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Some home truths about teleworking; Small Business

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Working away from an office environment is becoming more common, but there are pitfalls that can catch the unwary, warns Sandra O'Connell

FOR Caoimhe Lynch, the office isn't so much a place as a state of mind.

A sales executive with PC Cubed, a company that employs 16 people and sells technology to the retail and hospitality sectors, she has been in the job for three months, but has hardly been in its Bray office.

Instead she divides her time between her home office and her clients' places of business. The arrangement was part of the reason she took the position.

"My previous job was office-based and what really appealed to me was the fact that I would be able to manage my own time," said Lynch. "Initially I had to be in the office to learn about the company and its products, but even then I found I was quickly getting bogged down with office stuff and administration. Working from home frees me up to sell and that makes me more productive."

She's not the only one who feels that way. A survey by the mobile-phone company O2 found a dramatic rise in teleworking among owner managers and senior executives in small firms.

Over the past two years, the numbers of such workers based at home for more than four days a month trebled to 24%. Better productivity and better work/life balance were the main reasons cited, not least because of the elimination of commuting.

The prospect of increased productivity will be attractive to business owners, but there are several issues to consider before introducing teleworking. Your business may simply not be ready.

"The key factor to the successful introduction of teleworking is that the culture of the organisation must be one that measures outputs, not inputs," said Mike McDonnell, a director of the Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development.

An input-driven organisation values physical presence or "face time". "This is what was measured in the past because there was no real requirement for people to give discretionary effort in their jobs, just that they do their jobs," said McDonnell.

Automation and outsourcing have done away with many such functions, he said.

"Today an employee is only valuable if they add value to the organisation and this puts the emphasis on output."

To allow staff to work from home means first defining what outputs -targets and objectives -they need to meet.

"You then need a fair and simple way of assessing the performance of the remote worker and must do it regularly," he said.

Different people working from home will need to be managed differently. "Some people will need a more discipline-based approach, others will like to be left alone. The astute manager will recognise the characteristics of each kind of worker."

A sense of isolation can be a common problem for home-based workers, he said. This isn't a problem for Lynch, but it is an issue, she said. "I may be out and about meeting people all day, but that doesn't give you the bond you get from working with people in an office."

According to the online teleworking publisher Network World, the fact that 40% of IBM's 333,000 employees work at home, on the road or at a client location on any given day was found to weaken employee morale.

IBM responded by ramping up social and recreational activities for staff. Small firms should take note. "The lack of peer-based support and of the social element of the workplace must be addressed," said McDonnell.

Management dealing with remote workers should have coaching and mentoring competencies, he said. "It's also important that the teleworker comes in to meet the team for monthly meetings at least, to feel engaged with the organisation."

Too much slogging can be counter-productive. "Initially when the idea of remote working came in, it was dismissed because people thought nobody would do any work," said McDonnell. "But the research shows that the opposite is the case. It is vital, therefore, that the employer provides guidelines about how the staff members manage the break between home and work."

Not doing so could leave the employer legally exposed to claims in relation to working-time directives as well as health and safety regulations.

"Your workplace at home is considered in exactly the same way as your workplace at work," said Angus Laverty of the Health and Safety Authority. "The responsibility of the employer and the employee remain just the same. This means it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that the workplace is healthy and safe and the employees' responsibility to ensure they work safely."

Ideally, employers should inspect the proposed home office to carry out a risk assessment and make sure it is ergonomically sound.

There are other concerns, according to the employment expert **Colleen Cleary**, the head of the employment law unit at Landwell Global, a firm of solicitors. "If you allow someone to work from home over a period of time, it can evolve into a term and condition that then becomes a right," she said.

"If a person has been working from home on a Friday for the past five years, you can't, as an employer, simply request that they start coming in to the office on a Friday. It could constitute a breach of contract that you can't just change unilaterally."

To avoid misunderstandings, there should be a clear policy in relation to telecommuting either in the contract of employment or in an e-working policy.

"This must state that any teleworking arrangement is subject to operational requirements and can be withdrawn at any time," said Cleary.

"If you are going to allow one staff member and not another, then it could cause unease unless it is clear that your decisions are consistent and based on operational requirements, and that you have objective reasons. To avoid leaving yourself open to discrimination issues, teleworking simply cannot be introduced on an ad hoc basis."

Barry Murphy has experience of both home-only and office-only working, and has plumped for a mixture of both for his IT firm Pyramid Consulting.

Five years ago, the company gave up its Blanchardstown offices in order to set up a virtual office,

where staff worked from home, communicated via technology and met for regular meetings in a hotel.

Since then, however, Pyramid has made a strategic move from consulting to product development, shrinking staff numbers from 35 to eight and taking on an office.

"While it was okay to have people connected remotely when we were consulting, when we were product building we needed to have people in a room bouncing ideas off each other," said Murphy, whose company specialises in software programmes for property developers and universities.

Having experience of a traditional and a virtual arrangement, and now offering staff a mixture of both, depending on their function, his advice on teleworking is simple.

"It must be fit for the purpose. It suited us to do away with the office when so many of our people were out on the road, but when you move towards team-based working, you need the dynamic you get from having people work together."

This way the team shares knowledge, he said. "There isn't the risk of one person knowing everything and getting hit by a bus, or leaving and taking it with them."

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