

HR TECH

24/7 FLEXIBILITY

Thanks to mobile technology, flexible (or 'agile') working is now much more of a reality than previously possible. With the increased presence of portable devices, particularly smartphones and tablets, comes the capability of working anytime and on the move.

There are three questions concerning flexible working that become particularly prevalent with the advance of mobile technology.... and the hard-wiring is more to do with human relationships than mother-boards and megabytes.

Firstly, given more time out of the office to do their work, will employees respect this freedom? Marissa Mayer clearly thinks not. When she was appointed CEO of Yahoo last year, insiders say she banned employees from working at home due to decreased performance.

In other words, technological advances have put trust on the HR agenda. Telling people they can no longer work from home is effectively telling them you no longer trust them.

It goes without saying that a breakdown in trust is not good news and how the tablets and mobile devices that are supposed to improve communication could have the opposite effect. Of course, the answer is to manage employees working from home as effectively as those working in the office: recruit the right people and then have clear performance objectives.

The second issue is if flexible work really increases levels of employee engagement in the first place.

It is easy to understand the appeal of having a greater degree of freedom and control over one's work schedule, especially for those who would need it most for things like childcare. Indeed, an increased level of control is a critical component in avoiding strain and maintaining wellbeing at work.

But, are people actually more engaged? An organisation may offer flexi-time in order to portray a certain image of itself and its culture, but the extent to which this flexibility will motivate its employees is still unclear.

This is where the third issue comes in: does flexible working result in perpetual working? If you're not at the office but working, can you ever truly be out of the office? The associated risks of this are relatively obvious and concern burnout and work-life balance issues – precisely the problems that flexible working is supposed to prevent.

“ There is a fine line between seeking to improve employee engagement and creating a culture of excessive pressure and expectation. ”

One possible solution to the problem of working outside of designated hours has been adopted at eBay amongst other companies. The online auction house employs a policy whereby emails (particularly from managers) composed outside of normal working hours - for example on weekends - are not delivered until 9am on the next working day.

This not only prevents a constant flow of work-related communication out of hours. The thinking is that if management are not seen to be working extra hours, everybody else does not feel pressured to do so either.

It may be possible to adapt this concept to flexible working by having similar settings on mobile devices to only deliver or receive emails during the agreed working week.

I would argue that there is a fine line between an organisation fostering an environment seeking to improve employee engagement and one that takes it too far and creates a culture of excessive pressure and expectation.

Many of us even check and respond to work emails in bed. Are we getting to the point where we can simply not switch off?

There are clearly ways to take advantage of technology, such as audio and video-conferencing, instant messenger and mobile internet to enhance business activities and avoid wasting time and resources. Improved efficiency is not the only benefit as these technologies can also create a sense of community for employees who may not be in the same place geographically.



Nevertheless, a little caution is needed. After all, at some point in the day, the week, the month... we all need to switch off!

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EUROPEAN HR DIRECTOR SUMMIT 23-26 September 2013, London

In its 8th year, this year's theme is set on 'Accelerating HR Transformation in A Global Context and Pushing the Strategic Agenda of HR Organisation.' There will be three focused streams - Globalising HR Services Delivery, Talent Management & Workforce Optimisation, and HR Technology & Analytics.
europeanhrsummit.com

EMERGING MARKETS HR SUMMIT 1-4 October 2013, London West End Luxury Hotel and Waldorf Hilton

Expanding in new markets is complex but necessary in this era of global competition. This summit will deliver three specialised masterclasses by multi award winning facilitators and experts, key presentations, case studies and round table discussions by international HR professionals. boc-uk.com/conferences

HR TECH EUROPE 24-25 October 2013, Amsterdam RAI

HR Tech Europe is Europe's most important event on how software, technology systems and collaborative tools are changing the way people and organisations work. This event brings you the game changers, the new faces, and new organisations that are shaping the future of work. hrtecheurope.com

CIPD ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION 6-7 November 2013, Manchester Central

This year the conference features over 40 expert-led sessions from leading organisations including Facebook, Hilton, Kenexa, Unilever, the Cabinet Office and many more. Opening keynote sessions will be led by Professors Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, experts on leadership and organisational culture. cipd.co.uk/cande/annual

REWARDING TALENT AND ADDRESSING POOR PERFORMANCE UK-wide, November 2013

Effective performance management is vital for all organisations and is likely to be a decisive force in achieving a competitive advantage over the next decade. This half day session will look at best practice for the management of both talent and poor performance.
hrxchange.co.uk