

Advanced working practices could reduce an organisation's office space by up to 30 per cent and swiftly recoup any short-term outlay. But ingrained attitudes and a fear of the unknown ensure many managers remain glued to outdated routines. Yet, for those brave enough to take the plunge, now is the perfect time to adhere to a new set of principles

Given the pressure most organisations face to reduce running costs, you'd think that now would be an ideal time to improve the efficiency of the workplace by implementing advanced working practices such as free seating, ad hoc home working and so on. If companies did, they could probably achieve a 30 per cent reduction in their office space and IT costs. And at a typical £10,000-plus per seat you'd think this would be a no-brainer. So if organisations don't implement advanced working now, when will they?

FACT: For more than 50 per cent of the time most desks in office buildings lie unused...

FACT: We know that many people do not have the kind of workplace that helps them do their job...

FACT: When given the choice, many people would like to work 1-2 days a week at home...

Trapped in the past

The problem is that there is too much "glue" about. The glue I'm talking about is the organisational kind that traps people and organisations in their traditional ways. The glue that gets in the way of making a transition. There's attitude glue, technology glue, space glue and competence glue – in other words, not enough people with the skills and courage to lead the "unglueing" process.

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Sticking point



Attitude glue is about a very understandable human desire to keep things the same. It's understandable because when we find safety we tend to fight tooth and nail to retain it. People know that the normal "nine to five, everyone in the office every day" routine works – they've been doing it for years. So why should they change – and to something you can barely describe?

Then there's middle-management glue, those old-fashioned attitudes still held firmly by some managers, that "people need their own desk, otherwise they won't be able to work", or that "if people work at home, they'll be swinging the lead". The fact is that, for some, new skills and attitudes will be needed.

There's also a perception that there will be huge cost and complexity associated with introducing advanced working and that payback will take three years to achieve. Consider, for instance, all those costs associated with new furniture, upgrading the environment, new mobile IT, and so on. There's apparently too much glue and organisations stay fixed in a model better suited to the turn of the last century.

Breaking away

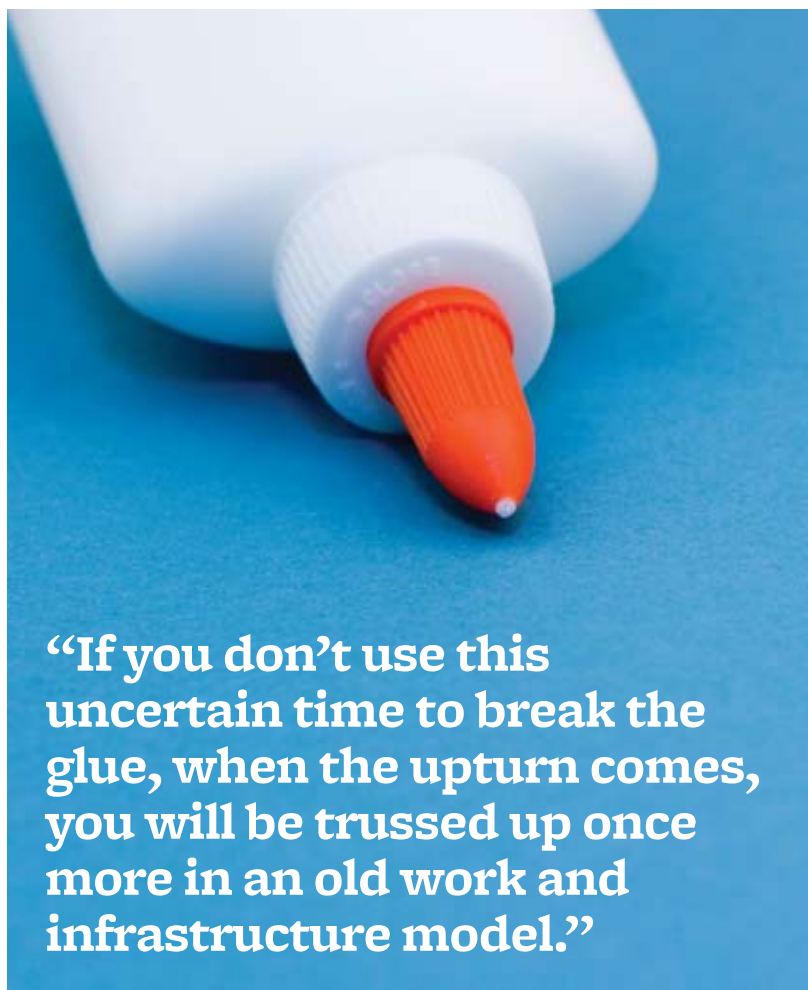
We know it is possible for people, to take on board new working practices as long as it makes sense and there is a robust and well-led change programme. It's not risky and it has been done in a variety of sectors including IT, professional services and, more recently, in financial services. To achieve the momentum, FM and real-estate executives need to present a solid business case. It may mean retrofitting a workplace by augmenting existing furniture solutions to provide a range of new places for people to work, maybe with a cosmetic upgrade.

