Creating the "Agile worker" – The Staffordshire Place Project
Staffordshire County Council

Introduction and overview

Having created an opportunity to realise significant property savings, Staffordshire County Council also saw an opportunity to use the project to take forward their innovative "one council" transformation programme. The concept of the 'Agile Worker' was devised and proactively managed to create efficiency and cultural changes well beyond the immediate project and which created new skills for staff and profound changes as to how they are managed.

The concept of the 'Agile worker' is to make the location where staff deliver outputs and, in many instances, even when they are delivered irrelevant. A fixed base and daily reporting at a central office have been done away with and staff now have far greater flexibility regarding how they manage their work. Through this, performance management has become focussed on quality and outcomes rather than time sheets and attendance. Not only does this mean that the focus is on the things that create customer satisfaction, but managerial supervision time has been reduced and staff are enjoying a greater degree of flexibility that allows them to work at times and locations that are more suited to their outside work commitments. In addition both staff and the council are creating direct cash savings and efficiencies through reduced travel and contributing to reduced traffic pollution.

The benefits the council has created through a complex mix of 'hard' project management and 'soft' people leadership skills are:

- Greatly reduced property costs
- A breaking down of departmental 'silos'
- A cultural change towards new ways of working and flexibility
- Improved productivity and efficiency
- Greater emphasis on key performance issues
- Reduced management time
- Better work/ life balance for staff
- Reduced travel time and pollution

Such success and change does not come easily and the project team, managers and staff have all had to learn new skills sets and behaviours to ensure that the potential benefits were achieved

Background

Staffordshire County Council identified that it wanted to transform the way they 'do business'. They wanted to embrace and take advantage of new ways of working and, in particular, to make sure that services are joined up and not delivered in departmental 'silos'. To enable this, a wide ranging 'One Council' transformation programme was created. At the same time they were eager to reduce their property costs and to shed outdated buildings. Many of these building were no longer fit for purpose and were also spread across the county town of Stafford – which helped reinforce a silo approach in some instances. An estates management project was created to bring the staff from 17 buildings into just two side by side new offices known as 'Staffordshire Place'. This was also seized as the opportunity to create the concept of the 'Agile Worker' as part of the overall transformation programme. Apart from the improvements to council services the immediate property management

exercise also created major regeneration opportunities for the county town by releasing valuable development sites.

How success was achieved

The Agile Worker concept is quite simple but has wide reaching consequences. Put simply it means that staff do not have to deliver their outputs from stationary desk locations in offices that they report to every day. Instead they can work from flexible locations including:

- Hot desks in Staffordshire Place
- Hot desks in 'touchdown' centres throughout the county
- Home
- Anywhere – as long as the work gets done

This means that managers and supervisors may not actually see (or even communicate) with their staff for several days. Similarly, staff may not regularly see their colleagues. This has meant that new skills and disciplines have been required, including a fundamental change to performance management.

This flexibility was also key to the success of the Staffordshire Place concept itself. It meant that of the approximately 1700 staff who 'transferred' to Staffordshire Place, desk space only had to be provided for 1200. Within Staffordshire Place itself the traditional idea of each person having their own set desk was also thrown away and only a very few staff have individual offices. Most staff now work in an open office environment at hot desks which means that they find themselves working next to different people and in combinations that change constantly. This has had the effect of informally increasing staff access to managers and improved communications between staff from different services. Staff not 'based' in Staffordshire Place are also able to use the hot desk and other facilities. This space saving helped allow for the creation of informal meeting areas, open kitchen areas etc. where staff who previously had communicated by phone or e-mail are able to quickly meet each other and work together. The increased speed of communications and personal relationships has been dramatic.

A wide range of benefits has been realised for the council, managers and individual members of staff.

