

HRC Recruitment

White Paper: Agile Working

“Agile working is a way of working in which an organisation empowers its people to work where, when and how they choose – with maximum flexibility and minimum constraints – to optimise their performance and to do their best work”.

- The British Computer Society

When organisations discuss the opportunity to commit to “agile working”, no doubt the idea of flexitime, hot desking or working from home is what instinctively comes to mind. However, agile working is actually the ability to work in various locations to complete the tasks necessary to your job on any given day. This may be in an office at a desk with your team, in your company breakout area, in a library, in a coffee shop or at home.

For several years, the notions of agile working and flexible working have been confused by employers. The UK Government define it as “Flexible working is a way of working that suits an employee’s needs, e.g. having flexible start and finish times, or working from home.” Agile working, however, lends itself to the notion that work is an activity, not a defined place, and therefore can take place in any given location.

Agile working can encompass any of the following:

- Working from home
- Working from a location that is neither home nor the office (e.g. a café)
- Compressed or reduced hours
- Part-time roles or job shares
- Other flexible alternatives

It is, if you like, a multi-dimensional way of working. It’s less about being hunched over a desk to all hours and more about open-plan offices, collaborative efforts and freedom to choose your daily workload.

Working practices are becoming much more fluid, with particular regard to the new generation of Millennial workers who are keen to shed both their desks and the traditional 9 – 5. More established workers may just feel that they are at their “peak” before 9am or after 6pm.

Alongside “Prosecco Fridays” and office pets, many start-ups (and some more established businesses, too) advertise their agile working policies when recruiting for new staff. It is something that is seen to have a big appeal with job candidates – be they passive or active. Lloyds Banking Group, for example, have their agile working policy listed on their careers website and state that over one third of their employees work in this way.

It marks a significant cultural change as to what employees expect from a company and how businesses choose to operate. Basic technology, such as Skype, email and laptops allows for this to happen. In theory, your employees should be able to work anywhere, at any time.

Recently, at the Recruitment Leaders Conference in Birmingham, John Vaughan of Finlay James spoke about their processes and thoughts behind implementing an internal agile working policy. His belief was that it would lead to a business where the employees had no “Sunday night fear” and that those who are first to their desk and last to leave it are not necessarily the most successful. In fact, he stated that sitting in the office all day could, potentially, lead to poorer decision making.

He asserted that his desire for an agile working strategy stemmed from a “Happiness Index” that he conducted amongst his employees, wherein he asked questions about targets, work / life balance and the technology they were provided with. Most of the scores (out of 10) sat somewhere around the middle. Happiness levels, he went on to explain, have a huge impact not only on your own productivity, but that of your colleagues. If a negative mindset creeps in, it can poison an entire team.

Therefore, he chose to implement an agile working scheme throughout the office. There were just a few caveats to the programme;

- You had to have passed your six months’ probation in order to be eligible
- You had to be in the office on a Monday (as that is when most of the team meetings were held)
- If your targets or overall performance slipped, you had to be back in the office more regularly

Other than these three key rules, Vaughan stressed, the Finlay James employees were in complete control of their own destiny throughout their working week. It was simply up to each employee to decide when they would need to be in the office. He invested in the relevant technology to enable his employees to speak to clients and candidates outwith the office and told those who were eligible to begin setting their own schedules.

This required a huge behavioural change, not only from the recruiters, but from those in charge. It would take some time to get used to a once busy office being relatively quiet. That being said, no one who wasn’t present in the office was uncontactable – everyone was able to keep in touch with everyone else, should it be necessary.

For those who were in the office, agile working opened up new avenues of communication and collaboration. They were able to hot desk and sit with colleagues from different teams. In doing so, it allowed them to share ideas; see things from a fresh perspective; further their business development and pass on leads. It broke down the barriers of seeing colleagues as being in a different area of the business and encouraged recruiters to work together.

Vaughan really sold the idea of agile working with two key points. The first being, that the quality of work and the levels of productivity within the business significantly improved. Thirty five per cent more recruiters hit their monthly targets and productivity was up by sixty five per cent (presumably measured against KPIs). The reason behind this, Vaughan went on to explain, was the power of choice.

Picture the scene: It’s 11am and you don’t have too many leads for the month ahead. So, in order to ensure you’re not sitting at your desk doing nothing, you start chatting to any clients or candidates who will pass the time with you. That’s not good business development or a productive use of time. Vaughan’s “agile employees” – because they were choosing when to work – were having better conversations that were converting into sales. They were choosing to do the work that would add the greatest value to the business because they were trusted to run their own desk; there was no pressure to fill a day with BD calls or marketing emails.

