FCIOB acknowledged that *'people feel a little bit guilty, if that's the word, if you phone your colleagues on site, and you're at home. I've been very conscious of that. There's a bit of a them and us scenario.'*

As construction sites and offices were made COVID-secure and work started up again, Francis was keen to turn the crisis into an opportunity for changing working practices. He wanted to avoid penalising those whose jobs didn't allow them to work from home, but at the same time to maximise the benefits for those who could: *'I had a feeling that if we didn't do something different, once the pandemic had subsided, there'd just be this mass return, unnecessarily, to the office. We've been working productively from home, it fits our values and our commitment to being net carbon zero by 2045; maybe there's a different way to do this. We have a great opportunity here.'* Senior Project Manager Lee Harman agreed that the pandemic presented opportunities for rethinking ways of working: *'At first it was all about risk-assessing and getting back on site, and then you start to see other things that could be best practice, that could come to be a new normal.'*

What they did

Before the pandemic, Skanska was already developing a flexible working initiative as part of a commitment to wellbeing, and to attract and retain a more diverse workforce. The basic principle was, said Francis, *'not necessarily to treat everybody the same, but to have some kind of parity across workers'*. This project, scheduled to be implemented over several years, was fast-tracked, and in October 2020, Flex-it was introduced.

A basic tenet of Flex-it was that informal flexible working is, in principle, available to everyone, within the constraints of the role, the team and the individual. An in-house diagnostic tool, the Flex-it grid, enabled each individual and their manager to assess the flexibility that's possible in any job on two dimensions – time and location. Line managers were asked to work through the options with each of their staff, recognising that, in Francis's words, *'each individual case is unique, both in terms of the person's circumstances and requirements, but also the needs of the team and the job. So you plot somebody on the Flex-it grid, and then there's a range of solutions.'* The output from this process was not a change to terms and conditions of employment, but a customised approach to flexible job design.

In cases where the work of a team was highly interdependent (which applies to a lot of jobs in construction), line managers were encouraged to lead an open team discussion about how all the needs of the team could be met, using a team checklist provided as part of the Flex-it toolkit to guide the conversation.

Francis recognised that more choice and autonomy is possible for workers in the corporate offices than for site-office-based workers, who are co-ordinating construction work on site, or site-based manual workers. However, the guiding principle of Flex-it was that it's open to everyone. In order to overcome the danger of misperceptions of the pros and cons of each way of working, CEO Gregor Craig *'made a point to thank all groups, in terms of the contribution they are making to the company. It's very easy to look at people working from home and think it's a bit of an easy ride, but the message was that we are one company, and let's be honest about the fact that the jobs we do are different, and the circumstances are different.'*

Outcomes

Francis was realistic about how quickly ways of working can change in construction, especially given the financial impact of the pandemic on the sector. From the launch of Flex-it in October 2020, a 12-month implementation period involved regular Pulse surveys to check in on progress. Crucially, managers were asked to review any flexible working arrangements at least every quarter and as part of the annual PDR. This was critical as people's circumstances changed, but also because construction work is project-based, with the requirements of the job varying at different stages, from bidding through planning and design to completing the build. Different working hours and locations may be needed at different stages of a project, for example when a 24/7 specialist tunnelling team is brought in for a fixed period, or when longer daily working hours are required to minimise the length of a road closure.

Birch observed that senior managers had to work at altering entrenched patterns of behaviour, and misperceptions about what flexible working is, to encourage the rollout of Flex-it: *'As senior managers, we have to work to encourage it. It's not a quick fix, I think it's going to take a little bit of time.'* But he also recognised that the pandemic had changed people's perceptions of what's possible: *'There's no reason why the QSs [quantity surveyors] couldn't work from home; design managers, the same. They have lots of meetings, and whereas before COVID, people had never heard of Teams meetings, they were suddenly being used all the time. So that's been a positive. They might continue doing that, say three days a week from home, after COVID.'*

