

Monmouthshire County Council embraces agile working

Monmouthshire County Council believes that ‘work is something you do, not somewhere you go’. The council encourages staff to work whenever and wherever is best for them to get the job done, and its two new office buildings have just one desk for every two employees. This ‘agile working’ philosophy has helped generate cost savings of around £1 million a year and has provided the basis for creating a truly ‘agile workforce’.

In the course of the last three years, Monmouthshire County Council has come to fully embrace the concept of ‘agile working’ – the idea that people can work whenever and wherever they wish as long as service outcomes are met. This is neatly summed up in the new ethos at the council: ‘Work is something you do, not somewhere you go’.

In line with this new way of thinking, the council’s two new main office buildings in Magor and Usk each have a ratio of just one desk to every two employees, and staff are fully enabled to work remotely: whether at home, in the community, in coffee shops, in the local leisure centre or on the road. The move has helped to generate cost savings of around £1 million a year. But more importantly, it has contributed to a complete change of culture throughout the council – and it is now looking to build on this to develop a truly ‘agile workforce’.

Introducing agile working

The council’s transition to agile working started out as a solution to a property issue. ‘For many years the council was based in a 1970s office block – we shared it with another local authority and it wasn’t actually within the county of Monmouthshire,’ says Sian Hayward, Programme Manager and Interim HR Lead. ‘Then, around six years ago, the building was diagnosed with “concrete cancer” and we were faced with two choices: to repair the building or to relocate.’

The cost of repairing the old building was estimated at £30 million, while the cost of building a ‘like-for-like’ replacement – with the same floor space and capacity as the council had previously enjoyed – was put at around £40 million. ‘These kinds of sums were completely out of reach for the council,’ says Hayward, ‘so we had to look for an alternative.’

The council sought salvage in technology and a radically new way of working. ‘We already knew that some of our staff were starting to use laptops to work remotely and that often only around half of our staff were actually in the office at any particular time,’ says Hayward. ‘So we looked at the situation and thought “why are we clinging to the way we have worked for the last 20 to 30 years? We should be looking ahead to how work will look five to ten years from now”. This

meant moving away from a traditional set up with a desk and desktop PC for every employee, to an agile structure where people can work whenever and wherever they want – as long as they produce what’s expected of them.’

By embracing this approach and encouraging employees to work away from the office, the council was able to build two new buildings – in Magor and Usk – but with a much smaller total capacity than at its previous headquarters.

Setting up the new offices

For this agile future to become a reality, however, the council needed to do more than just build new office space. Every employee needed his or her own laptop and every council building had to be fully wi-fi enabled to ensure people could access the network wherever they chose to sit and work.

‘We spent a large chunk of our budget on hardware and infrastructure,’ says Hayward. ‘But we knew that this would make or break the project really. The network had to be able to handle videocalls, for example, and the uploading of large files – otherwise the model simply wouldn’t work. But our systems are future proof now – we won’t need to spend the money again.’

In tandem with increasing its virtual network capacity, the council dramatically reduced its physical office space – the new offices have just half the number of desks in total as the previous set up, leaving a ratio of just one desk to every two employees. The new office at Magor, for example, has 200 desks for its 400 employees, while the office at Usk has 88 desks for its 200 staff.

For this approach to work, of course, nobody is able to have their own desk. Instead, everyone – from the CEO down – is required to ‘hot desk’ whenever they come into the office. People are free to sit wherever

Profile: Monmouthshire County Council

The county of Monmouthshire encompasses the towns of Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow, Monmouth and Usk, plus numerous small villages, and has a population of approximately 91,300. Monmouthshire County Council employs around 4,500 staff.

they wish, on a first come, first served basis, although the council has created zoned areas that are notionally assigned to specific service areas. 'These zones aren't really used though,' says Hayward. 'At first people would say "that's our zone, you can't sit there" – but after a short time people got used to sitting wherever they could get the work done.'

Each building has dedicated 'project areas', where project teams can sit together and collaborate when required. They also have several meeting rooms of various shapes and sizes, from spaces designed to offer a retreat for individual employees in need of some privacy to larger boardroom-style meeting areas. And there are also a number of desks in every building – including the council's four leisure centres – with desktop PCs for people to use if they are ever without their laptop.

Providing the necessary hardware...

Every council employee is issued with the same basic laptop, loaded with the same range of software. Mobile phones are not needed, as the laptop's software enables staff to make phone calls from the machine. 'A few roles do benefit from additional hardware – some of our planning roles, for example, require a smartphone to allow people to take photographs and then e-mail them to get a quick response,' says Hayward. 'But extra equipment is assigned to roles on a job-need basis only – it is never given out as a "perk".'

