

Ways and means

Is the FM community meeting the challenges and reaping the benefits of flexible working? In the second of a series of industry roundtables arranged in association with BDO Stoy Hayward the BIFM asked 10 professionals to share their views

The panel



Cathy Hayward (chair) is editor of *FM World*



Ian R Fielder is chief executive of BIFM



Nigel Miller is MD of Cordless Consultants



Bernard Crouch is a consultant with Peoplespace



Oliver Jones is chief executive of The Asset Factor



Andrew Mawson is managing director of Advanced Workplace Associates



Steve Chapman is facilities partnership manager, Home Office



Iain Lowson is a partner at BDO Stoy Hayward



Mark Rogers is executive business development director for Johnson Facilities Management



Fred Child is research and development manager at Nationwide and chair of the BIFM's Knowledge Committee



Wes McGregor is director of Advanced Workplace Associates and co-author of *Facilities management and the business of space*

Cathy Hayward (CH): Let's define flexible working. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development it is working practices agreed between worker and employer including working hours, locations and work patterns.

Andrew Mawson (AM): Can I challenge that? It misses out mobility within the office. It's not just about working away from the office.

CH: What are the advantages for employers and employees?

Bernard Crouch (BH): For the employee, it's a work-life balance. An employer can retain a workforce and sweat the asset by having more employees using the building, so your costs come down.

Wes McGregor (WG): The danger is people view the predominant benefit as saving real estate space. The big prize is leveraging corporate advantage from empowering people to work in the most effective way that suits them. That productivity gain is ten times the asset savings.

CH: Research from the University of West of England and Johnson Controls pointed to less stress, absenteeism, staff turnover and better productivity with flexible working.

AM: Yes, but it allows you to change office environments without cost and time. Think of business continuity planning. If your people can work anywhere you have a more resilient workforce and robust business if any of your buildings get taken out.

CH: What about disadvantages such as isolation, especially by constant home-workers?

Nigel Miller (NM): That shows the importance of the right policies, which are often missing. When businesses throw open the doors to home working, the people most likely to grasp it are those whose natural behaviour tends towards isolation. They then shut themselves away for two months and become neurotic, so you need a policy to drive them into the office. Sometimes I will see my people online at 11pm working on a report, which is fine if it's their choice. The right policies will keep people interacting despite homeworking.

AM: Isolation is a problem when people work away from the office all the time and these people are few.

WG: The isolation issue is vastly overplayed. It happens if management dictates that they work from home. If you empower people to make the decision that is right for them you don't get isolation. Imposing home-working won't work. »

FLEXIBLE WORKING

ROUNDTABLE



« **Oliver Jones (OJ):** In one of our businesses a sense of email machismo crept in with the management team were sending e-mails amongst themselves at 3am not because it was fun, but because they had moved into 18-hour days. This was a real issue for us that could have led to stress breakdowns and potential legal action in terms of inappropriate or inadequate management.

AM: What was the management signal that said that was OK to do?

OJ: The people were highly motivated, project and goal oriented staff who were hitting their targets but in danger of burning out. But we caught the problem in time.

WG: A firm I know recognised this burnout and brought in counsellors to watch for the signs for over-working.

Ian Fielder (IF): But also within an organisation a lot of management - many 'silver-tops' - want to see people there at 9am instead of managing their outputs.



Fred Child (FC): This happened at Nationwide. The policy was in place and facilities were there. But middle management managed people by seeing them at their desks and so were dead against flexible working. And we didn't retrain those managers, a big lesson we learned.

WG: Middle managers often fail to see the benefits to themselves and it challenges their management style.

CB: HR think people run off to play golf or tend the garden instead of working. Yet in reality some will work down to dusk and get severely stressed.

WG: But if emailing at 4am means that I can be on the golf course that afternoon, then good. Flexible working should be about motivation, incentivisation. But if the business culture is long hours then benefits of flexible working could be lost.

Iain Lawson (IL): Individual training and coaching for people to manage themselves outside the working environment could help.

Room to manoeuvre: industry voices discuss how to achieve maximum benefit from flexible working

Steve Chapman (SC): We've embarked on a flexible working project. I'm looking at making my building more efficient which is a sustainability, carbon footprint issue. But for the government, long-term home-working is difficult because of health and safety. You need union approval, risk assessments, to buy furniture, PAP testing of IT in the home.

CH: What about the cost of work stations?

OJ: We are trying to work out what a day-desk rate would be on the old touch-down model. If it is £30 a day, then £6,000 to £7,000 a year is probably the cost of a fully-supported workplace. Potentially 50 per cent of average workplaces could be avoided if you move from static traditional officing to ultimate officing. But there are some big corporates with very low costs, between £4,000 and £5000 annually so getting people out of the offices didn't make sense.