Harman established different ways of working for his team members, but with different solutions for different types of work: *'The site team are pretty much 80% at the site and 20% at home, and vice versa for more office-based roles. And I think that's the premise for the moment.'* He also believed that the pandemic had hastened people's acceptance of the use of remote technology: *'It's got people into a space where they do believe now that you can work from home in more roles. There's been a decent amount of time of things having been shaken up, not just a week or two, so hopefully it's long enough that people are creating new habits. And some of the good ones will stick.'* One such use of technology involved showing videos of the site for those who are working from home: *'At team briefings, the site engineers are giving a video of their section and what's going on there, to support people working from home, and it's really quite easy with a smartphone. Everyone can see the live and working site. And it's probably a lot safer than lots of people visiting site as well.'* Harman speculated that, in the longer term, technology may enable remote working in an even wider range of jobs: *'We're not quite in an age where we can control excavators remotely yet. Maybe we will do in the future. But you can have a drone fly through. Other places of work such as in the military, and definitely as depicted in films, manage operations occurring in a foreign country from, say, a bunker in London, and they've got wearable cameras as they go in and do an operation. Maybe the technology will take that leap on to our projects in not too long too.'*



8 Wychavon and Malvern Hills: Accelerating location flexibility in multifunction district councils

Ensuring organisational belonging in local government

Organisation: Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils (two organisations with a shared management team, significant shared services and shared workforce strategy)

Size: 413 people

Location: Pershore and Malvern, Worcestershire

Sector: Local government

Operational context

Before the pandemic, remote working at Wychavon and Malvern Hills District Councils was occasional rather than regular. *'We didn't have the tools for it,'* said Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development Victoria Lee. *'Our culture was that people could work from home for the odd day in order to get project work done, because it's quiet time.'* But even before the lockdown, a programme to change that had already started.

Although property rationalisation has been a driver for remote working in other austerity-hit local councils, the motivation for Wychavon and Malvern Hills was performance and work-life balance. The vision was of staff choosing the most appropriate place to work, said Lee, *'so that when they're in the office, it's the team meeting, it's the team development, it's making a really effective collaborative time. And then I'm out and about, or working from home, because I've got the right tech. Ultimately, it's about enabling people to have that work-life balance, and deliver productivity that's at least as good as before.'*

Pre-pandemic, the senior management team had agreed the vision and principles for the new approach, conversations had begun with staff, and bulletins had gone out to managers. Pilot teams had started to work with various mobile devices and the migration to Microsoft 365 was beginning. The IT department had started to assess how many laptops would be needed, aiming, said Head of ICT Nigel Winters, to ensure that *'it doesn't really matter where somebody is working, the systems would work the same if they're in the office as when they're at home.'* When the pandemic hit, the programme had to be super-charged, but they had a head start, said Head of Financial Services for Malvern Rebecca Floyd: *'Lockdown escalated things, made it go a lot quicker, but we were planning on that direction anyway, which was a really positive thing for everybody.'*

In a multifunction organisation such as a district council, homeworking was only ever going to work for some types of work. Refuse collectors and civil enforcement officers, for example, continued to work in the community during lockdown. Some services closed, so staff had to be redeployed. But for the vast majority of staff, the move to homeworking was swift, said Lee, *'albeit that it wasn't necessarily on perfect kit'*. Although new laptops were on the way, initially about a third of staff had to take their office PCs home with them, while others used personal equipment. And, said Winters, *'we hadn't invested in telephony over the last few years, so forwarding calls was a bit clunky.'*

The problem/opportunity

The rapid, enforced rollout of working from home meant that staff had little time to think through the necessary changes in working practices. There was a noticeable change in culture, and Lee acknowledged that *'what we missed was the walking around, because both councils are relatively small, so the culture is very much that you'd walk around to chat to somebody. And of course, that's the bit that went, and that's the bit the senior management team really want to see come back, because it's absolutely at the heart of what makes working at Wychavon and Malvern Hills, it's the culture really.'*