In many cases it can be done quickly and cheaply. As far as IT is concerned, many companies have already invested separately and for different reasons in IP telephony and virtualised desktop solutions, laptops and the like, allowing complete mobility in and out of the office. Thus, in some organisations, the technology infrastructure may already be suited to advanced working. Where there's legacy systems, such as an old PBX or legacy IT application, for example, there are workaround technologies and solutions that allow mobility without throwing out all the IT and telephony systems (contrary to the views of some large networking companies).

And if you want to make your new workplace work really hard, then highly effective and economical workstation booking systems are available from a number of suppliers including BusinessSolve, Agilquest and Condeco. These are easy to introduce and give staff confidence that they'll get exactly the kind of desk they need when they are in the office.

Shed the surplus space

So it is possible, depending upon the status of your portfolio, to make a payback inside 12 months, but you do need to be able to dispose of a building. The reason for this? Take as an example an organisation that has 5,000 people working in six buildings within reasonable proximity to each other in or around a major city. If one of these has a lease that expires in the next 12 months, the aim is to transition the other five buildings and their people to advanced working to create space for an additional 1,000-1,500 people (who will, of course, need less space because they too will transition to advanced working when they relocate). A building accommodating >>



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« 1,000 people might cost an organisation £10 million per annum, so as long as the cost of implementation is less than £10 million, it’s worth doing.

The key question is whether you have a lease break coming up to allow you to dispose of a property at nil cost. Without a mechanism for disposing of the space, some organisations will wonder why they should bother, because leaving a building empty will not, in the short term, save much in the way of running costs.

The reason why you should bother is that if you don’t use this uncertain time to break the glue, when the upturn comes, you will be trussed up once more in an old work- and infrastructure model. When your headcount grows, your leaders (who will have conveniently forgotten about the pain of long leases during the recession) will demand more space and the inherent inflexibility will be reincarnated.

Seize the moment

So, going back to the question, “If not now, when?” If not now, you’ll have missed a rare moment, when everyone understands all too well the need for change – a time when successful change leaders will be the corporate heroes. My guess is that this moment will last for a maximum of two years. After that, the next opportunity to break the glue will be when you need a new building or you refurbish existing space.

But isn’t it critical to break the glue now anyway, to evolve into a leaner, more flexible model in all aspects of business in line with the inherent volatility of a truly global world with no “firewalls” between economies? For me, this is the single most

compelling strategic reason for transitioning to an advanced organisational model now. When the world economy picks up, if the glue isn’t broken, we may return to the same inefficient and unsustainable ways of working we had before.

Because you haven’t shrunk down to the smallest space possible, you will also have denied yourself the opportunity to release the vacated space to the market when the upturn comes, so the temptation will be to expand again by taking on yet another building with a long lease. In addition, you will probably never get a better deal on the furniture, services and technology you need to make the transition. Suppliers are prepared to do deals they wouldn’t have dreamt of three years ago.

Improved team work

There are a whole load of other reasons why you should make the transition anyway which have all to do with organisation culture, vigour, resilience and sustainability.

From a cultural point of view, managers tell us that mobile working and free seating allows them to re-group their teams more easily and that they can get to know their staff better because they are able to sit with different people on different days. Team members also say they develop better relationships with colleagues because they sit with different team members on different days. They say their relationships with other teams have improved because “territory” has been removed, which allows adjacent teams to intermingle, and they tell us they are more productive, because they can choose the most appropriate place for them to work.

Business resilience also improves with a more mobile infrastructure. During the recent snow, many organisations with advanced working infrastructures were untroubled by the weather as they had huge numbers of staff working from home. Those that relied entirely on braving it to the office, on the other hand, suffered, as their people couldn’t get there.

Environmental benefits

On the environmental front, if everybody does not have to come to the office every day then, clearly, there are fewer journeys and a concomitant reduction in CO₂ emissions. It’s commonly known that office buildings are one of the main sources of CO₂, so if your organisation needs 30 per cent less space, it is also generating 30 per cent less CO₂ per head than before. Another major benefit is the dramatic reduction in paper and toner that comes from moving to a more mobile workplace.

So it’s a complex choice. If you take the FD’s traditional view, you might choose not to introduce advanced working because the costs will seem too high and the benefits too low in the short term.

However, if you recognise that the largest bar to transition to an advanced workplace model is the reluctance of people to change, and that there is a limited window of opportunity to bring the change about, then you might make a more mature and strategic decision, particularly if the change can be delivered at a lower cost than generally thought possible and within a shorter period of time.

So, I ask you once again: If not now, when? Isn’t this a time for breaking glue and moulds? **FM**

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