Employees are free to use their own equipment, such as smart phones and tablet PCs, if they wish. However, they are required to use a security key fob to log in and the ICT team must be given permission to remotely wipe all of the data from the equipment if it is lost or stolen. 'We encourage people to use their work equipment as it has all of the communication and contact functionality, and providing security for personal devices is an additional cost for us,' says Hayward.

...and software

All of the council-provided laptops have Microsoft Office Communicator software installed. This allows staff to make phone calls and video calls, and send instant messages. Most importantly, it provides access to a directory of all council employees that shows at a glance if a colleague is available, away from his or her desk or on a phone call.

'Everyone is listed in the directory and a green light shows next to their name if they are working and can be contacted,' says Hayward. 'You can then just click on their name and choose to call them on the phone, start a video call or send them an instant message.'

Where do people work?

Given the lack of desks at its offices, for the system to work the council relies on its employees to work remotely whenever possible. 'We basically told everyone that they were able to work where they liked as long as the service needs were met. It relies on a great deal of trust: though our managers have 51 per cent of the vote about how people work, as the service always takes priority. In practice, people know that being given the freedom to work differently comes with the responsibility to get the job done effectively. We don't care if someone is working in a cafe, or if they are using social media at 11 o'clock in the morning, as long as they get the job done. That's all we ask,' says Hayward.

But while all council employees are free to choose where they wish to work, each individual does have a base at one of the council's offices. 'No one is based at home,' says Hayward. 'Everyone knows where they can go for professional interaction.'

'And no one has to work from home if they don't want to. We only ever talk about remote working – never homeworking specifically,' she continues. 'We would never force anyone to work from home if they didn't want to – and we have agreed this point with the trade unions.'

And if people do want to work from home, it is up to them to ensure they have the right equipment. 'If someone's Internet connection at home isn't up to scratch, for example, we ask them not to work from home,' says Hayward. 'We won't pay for it to be upgraded – just as we wouldn't pay for someone to buy a car to get into the office.'

Staying in touch

All employees are expected to log in to the Microsoft Office Communicator when they are at 'at work,' so that colleagues can see their availability. They should also update their status when on a call or at lunch and they must open up their Microsoft Outlook calendars for everyone to view – although they can choose to make certain appointments 'private' for information security. 'Your team and manager need to know where you are and how to contact you at all times, so this is very important,' says Hayward. 'Even the CEO's calendar is open for everyone to view.'

Embedding an agile working culture

According to Hayward, the physical relocation to the new offices and the provision of new equipment was relatively straightforward. The real challenge was cultural – getting people to buy in to the new way of working. 'With agile working you don't measure

someone's worth by looking at how long they sit at their desk – you measure them by what they produce,' says Hayward. 'This can be a difficult shift for some people, especially managers.'

The importance of symbols

The transition was helped by the removal of some of the 'symbols' of the previous arrangement. 'Removing half of the desks and all the desktop PCs provided a clear message that the old way of working had gone,' says Hayward. 'We also removed the old "core hours", which required staff to only take their lunch between 12pm and 2pm – which was actually the busiest time in many departments.'

Just as important as getting rid of these old symbols, says Hayward, was providing highly visible support for the new way of working from the very highest levels of the organisation. 'The CEO hot desks, just like everybody else, and you could easily find yourself sitting next to him on any given day,' she says. 'I think this really shows to everyone that we are serious about this – that this is the way we're going to do things now.'

Training for line managers

Hayward also arranged training for line managers to help them understand what the change would mean for them and how they could make it work. 'We helped managers understand the need to measure performance by output and outcomes, rather than by presenteeism, for example,' says Hayward. Training also covered issues such as information management and how best to use electronic communications, including social media.

Keeping it simple

For Hayward, the simplicity of the council's approach has also played a big part in helping to make agile working a success. 'We've found that the less rules we have in place, the better it's worked,' she says. 'We started off with lots of detailed policies and processes – we initially categorised people into different groups, for example, such as "fixed desk worker" and "mobile worker", and we had different rules on what each group could do in terms of flexible working. We required employees to complete application forms too, detailing how and why they wanted to work flexibly. But we soon found that all these rules and procedures caused more problems than they solved.'

'For example, a department might try to formalise who would work from home on a Monday, and who would work in Usk on a Tuesday, and who would work in Magor on a Wednesday – only to find that the person scheduled to work from home on Monday has to attend a meeting at Usk, or the person working at Usk on a

Tuesday has to stay home for a delivery,' she continues. 'It just didn't work. So we did away with them. And instead we just left it to employees and line managers to sort out their own arrangements between themselves.'