Head of Strategy, Performance and Strategic Projects Cherrie Mansfield agreed that *'in an organisation like ours, you need to mix in order to still feel connected, and part of the organisation. You need to remember what we're there for. Because, you know, we're a council, we have a purpose, we need to have that sense of belonging.'*

What they did

Replicating a sense of organisational belonging during the period of enforced homeworking started from the top, with the senior management team doing staff briefings on Zoom, and Q&As with the chief executive. The directors encouraged managers to check in with all of their people individually and to have weekly virtual team meetings, while also doing 'the fun stuff' which, said Lee, *'comes more naturally to some people than others'*. While the technology rollout was still a work in progress, she also encouraged the use of WhatsApp groups, within teams and among managers, to share *'that stuff that you blurt out in a team environment when you're all in the office together, like, "I've got an IT issue today, are you having problems as well?" It's really important to be able to do that as well as the more formal communication from your line manager.'*

One advantage of having planned their remote-working programme pre-lockdown was that a group of expert users, Digital Champions, had been identified to assist with rolling out remote technology and the migration to Microsoft 365, and promoting greater collaboration and better online working. In a workforce with very mixed levels of IT expertise, Winters recognised that *'we needed a group of people who are respected in their departments, who have got a bit of IT knowledge, who will be willing to have a go first of all, and be the people to go to, if there is an issue, or to introduce some new functionality to the team.'* A two-hour training session on 'Making Virtual Working Work' was also fast-forwarded to help people work through some of the behavioural impacts of remote connection.

It was important to underline the message that homeworking was part of the longer-term vision. *'It's not just about our response to coronavirus,'* said Lee. *'We needed to reinforce that with managers, to find out, "What do you need now to see this as longer term, and to champion it?"'* In response to manager feedback, and in order to strengthen organisational belonging, senior management mandated in August 2020 that at least 40% of each person's working time should be in the office, once the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

The pandemic enforced location flexibility, but some people reported a higher degree of time flexibility as a result of working from home. This depended partly on their home circumstances, but mainly on their job role and team environment. The work of Mansfield's strategy and performance team, much of which isn't customer-facing, allowed people to make changes to their working hours when working from home: *'A couple of members of the team prefer to start and finish earlier, unless there's a work reason not to. And others may be having breaks at different times, going to the supermarket or seeing their neighbour or walking the dog. So people are using their time more flexibly.'* Floyd's finance team had



set service hours, but used a more formal team-based approach to cover them: *'8.30 to 5.00, Monday to Thursday, and 8.30 to 4.00 on a Friday, we always have somebody available. We've got a Financial Systems team, and a Debtors and Creditors team, and both teams cover those hours, they arrange it among themselves and they've got a rota in place.'*

Outcomes

Despite technology challenges, the majority of staff wanted to continue working from home for at least part of the week after the lifting of the pandemic restrictions. Lee confirmed that the enforced trial accelerated acceptance of homeworking: *'Without the pandemic, it would have been very piecemeal. Some managers were sceptical and wouldn't have supported it so readily. People have moved from "I can't imagine doing my job from home" to "I get this now. I like being in the office, and I like being out of the office." Without the pandemic, we wouldn't be where we are now.'*

The lockdown experience also increased the proportion of the working week that people felt comfortable spending at home. Mansfield reported that, *'before lockdown, the conversations in my team were about maybe a maximum of one day a week at home. Once there are no COVID restrictions, I now expect most of the teams to be working at home at least a couple of days a week. Without COVID, the end result would have looked very different from how it will look now.'* She also advocated not just having a minimum number of days in the office, but also organising the team's time in the office for maximum effectiveness: *'I think for building relationships, collaborating on things, keeping people informed, I would like there to be a day a week when most of the team are in the office, so that we have that interaction, somebody to help you generate ideas, or refine things, or share frustrations with, or problem-solve with. And then the rest of the week, where they work is up to individuals.'*



CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom
T +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201
E cipd@cipd.co.uk **W** cipd.co.uk

Incorporated by Royal Charter
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)
Scotland (SC045154) and Ireland (20100827)

Issued: April 2021 Reference: 8119 © CIPD 2021