

New ways of working - Microsoft's 'mobility' office

by Eric van Heck

There is a common expectation among forward-looking companies that through the use of information technology new ways of working can be created that will enhance workplace conditions with such an effect as to improve employee satisfaction levels, increase productivity and ultimately impact positively upon company performance.

Certainly, as far as improving the methods of working for the benefit of employees, and when seeking to recruit the best of today's bright minds, it should be borne in mind that the younger generations expect from companies environments that suit their needs. They have no desire to spend their professional lives in a 'traditional' office environment where they will be expected to work between the hours of 9 to 5 at a desk piled high with stacks of paper. Instead, they expect collaboration tools and methods that are specifically designed to help them get the job done.

But how can organisations find the methods, tools and ways of working that are right for them? Is there a universal panacea that can be applied – a one-size-fits-all approach? Or should companies be looking within themselves for the solutions?

At RSM, we have worked closely with a number of major companies to determine exactly these points. One stand out example is Microsoft Corporation.

In 2005, Bill Gates wrote a white paper "Digital Work Style: The New World Of Work". In part this served as a basis for Microsoft's exploration and subsequent development of new ways of working, about which they identified three key factors:

- That increasingly businesses function in a knowledge based environment and that the traditional office model was not the most efficient way of organising and utilising this knowledge.
- That the Microsoft business model was changing, from traditional software sales to one that is more customer-oriented: it is about ongoing relationships with clients and working with them in teams, sometimes virtually. As such the work environment is necessarily much more collaborative and therefore needs better tools that are specifically designed to facilitate and encourage this collaboration.
- That there is fundamental truth in the philosophy that you can only create a growing company if the people employed by it are able to grow within

the organisation: personal growth and personal freedom to create aspects that they think are worthwhile for themselves and for the company.

In the Netherlands, these three factors convinced Microsoft that it was essential to move to new offices. For them it was the start of what they described as a journey. At the outset it was clear that they would have to look to combine the virtual dimension (the role played by technology) with the physical dimension (the building itself) and the mental dimension (how people interact with new technologies, new ways of working, and a new environment).

Before the journey commenced, Microsoft approached RSM for assistance. After much discussion it was agreed that we could best assist by measuring and assessing the impact of the workplace on performance. This would be done through 'before' and 'after' measurements, ie, prior to the relocation and then again a short while after the move.

We created an online survey that would explore perceptions: individual perceptions about work dimensions and performance. We developed unique analytical instruments that carefully measured working dimensions and individual performance. And we analysed the 'before' and 'after' responses to the survey.



As well as online surveys through which Microsoft employees could contribute, specific research was also conducted utilising Master's students. For example, one explored digital working styles within the organisation. Another looked at team performance, in both physical and virtual teams, and sought to determine if there were variances in performance between the two.

The key findings can be divided into three areas thus:

In the first instance our research highlighted the fact that there are differing digital work styles within the corporation. In assessing these we considered the aspect of mobility. From here we were able to characterise mobility on a scale of one (deskbound) to seven (highly mobile both internally and externally).

It became apparent that mobility was a major factor in any considerations for a new office building. Now, no one has

a fixed office any more and the building has been designed to be what we call activity based. It is no longer an office in the traditional sense. Instead it is a workspace, where employees can locate themselves in different parts of the building depending on the tasks they need to perform. Increasingly, it is a meeting place where employees can interact with colleagues, partners and clients.

This, our findings show, has increased even further the levels of mobility among employees.

Secondly, we looked at performance and in our analysis divided this into four dimensions: flexibility; productivity; satisfaction, and innovativeness.

A substantial increase in flexibility is shown after the move to the new tailor-made building and the adoption of new working methods. People, because they could work from home or office as they felt suited them, and in the hours of

their own choosing, felt much more flexible in terms of how, where and when they could do their job.

An improvement in productivity levels was also noted by those surveyed. Satisfaction levels, which were already very high, remained so, as did the innovation dimension.

The third aspect relates to the issue of trust, and is something that prominently features in studies we have conducted with other organisations. Trust is an important element. Employees need to trust their managers, and managers need to trust their employees in terms of giving them the freedom of how, where and when they would like to work.

Managers at Microsoft had many discussions about this issue. They questioned how levels of trust could be increased. How could they give employees more freedom; the freedom to work when, where and how they choose and yet still manage them effectively? What they came to realise was that their own perceptions had to change in terms of how to manage, and in doing so required the use of output driven methods of measuring overall employee effectiveness.

Also, empowerment is a crucial factor. Microsoft found that they needed to empower their people and give them more freedom. This, they discovered, improves employee flexibility, which in ►

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turn leads to higher productivity – but that's only if or when the element of trust is in place.

From our research Microsoft came to understand how crucial not just the design of the work environment is for company performance, but how essential it is to consider employees' perception and attitude towards working in this environment. We spend a great part of our lives working, so it should be obvious that to get the best from us we must be happy.

This is a very important message for all companies. Our research shows us that changing the workplace can lead to increased levels of productivity, flexibility, satisfaction and innovativeness. However, it has to be stressed that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

You cannot take Microsoft's journey and use it as a template within your own organisation. The lesson is that you have to start on your own journey, understanding the insights gained from Microsoft, and seek to come up with a way of working that best suits your people; suits the way they would like to deal with their colleagues, their managers, and especially with your clients.

We have conducted similar research with a number of major companies, and, as corporate interest in our findings is growing, will continue to do so.

Two further dimensions have been added to our work. The first relates to sustainability and eco-efficiency. Companies are asking: can we, through new ways of working, reduce our environmental footprint? This is an area that Microsoft Corporation is currently investigating.

The second dimension relates to 'smart working' and the concept that 'smart working is smart travelling'. We

are now looking at how, especially in countries like the Netherlands where traffic jams and transport overcrowding are daily occurrences, work can be redesigned in such a way that it offers more flexibility. Further, how can we utilise the existing infrastructures – the highways and rail networks, for example – in such a way that leads to higher productivity?

A lot of major questions will need to be addressed here. For example, how do we redesign work in such a way that it will improve the ecological footprint, work-life balance, customer interaction and customer service? How can we better utilise the transport infrastructures, even Internet infrastructures?

If more flexibility can be created in these areas then we can finally create a situation where people can decide for themselves where to work, what to work on, which technologies and tools to use and when.

In essence, we need to question and break down many aspects of our existing preconceptions about workplaces, the work itself and how it is done. ■

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This RSM research project is a multi-year, multi-client, multi-department undertaking. Companies sponsoring this research are De Unie, Essent, Microsoft, Rabobank, Sogeti, Transumo, and TopForce.

Participating faculty and master students collected data via interviews, online surveys, and analysed secondary material like white papers, web sites, and internal company documentation. A number of online surveys have been conducted that measured the perceptions of 2,640 knowledge workers had about their work dimensions.

In 2010 new students, faculty and sponsors will join the project. More information can be found at: www.newworldsofwork.nl