FC: We did a cost study of a building with 3,000 people and it worked out to £12,500 per desk, and we are now down to £9,000.

CH: Are we not shooting ourselves in the foot by looking at pure cost and not the true value of FM?

OJ: Its really about increasing the spend on FM. Out of £100 spent on a typical workstation, £60 is rent, £25 rates, £15 FM costs. If you spend less on rent and rates, you spend more on FM to create a better workstation. You can improve the quality of the working environment only by cutting occupancy costs.

WG: Flexible working works best if there is a one-team approach, that is FM working in conjunction with HR and IT as a seamless support services element of the business. But a transitional programme is required to migrate from a fixed to flexible world.

SC: We're aware of these cultural issues at the Home Office and our current project is headed up by HR, me from FM head of IT team. We also involve our internal cultures team are getting internal customer input. When we moved into Marshal Street HQ three years ago we had breakout areas, cafes and study areas, which will likely be extended.

CH: Are we moving towards Wi-Fi cities like Philadelphia?

OJ: It's been in Hong Kong and Scandanavia for years. It's all over Europe but here you have to pay-and-go.

Mark Rogers (MR): More and more hotels are offering flexible work space and Wi-Fi for people who pitch up for meetings.

IF: In Portsmouth we have just introduced community free Wifi through the schools programme. But I fear these kids will come into the workforce and the HR contracts will be 'you work here and these are the times'.

CH: Is flexible working generational? Are kids more in tune with it than us?

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FLEXIBLE WORKING

ROUNDTABLE

< NM: Absolutely. At the recent WorkTech presentation in November two lasses from the Nottinghamshire Academy - a paperless place - told delegates they saw the workplace as old fashioned, a boring place with a plant in the corner. There will be recruitment problems if these things are not addressed.

WG: For some organisations your pre-eminence in the organisation is still defined by having four walls around you. The new generation is more interested in the bells and whistles of the technology than the real estate.

NM: IT people are becoming the Luddites, saying to the young 'no, you can't have that because we run the major application on that here.

IL: In some of our internal surveys a big issue has been the quality of the workplace. But now it is shifting to the quality of IT, frustration with slow responses and systems being down.

CH: What are some the practical things that FMs have to deal with when employees work from home?

BC: Organisations ignore normal health and safety things such as PAP testing. But there is an issue of ergonomics, such as putting in place the right furniture. Yet people take their laptops and sit in the garden. These will bite back.

AM: These same people might be sitting in poor furniture at the office, too. It's about making people aware of these things and for the organisation to discharge it's duty of care through training. If home-working is five days a week you must take a robust approach to ensuring they do things properly.

IF: If you have good management, communication and training, then issues go away. It worries me that in large organisations few people actually know who owns the flexible working policy, whether it's finance, HR or FM?

AM: You have to glue together three silos of FM HR and IT together. But you get jealousies among them as to who owns it. FM can take the lead and draw together these silos together, and also champion flexible working as a good productivity move.

CH: What about the supposed geographical benefits to the employee's community of flexible working, such as 'touch-down' spaces?

OJ: One model is for an organisation to rent out empty office and desk space to local home-workers. These people might need to escape their domestic stresses but can't travel to their HQ office far away. These flexible workers would use local cafes, nip out to do their shopping and generally invigorate the high-street. It's also a sort of corporate social responsibility, ie putting something back into a local community.

CH: Is home working or flexible working really that

“Two people from the Nottinghamshire Academy – a paperless place – told delegates they saw the workplace as old fashioned and boring place. There will be recruitment problems if things are not addressed.”

NIGEL MILLER MD CORDLESS CONSULTANTS



Suitable surroundings: workers of the future will demand high standards of workplace environment

sustainable? People would be lighting and heating their own houses?

AM: Yes, but people are avoiding journeys and carbon footprints. And what about putting on an extra jumper at home? It really isn't an argument against home-working.

MR: Our group has been investing in video conferencing and saving on much transportation.

SC: We are incorporating BIA (new immigration agency based in Croydon, into the Home Office organisation in central London. We could be using video conferencing a lot.

OJ: I can now video conference from my mobile phone.

IF: It all gets back to asking why people have to work 9-5. Before FMs usually had to be on-site in case a problem arose, such as advising people in the office about locking up late at night. But this can all be done if the FM is not even there because they are accessible by phone or laptop.

FC: But what processes do we see changing in the future to be more flexible?

IF: Most of us just don't know. Look at broadband and what it allows, and nobody predicted it.

IL: The future is about building flexibility into your long-term contracts and not tying yourself into working patterns. Give yourself the flexibility to change. **FM**