The second point he made was a huge improvement within the company’s internal “Happiness Index”. Scores of 5s and 6s were now 8s and 9s because employees had a much greater work / life

balance. A bad commute into the office wasn't putting them in a mood for the day; if they had a doctor's appointment, they didn't have to worry about making up the time. There was a distinct drop in presenteeism as, Vaughan stated, the managers didn't care when you were in the office as long as the work was being done.

So far, Vaughan believes the trial has been a big success. No one has had their privileges revoked and it is giving new recruiters an even greater incentive to pass their probation. His trial period would seem to indicate that agile working capabilities equals happier staff and more targets hit. Would there be similar implications if other businesses tried to replicate this model of working?

Agile working is a change in operational planning, as well as an exciting addition to your Employee Value Proposition. Businesses would have to educate their leaders in the first place to ensure that any form of non-traditional working processes take into account the needs of each individual as well as the needs of the business. It may also take further training to encourage leaders to adopt new attitudes when it comes to working outwith the confines of (a) the desk and (b) core business hours.

As Advanced Workspace states: "Along with the agile workplace strategy come new more sociable and intelligent behaviours. These new behaviours will get people comfortable with consuming space as they need it. It is important to embed a culture that encourages employees to use the new flexibility in the office to build new relationships."

There is no "one size fits all" approach to agile working, as every employee will have different needs, preferences and working methods. This style of working means the removal of traditional 'success' measures such as time keeping and attending and focuses purely on outcome and results. Many companies – from Finlay James to large multi-nationals – have taken the approach that they don't care where the work is done, as long as goals are met and projects are completed.

The Agile Organisation states on its website: "The goal of agile working is to create more responsive, efficient and effective organisations based on more balanced, motivated, innovative and productive teams and individuals – essential ingredients in surviving and thriving in the current economically challenged globalised world."

"Twentieth century methods are no longer sustainable in twenty-first century organisations – as such agile working is no longer a fringe idea but a mainstream concept that no organisation can afford to ignore."

A report by the Economist Intelligence Unit confirms this, revealing that 90% of senior executives across the world believe that agile working is "critical for business success." Agile working, therefore, seems to offer a business a real competitive edge, whilst giving staff the work / life balance that they want. It creates better work and a better balance.

Taking everything into account, agile working strategies are not applicable to all members of staff. For instance, it would be impractical to have a receptionist who worked from home. Should this be taken into account when creating internal policies? Would those who are not eligible to work flexibly be entitled to other perks or benefits?

More than this, what about a manager who is able to work from home but has recently brought a new recruiter into their team? Shouldn't they be present to manage their new team member?

Would their agile working policy be revoked until they are confident their direct reports are able to work independently?

These are all issues that are specific to the business in question. As previously stated, there is no catch all agile working solution as there are so many ways in which it can impact upon your business. Whilst Vaughan was able to state a positive business case, this may not be how other employers have found the process. For many, it can throw up more questions and problems than the solutions it offers. For others, it simply isn't possible, particularly if they offer support during core business hours.

Although some companies may see it as an opportunity to downsize – there is no need for office space to accommodate 75 employees if, on any given day, 50 of those people will be working outwith the office – there are other costs to take into account. For instance, the additional expenditure on phones and laptops as companies must provide their employees with the appropriate technology and – in some cases, office furniture – in order to do their job fully and properly outside of the office. You may also need to consider establishing “social hubs” or space for eating a meal should an employee decide to host a meeting or come in to meet colleagues for lunch in the midst of a working day.

Agile working has clearly had a successful outcome in the case of Finlay James, but there are serious implications that each business would have to weigh up to gauge whether or not such a process would be beneficial for their daily operations. The concept of working anywhere, any time may well seem appealing to employees – current and prospective – but it is a policy that could end up being abused.

Of course, it is important to offer your employees a sustainable work / life balance but there are many options that you can consider (some of which fall into the flexible working bracket) before declaring that no one has to be in the office any more.

Not only are there financial implications – both positive and negative – associated with agile working, there is also the issue of behavioural changes. A business would need a strong leadership team in place in order to roll out such a policy, and would also require those in senior roles to fully understand that agile working “attitude”.

Agile working is a stark move away from the traditional 9 to 5 desk bound job that it probably won't work for every business that attempts to implement it. Whilst John Vaughan laid out an extremely positive case study with Finlay James, it is a huge organisational shift that requires a lot of thought and debate before implementation.