'Our only rule is that with any arrangement, service has to take priority. The line manager always has the deciding vote and we trust them to make the right decisions.'

Overcoming difficulties

Following the initial transition period, Hayward says there have been few difficulties in managing the new agile working approach. 'If a line manager or an employee has a problem with their working arrangements, I ask them to come directly to me. Some of our line managers have told us they find it hard not to have everyday face-to-face contact with their reports, for example. Others have perhaps embraced it too much and become too distant from their team,' she says. 'By sitting down with these managers and having a frank conversation, we've been able to work through these problems. So far we haven't had any performance management issues, but if they should arise we would look at reining some of the flexibility in for the individual concerned.'

'One bit of advice I give to managers is to try it out and see how it works. There will inevitably be teething problems with any new arrangement, but when you start seeing this as "the way we do things around here" you begin to relax and see the real benefits.'

'From the employee perspective, we have found some employees who have taken the idea of "working anywhere and anytime" to the extreme and are actually working far too much and for too long,' she continues. 'But we are conscious that we need to keep on top of any perception that employees have to be available at all hours of the day. It's about striking a balance between giving employees the freedom to work how they want to work and controlling the extremes.'

'But generally speaking our managers and staff have negotiated working patterns and routines that work for them and for the council.'

A huge cultural shift

Hayward believes the council has achieved a huge cultural shift over the relatively short course of the project. 'There has been a definite change in the way we think about work here at the council,' she says. 'I'd liken it to the ban on smoking in the workplace. If someone lit up a cigarette in your office these days you'd be shocked. But I think seeing someone sitting at their desk every day from 9 to 5, and only being allowed to take their lunch between 12 and 2, is almost

as bizarre. I almost can't believe we ever worked like that – what were we thinking?

'For our staff it was a slow shift at first – initially a lot of people were reluctant to let go of their desks and pedestals. But when they saw others using their laptops to work from home or starting work earlier in the day so they could go shopping in the afternoon, it actually snowballed quite quickly,' says Hayward.

She puts the success of the project down to the total trust the council has placed in its managers and employees and the responsibility that they in turn have shown in managing their working arrangements. 'We also had 100 per cent support for the business case from senior management – we couldn't have done it without that,' she says.

Cost savings

The introduction of agile working was initially prompted by the need to move to smaller, less costly premises – and the council's move from its previous headquarters to its new office buildings in Usk and Magor has generated big cost savings. 'Our old building cost around £1 million a year in heating, lighting and general maintenance,' says Hayward. 'The new building at Usk has a bio mass boiler for heating which is extremely cheap, and also a third of the electricity is generated from solar panels and upkeep at the building is expected to run at around £40,000 per annum, while Magor should cost around £60,000 a year. And having fewer people in the building has led to a big drop in printing and photocopying, so we've made quite substantial savings on the cost of paper and toner too.'

Better service

Hayward is in no doubt that the new working model has helped to improve the level of service the council provides to the people of the county. 'It has allowed our staff to go out and work in the community – to work both when and where they are most needed,' she says. It has also helped the council to overcome potential disruptions to its services, such as might have been

caused by the heavy snowfall over the last couple of winters. 'The snow had absolutely minimal impact on us,' she says. 'A handful of field workers were affected, but everyone else was fine – they could just log on to the council's systems remotely and work as normal.'

Improved employee satisfaction

While Hayward admits that there was some resistance to the move to agile working, she believes most staff are now very happy with the new arrangements. 'Some people found the new arrangements weren't for them and they moved on, while others grudgingly accepted the new set up and found a way to make it work. Any way of working has its down sides, but I would say now that the majority of people are really happy with the new way of working,' she says. 'To be honest, I think the change has been so gradual that I'm not sure we all really appreciate just how much things have changed and how far we have come in just three years.'

Looking to the future

Following the success of agile working, the council's next step is to build on the concept to build an 'agile workforce'. 'We want to create a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, where our employees aren't tied to slavish job descriptions but can work wherever they are able to make a contribution,' explains Hayward. 'We want to tap into people's skills and aspirations to enable them to contribute in different areas. At a basic level, for example, instead of someone just performing admin work for one particular department, they should be able to float between them all and help out wherever needed. At a more advanced level, we want people to work outside their designated role – to be able to talk to anyone in the organisation and see how they can contribute to ongoing projects, or even to develop ideas of their own.'

'We've removed the physical and hierarchical boundaries to make this possible, through agile working. But we now need a way to be able to spot talent and move it quickly around the organisation to where it is needed. That's the next challenge.'