

HUMAN CAPITAL

HC
ISSUE 6.10

PROFILE:
LENOVO

TEAMBUILDER:
GLINTECH

PLUS
TOP TIPS on
workforce
planning and
redundancies

Time for change

Dave Ulrich's 6-step guide to change management

Workplace design: how hot-desking can work for you



HOT-DESKING AND TEAMWORK TENSION

The hot-desking phenomenon has hit many organisations hard. *Dr Suzanne Perillo* looks at the challenges – and benefits – that hot-desking brings to team cohesion

Flexibility and mobility are strategic orientations and hot-desking, in conjunction with remote working, provides a response. A shift to a hot-desking culture is more likely to be experienced as a gain when teamwork is directly factored into the equation.

Originating in the late 1980s, the practice of hot-desking incurs the loss of ownership over a particular desk and workstation. Countering this, employees gain access to a network of spaces. Advancements in technology have helped to mobilise the latest wave of hot-desking as instant messaging, electronic maintenance, and remote access to networked records and files become familiar workplace attributes. However, a shift to sharing desks and accessing multiple spaces, including virtual ones, is more complicated than a simple matter of give and take.

A growing commitment to delivering flexible working conditions is taking place in a workplace landscape where collaboration and teamwork are also priorities. Employees are increasingly being organised in teams but the chance that they will be in the same place at the same time is decreasing. How can this tension zone be proactively negotiated?

Hot-desking

Globally, the desire to attract and retain quality staff is driving greater levels of workplace flexibility. According to a recent benchmarking study undertaken by the Global Workforce Roundtable (Boston College), 57% of multinational companies operating in the Asia-Pacific region had a flexible work arrangement policy and 80% believed that flexible work arrangements were an important, or very important, tool for attracting and retaining talented employees.

A report published by the UK Equal Opportunity Commission (*Working Outside the Box*, 2007) notes that men and women want flexible working arrangements that see the same work being completed at different times and in different locations for the same pay.

The hot-desking response to increasingly flexible working arrangements is a lean one. Organisations that offer employees the option of combining home and office work, have employees

working on the road or visiting clients at their premises on a regular basis, have found this quality attractive, especially those involved in sales, accounting and consulting, where desks can be unoccupied for at least 60% of the year (Architectural Record Continuing Education Series, 2006).

For employers, savings in office space and costs are expected when employees share desks, and the potential contribution to reducing the carbon footprint, through lower levels of employee commuting, is also being noted. In hot-desking cultures, actual ratios of desks to employees, hot-desks to assigned desks and teamwork performed locally to teamwork performed remotely varies across organisations. There are also likely to be differences in departments and teams within organisations.

The hot-desking idea is also egalitarian. In addition to sharing desks, employees typically share services, drop in or touch down centres, and informal lounge areas. The requirement to share has implications for hierarchy. Rather than marking status, 'all desks are equal'.

Experiences with hot-desking vary. Hot-desking can increase opportunities to meet new people, exercise choice and experience a greater sense of freedom. Hot-desking has also been associated with cumbersome file storage and carrying, the inability to rely on seeing people and feelings of being isolated from team members. Trouble shooting for both poor communication and a lack of team cohesion can help to support hot-desking as a positive experience, especially when this involves varying degrees of virtual teamwork.

Teaming tension zones

Individuals want to know what the personal impact of greater levels of flexibility and mobility will be and this includes teamwork practicalities. When people feel threatened by change they are likely to resist it. More often than not, the uncertainty that comes with change evokes fear. The more employees understand about how the change will work the better the outcome will be.

Invite questions and communication. Creating opportunities for questions to emerge before and during the transition phase of a shift to a hot-desking culture will see levels of uncertainty fall and expectations tabled, compared and readjusted. Employees

System Marina





Project Architectus

Photo: Peter Hyatt

will want to know details. How will storage and filing work? How will printing be managed, especially when people aren't there to collect it? Can desks be adjusted, reconfigured and moved into another team's area? What rules will apply to personal items and photographs? What happens when someone claims ownership over a hot-desk and ignores the 'clear desk' policy? How will messaging be supported and what new technology skills will be required?

The hot-desking idea is egalitarian. In addition to sharing desks, employees typically share services, drop-in or touch-down centres and informal lounge areas. The requirement to share has implications for hierarchy

Can people be asked to come into the office? What are the options for meetings and what is the etiquette?

Company policies provide a rational response to employee fears and the need for certainty. However, the relationship between people and the workplace is also an emotional one. This is one reason why individuals and groups adjust differently to workplace change. Hot-desking will see relationships between employees change. There will be an impact on team dynamics and the ways in which information is formally and informally exchanged, knowledge is built and solutions to problems constructed.