- Greatly reduced property costs
- A breaking down of departmental 'silos'
- A cultural change towards new ways of working and flexibility
- Improved productivity and efficiency. It is interesting that in some service areas managers are now requesting staff to work at home even if office accommodation is available. In some of the more process orientated service areas managers have found that staff can be up to 100 per cent more productive when working from home. Managers actually schedule more work for staff when they are home working
- Greater flexibility of resources – staff time has become more flexible to take account of peaks and troughs of work and set the scene for concepts such as compressed hours etc. One example is in the shared HR centre that has created compressed hours for a core number of staff. Those team members have rolled up their total monthly hours into a consecutive block of working days, enabling them to now benefit from having block periods of time away

from work, thus reacting to the service requirements and expected delivery outcomes

- Increased collaborative working was expressed by staff through examples of how problem solving was addressed face to face which was far simpler and cost effective. This was expressed as ' a breath of fresh air' compared to the previous complicated travel arrangements or the constant ping of emails back and forth with limited progress being achieved
- Greater emphasis on the key performance issues. Not only does that mean a greater focus on the issues that matter but real performance can be more closely appraised and a firmer base is set for any capability or similar issues
- Reduced management time through staff empowerment and reduced supervision time. The relationship between managers and staff is a more 'adult to adult' relationship
- Better work/ life balance for staff. They have the ability to stagger work during the day e.g. to fit in the 'school run', visit dependant relatives etc. before re-commencing work
- Reduced travel time and resultant pollution

Overall the whole Staffordshire Place and Agile Working concepts have made a major contribution to changing traditional ways of working and a creating a new 'how we do business' culture.

The Skills Piece

When researching the case study it became apparent that there were three key stakeholder groups that all had to learn new skills and ways of working. These were managers/ supervisors, the staff themselves and the project team:

a) Managers and Supervisors

The concept of agile working requires the adoption of some key management principles:

- Understanding the "one council" vision
- As staff may not be in the office for days at a time, managers need to be precise in communicating role expectations and outputs to team members
- Having set the required outputs, managers must ensure that there is an atmosphere of trust and that staff 'out of sight' know that they are trusted to deliver without constant supervision . This also means empowering staff with the flexibility as to how/ when they deliver these outputs
- However, staff should still have access to support when required and managers need to ensure that they are still accessible even when they are working flexibly themselves
- Performance management should focus on whether the agreed outputs have been achieved and not on the minutiae of an 'attendance culture' such as timesheets
- Communication also becomes more important and managers must ensure that all staff are kept informed of changes. These means having to adopt a wider variety of communication channels
- Firmness is also required in ensuring that staff understand when they must attend the office for joint meetings etc.
- Supporting people through the change – creating the right environment for teams to perform, and having the personal resilience to own the changes and initiate operational plans to "make it happen".

Managers were supported themselves throughout the change period. A training programme and supporting materials were delivered and these included lessons learnt from trials of the new ways of working. The training covered:

- The concept of Staffordshire Place and the Agile Worker
- Practicalities of an agile staff force
- Performance management
- Communications
- How to support staff through change

A system of team champions to gather manager and staff questions, identify fears and concerns and find solutions was also introduced

b) Staff

The new ways of working also required staff to make sure that they had certain skill sets and behaviours:

- Self discipline – the freedom to be far more flexible about where and when work can be undertaken (including increased freedom to fit in domestic commitments) requires staff to ensure that they still have the discipline to deliver what is required. Similarly, some staff have had to ensure that they have the discipline to 'knock off' and not work constantly
- Plan work ahead – as there is no longer a daily 'touchdown' people need to ensure that they have a clear plan for at least each week and have planned their time and resources accordingly
- Communication and courtesy – although personal flexibility is welcomed, every member of staff must ensure that they are still available to managers and colleagues when required.
- Knowing what is important and enjoying greater empowerment– balancing the need to make sure managers are kept informed of important developments but not bogged down with e-mails and calls regarding trivia that staff can solve themselves
- Focus on delivery – ensuring that the agreed outputs are delivered on time and that performance is not judged by attendance
- Trust – accepting that the manager does trust you to be working when based remotely was an issue for some staff and they initially felt the need to 'call in' etc. to prove they were working

c) The Project Team

A multi-disciplinary project team was established to create Staffordshire Place and creating the Agile Worker was a strand within this overall project. The team charged with the physical transition had to cope with a wide variety of issues. These included:

