

Management Today discusses how using the internet, management can devise a programme that gives in-house staff a better work/life balance, while improving company competitiveness and agility.

A COHESIVE WORKPLACE

Managing the workforce seemed so much easier a hundred years ago. People took all the work they could get. No-one dared be late for fear of being locked out. Productivity was high because only the worked hours were paid for. Yet we hear of the intense camaraderie among the workforce and workers' pride in their high-quality products.

Today, there seems little time for socialising with work colleagues, and a large proportion of employees (many on 35-hour contracts and six weeks' paid holiday) wanting to reduce their working time. Yet Britain has wrestled for decades with productivity consistently below that of its competitors.

Employees now demand flexible hours and a good work/life balance, working at a firm of their choice. Organisations, meanwhile, are beset by the administrative challenge of variable pay scales, benefits packages and complying with maternity, paternity, age-discrimination and many other regulations, as well as managing absence-reduction. It has all got more complex.

Does this administrative overload and the need to be employee-focused put us at risk of neglecting our customers' needs? It is a huge challenge to deliver a fast, high-quality service 24x7 to customers with tight budgets while striving to retain staff, keep them skilled and motivate them to be productive. Workforce management has never been so demanding - but nor has it ever offered such a big prize to those who get it right.

For so-called knowledge workers operating from home on laptops, their roles and the control they have over their work times aid their motivation and productivity. But most staff still have specific places and agreed times for work. Such people need to fit into an overall work plan and to be scheduled along with specific equipment and other staff - and for times when the work needs to be performed. It may be harder to give this group control over their working lives, but in times of full employment you ignore their needs at your peril.

So is there a way to achieve a good work/life balance, while ensuring the workforce is scheduled to perform profitably through cyclical peaks and troughs?

The secret is to recognise individuals' work preferences while organising the workforce as a whole to get the goods and services delivered on time. This can be achieved by combining well-planned work-group schedules with enlightened work practices (flexi-time, compressed hours, variable shift lengths etc) to create an agile workforce. Competitiveness improves through a structure responsive to changing business demands. Thanks to the internet at last delivering on its promises, operations/line management can use technology to handle and automate most of the complexities.

All components such as compliance, productivity, pay and benefits, motivation, shift preferences and customer needs can be integrated into a cohesive work-force-management programme. Imagine a workforce closely matched to the fluctuating activity levels of your business, ensuring your customers get high service levels. Imagine control over staff costs (with no premium pay) and lower administration through automation of staff records and pay calculations. Consider how this will help recruitment, retention and motivation.

By operating flexible work schedules that aid business needs, the workforce benefits as well. Staff gain some control over their working lives through the ability to select their work patterns, swap shifts with colleagues and book holidays with minimum recourse to management. The technology enables all this, providing checks and balances too.

Can any other business initiative deliver lower labour costs, higher productivity and a more motivated and agile workforce - without capital investment? Workforce management may have become more complex - but it has become more profitable too.

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