VIRTUAL COLLEGE

Housing – Managing through change – Flexible / agile working

A short summary by Virtual College

Introduction

The past few years have proved to be an era of significant change within social housing. While the sector is always evolving, recent government legislation and funding cuts have meant employees are experiencing an unprecedented level of reformation.

Housing organisations know that if they want to keep afloat in turbulent waters they must change with the times: traditional methods of working won't necessarily cut it in a working environment that demands flexibility and adaptability.

Indeed, findings from The Future of Work Institute's Agile Future Forum suggest that working in a non-traditional way offers an advantage when it comes to organisational agility and ability to respond to change.

Implementing an agile working strategy is something many organisations - both within and outside of the housing sector - are choosing to do. Indeed, huge corporations such as Spotify, Unilever and BT have adapted agile to great success. This way of working can help companies to thrive in an ever-changing world, improve employee morale and retention, and boost productivity and creativity.

What is agile working?

For some, the concept of agile working will invoke visions of remote working, flexible hours and bring your own device (BYOD). While these can be consequences of an agile working strategy, they are not the core values.

An adaptable and flexible way of working, the agile vision begins with the understanding that "work is an activity, not a place".

While agile does incorporate flexibility surrounding the time and place work is carried out, its focus is performance and outcomes. As long as the work is completed, and done to a high standard, does it matter where the hours were put in?

Paul Allsopp, of The Agile Organisation, explains:

"Agile working is about bringing people, processes, connectivity and technology, time and place together to find the most appropriate and effective way of working to carry out a particular task. It is working within guidelines (of the task) but without boundaries (of how you achieve it)".



Why?

Adopting an agile way of working - when done right - can bring numerous benefits to an organisation. The focus being placed on the end product means that the actual task becomes central to employees' way of thinking - no matter how that goal is achieved. And by extension, productivity should increase.

Indeed, in a CIPD report entitled Productivity: Getting the Best out of People, it was found that agile working practices had a positive impact on productivity. Furthermore, research from Regus revealed that globally 72 per cent of managers reported an increase in productivity when their company made the move to flexible working. Furthermore, concerns about staff 'slacking off' when given these freedoms seem to be unfounded.

A 2012 study by Ipsos MORI indicated that employees actually tend to overcompensate when working in a location other than the office.



47%

of those questioned said they strive to be 'extra visible' by sending more emails and making more calls.

39%

claimed they put in longer hours to prove they're still working hard.



Increased productivity is all well and good, but what about the bottom line? Well, the Regus survey of senior managers found that:

63%

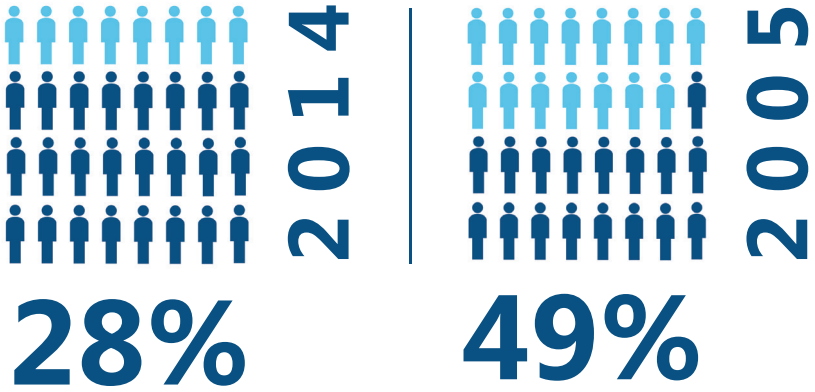
linked a growth in revenue directly to flexible working practices.



But it's not all about the time and money: there are other benefits to agile too, and a major one is employee morale.

Acas' Workplace Trends of 2015 underlined a dramatic shift in employees' attitudes to careers and work. Looking into employee preferences surrounding their 'ideal career' in 2014, it was found that:

28% of respondents would like work to be central to their lives. This figure is down significantly from 2005, when almost half of those surveyed said the same thing.





Agile can help to give employees the work-life balance they desire: whether they like to put the emphasis on work, or their life outside it. In 2012, a CIPD survey of managers found that employee retention was the number one benefit of flexible working, with 76 per cent of respondents giving this as a reason for adopting the practice. The research also found that 56 per cent of employers said absenteeism dropped after the adoption of flexible working.



A happy workforce should be a goal of any business, but upping employee morale and increasing retention can save a lot of money, time and other so-called soft costs for companies. HR.com estimates that the cost of employee turnover can range from 40 per cent to 400 per cent of an employee's annual salary.

Furthermore, the Agile Future Forum's case study analysis found that the adoption of agile can also increase the quality of outputs through diversity of skills and great ability to attract top talent.

How?

The authors of the ILM report Flexible Working: Goodbye nine to five noted: "Residual negative attitudes to flexible working at both employee and organisational level indicate that UK plc is currently in a transitionary period, moving from rigidly controlled to a truly agile workforce, and there is still some distance to travel."

This illustrates the fact that while lots of companies are adopting flexible working, many of them are only part of the way to operating on a truly agile system. While organisations are loosening restrictions on workers, embracing flexible hours and remote working, and becoming more open to bring your own device (BYOD) - and these are improving their company - perhaps they are yet to become a truly agile workforce, focussing on the end product and enabling the path to achieving this to be as flexible as workers want or need it to be.

So having established the many benefits of agile working, how do businesses go about implementing such a strategy?

Ultimately there's no one right way to do it. You need to consider what will work in your industry and your company, specifically, and how agile ways of working can be adapted to your form of work.

Implementing an agile and flexible way of working involves an entire overhaul of the way the workforce thinks about work. This will require a substantial amount of training for managers, who may have to deal with ways of working they've not encountered before, as well as training for various departments as they begin to operate in completely new ways. It will also require a strong communication strategy in order to ensure all employees are bought into this new way of working - and this really is key to the scheme being a success.

It's obviously important to research the subject properly before starting to plan or rolling anything out. Fortunately, as agile working has grown in popularity, the community surrounding it has strengthened significantly, and resources on the subject are widely available. There are plenty of books, blogs and other advice out there covering all aspects of agile: from the theory behind it to steps for businesses to take towards agile to what to do next.

Sources

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