- Identifying and meeting furniture and equipment requirements
- Thinking through the technical and ICT support an agile workforce would require
- Transferring to digitised data storage and far more off-site storage. This included a significant cultural change as staff were persuaded to give up the 'comfort' of close at hand paper records which were expensive and inefficient to store
- Security management

- Property planning and logistics

However, for the Agile Worker strand there were also significant cultural and people management issues to be overcome. Not surprisingly, in many instances both staff and managers were hesitant about the changes. The team adopted a number of techniques to ensure that the project was a success, including:

- Firmness – it was made very clear that the Staffordshire Place project was going to happen and that Agile Working was going to be a part of it. It was not going to be optional for those teams that were identified as being suitable for transfer
- Encouraging challenge - within this firmness people were encouraged to express their concerns and fears. It was a deliberate tactic to bring these into the open rather than let them 'fester' or have hidden resistance set in. In addition this approach meant that concerns could be dealt with quickly
- Training skills – both staff and managers were given training by the project team on how the Staffordshire Place and agile working concepts would operate. Factsheets and 'frequently asked questions' information was supplied as required
- Dealing with individuals – there was a huge amount of individual concerns raised ranging from significant service issues to personal detail e.g. whether home electricity costs would be subsidised
- Empathy – the team recognised that the concepts marked significant change and that each service area had genuine issues that needed to be thought through. The team had to have an understanding of these and be able to support managers through the change process
- Risk management – the scale of the changes meant that there would always be an element of risk as to whether 'it would work'. Boldness and the attitude to accept reasonable risks were vital
- Personal resilience and team working – the ability to keep going under immense time pressures and with a huge amount of queries and challenges being raised. This required team members to draw on each others expertise and support each other.

There were two other approaches that proved crucial.

Firstly, the team consciously ensured that they did not take over managers roles or undermine their responsibilities. Within the new flexible framework, managers were required and supported to plan how the changes would impact upon their own services. It was the responsibility of each departmental manager to ascertain how each team would operate within the framework. Upon clarifying each individual's role requirements, the managers themselves set objectives and schedules for agile working, ensuring team members maintained contact with each other and their manager, ensured days in the office were fairly distributed based on requirement and pre planning of work etc.

Secondly, agile workers were not defined as home workers (although they could work from home if they wished and it fitted work requirements). This meant that a large number of issues regarding possible changes to terms and conditions were avoided and additional costs of paying travel for home to work, subsidising utility costs etc. did not arise.

Lesson Learnt

Many lessons were learnt during the process and the fundamentals that ensure success have been identified as:

- Have a bold vision – if the overall aim is to help create a new 'mindset' then dramatic and obvious change will help reinforce this far better than many incremental changes
- Ensure that managers and staff do understand the new vision – and that it is a 'given' that it will happen
- Support to managers is vital – but equally important is to not undermine their personal responsibility
- Accept that some managers and staff will 'move at different speeds'. Capitalise on and publicise those areas which are 'fast movers' to encourage and demonstrate to others what can be achieved
- Match how performance management operates to the new working environment
- Work hard to bring concerns to the surface
- Think through and support the technological requirements
- Resource is required to create a dedicated team to see the changes through
- Keep going!

The overriding factor to the project's success is the people themselves and their willingness to embrace the attitude, practices and flexibility of the agile working concept. Despite some initial reluctance and objections to change such as no longer having their own desks with their own personal belongings and photographs, staff embraced the new found empowerment and flexibility. Perhaps strangely in the initial phases there was a perception in some areas by staff of a lack of trust by managers when they were off site. Over a period of bedding down staff realised this was not the case and understood the relationship between them and the manager was based on trust and focused on outputs which were tangible and real.

The future

The future, as explained by the Leader of the Council Councillor Philip Atkins is to see how this model may be extended across the council more broadly, including multi-service and partnership outlets in district council areas

The employees spoken to also wish to explore how even further greater flexibility can be created based on their belief that the use of static offices is they will become archaic and "old hat".

What Staffordshire County have managed to do in a time of austerity is create a cost effective model that benefits all levels of the organisation, contributes to its overall transformation programme and supports its vision of 'One Council'.