Emotions signal social dynamics and play an important role in communication. They are also contagious. This makes a team a suitable negotiating forum for developing hot-desking protocols, procedures and etiquettes. Articulating and discussing expectations about such things as team member accessibility and contactability, the facilitation of virtual discussion groups and the sharing of work schedules will help to facilitate adjustment in a hot-desking culture. It will also provide a basic foundation for building and maintaining a sense of team unity.

Building team cohesion

In addition to healthy adjustment, cohesion is an indicator of effective team communication and performance. According to research reported earlier this year by the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield, team cohesion is at greater risk when employees work remotely. Investigating the impact of flexible working arrangements on the experiences of hot-desked and site-based consultants, hot-desking was found to be associated with a weaker sense of cohesion and knowledge sharing effectiveness within a team.

In cohesive teams, the preferences, information and resourcing requirements of team members are more predictable and activity can be adjusted 'on the fly'. By comparison, poor or missing communication is likely to be a frequent occurrence when there is a lack of team cohesion.

Team members, including those who are virtually present more often, must stay informed. As long as the emphasis is on exchanging critical information, networked communication and data helps. Over-reporting does not. In addition to information

overload, opportunities for the whole team to discuss what information means may be crowded out.

Staying informed is not sufficient for building cohesion. When working remotely, maintaining a sense of team spirit with colleagues who are physically present in the office is the biggest challenge. Cohesion is built over time through participation in shared experiences that allow interaction and communication patterns to form. The level of awareness of these communication and interaction patterns influences the extent to which individuals successfully participate in opportunities for sharing information, building on ideas and calibrating expertise.

Awareness typically requires adequate participation in face-to-face and virtual teaming experiences in a hot-desking culture. Cohesive teams have a tacit awareness of who is around, what they are doing and whether they are relatively busy, and are receptive to collaborative activity. This awareness may be more difficult to acquire when employees change desks on a daily basis, or are away from the office for an entire week or month. In what can be viewed as an attempt to compensate for reduced tacit awareness, research conducted by the Fraunhofer Institute, supported by the European Commission, has led to the development of technology such as ambient display walls and various mobile devices that emit information about the presence, availability and social roles of team members working remotely through the use of different patterns of light.

Even when employees return to the office, there is no guarantee that a seat will be found in a particular location or a particular team area when employees hot-desk. Social dynamics may be disrupted and collaboration experienced unevenly. Gains in collaboration for team members who are physically present in the office may be at the expense of those working remotely. More frequent and explicit reinforcement of the team's collective goals and evaluation of the quality of virtual communication – satisfaction with information exchange and dialogue – can help to correct and troubleshoot these risks to cohesion.

Stretching ownership

Looking differently at the notion of ownership can also help to support a sense of team identity. Rather than ownership of a particular desk, a sense of ownership of a variety of spaces needs to be cultivated. The shift to a hot-desking culture does not mean that the workspace must be impersonal. It does, however, require a shift in mindset. Notably, achievement of a desired mindset does not precede the introduction of a workplace practice.

The relationship between attitude and behaviour change is not one way. Attitudes can influence actions and vice versa. For example, the findings of a recent study researching the impact of randomly assigning employees from a finance company to assigned desks or hot-desks found that employee perceptions varied in line with the nature of their experience, with 92% of positive comments about assigned desks coming from employees who had one and 93% of negative comments coming from employees who were hot-desked (Millward, Haslam and Postmes, *Organization Science*, 2007).

Concerns about the loss of ownership over a particular desk can be refocused by bringing the meaningfulness of shared spaces

for individuals and teams into the spotlight. Providing employees with experiences that require them to experiment with the use of different spaces can help to support a hot-desking culture by cultivating the attitude that the 'right' kind of workspace is one that enables individuals and teams to perform work effectively. This may be at a desk, in a quiet area, meeting room, training facility, touchdown space, an informal break out space or a remote location.

The requirement for individuals, teams and working communities to adjust is ongoing in a century where high speed internet communication, flexible working, virtual teaming, work-life balance, employee well-being and environmental responsibility are now familiar workplace characteristics. Shift happens and the ability of people to adapt functionally and psychologically to changes in workspace arrangements should not be underestimated. This capability is more likely to be enabled when practicalities are considered, and social and emotional sticking points negotiated. People expect choice and opportunities to shape workplace practices. HR practitioners are well positioned to create conditions that allow questions to emerge so that contextually relevant responses can be negotiated. **HC**

About the author

Dr Suzanne Perillo is an organisational psychologist with The Schiavello Group. For more information phone (03) 9330 8727 or e-mail sperillo@schiaavello.com