

LET THEM GO

Do your employees need to be deskbound?

The technology is in place to make the virtual workforce a reality, but companies stubbornly resist the change, despite sound bottom-line reasons to embrace it.

BY KIMBERLY GUEST

THE ADVENT OF the Internet and the global economy have had a considerable impact on the way in which individuals, businesses and governments conduct their affairs.

While the last decade has brought considerable opportunities to all it has also required significant changes to operations. By and large businesses have embraced the requirements, yet when it comes the workforce, management has stubbornly stuck to the theory seeing [them working] is believing [they're working].

Accordingly, many businesses have yet to realise the full benefit of a mobile or virtual workforce. Nevertheless, increasing time and financial constraints on the individual are going to transfer to the business, and those companies who are able to empower their employees to work more flexibly will be those who are able to attract and retain staff.

BOOM TIMES OF AHEAD

Despite, A shaky rand, interest rate increases and reserve decreases, SA's impressive economic growth shows on sign of slowing. This should be good news for business and society. Yet the country's infrastructure had been unable to keep up with growth and demand.

The transport system provides a good example. Few roads have been added to the network, despite the fact that according to the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa (Naamsa) 56 952 new vehicle were sold in June 2006 alone. Those new vehicles are clogging up the roads, making the commute to and from work that much longer.

A side effect of this is the delivery and collection of the children to schools and day care facilities, says Jill Hamlyn MD of The People Business: "Congestion on the roads is placing considerable pressure to parents as it now takes them longer to get to and from work. While the opening and the closing time of those facilities have not changed. Parents have no choice but to arrive at work later and leave earlier to meet their responsibilities.

There is also more work to be done fewer people following business management trends to restructure organisations, improve efficiency and streamline operations. While 'right'-sizing may have been a relatively rapid process,

the same is unlikely to be true of work force expansion to meet business growth.

SHAKE THE SHACKLES

There is another way to deal with the increasing pressures on the workforce to free up employees to work from anywhere, anytime. Of course, most businesses have already freed their sales and customer service divisions to some extent, but the concept of the virtual workforce looks to empowering a far larger proportion of the staff complement.

Interestingly, Tertia Smith, senior telecoms analyst at research house BMIT, says research done in November 2005 showed that many people were already taking work home.

"In a user survey we did in the high-end residential sector we found that 43% of all respondents worked for any office away from home, but brought work home to do," she reveals.

This insight show that enabling employees to work remotely not only benefits the employee but delivers significant rewards for the business, too. Further-more, companies that have looked to virtualising their workforce report considerable cost savings.

INTO THE BLUE

One example is IBM. In 1993 the organisation sought a solution to its dismal performance over the preceding years. Big blue recognised that complexity was at the root of many of its problems. It streamlined its core business processes and drove these across the company through a common Web infrastructure and integrated global processes. A change to its culture was also required in order to move away from the historically "siloed" units to an integrated company. And, importantly, a central voice was developed for IBM to reach its people. The Intranet site, dubbed w3, soon became an essential tool in getting IBMers to think and act with one voice, as one team.

According to IBM SA country GM Mark Harris, w3 has evolved from an outward bound communication tool to a platform where real work gets done in IBM, what it calls an 'On Demand Workplace'. In SA, w3 gives employees immediate access to all business applications, suppliers, customers, partners, company information, other users as well as personal requirements. Because w3 is



Jill Hamlyn, The People Business Group

available from anywhere in the world with an Internet connection, IBMers are able to fulfil the job requirements at any time, faster and more effectively.

This means that IBM no longer needs to have its workforce tied to a desk and the decision by almost half of the 315 000 strong workforce to become mobile either working in field or from home has resulted in employees claiming to 'get back' 29 million hours through reduced commuting time, while the company been has been able to slice 51% off of its real estate expenditure.

"56952 new vehicles were sold in June 2006 alone." - NAAMSA

In fact, IBM's savings have been considerable. In 2003, w3 was said to have provided the company with direct savings of \$683 million (R4.7 billion) and indirect savings of \$1.3 billion (R9.1million), with the total an astounding \$2 billion (R14 billion). Ongoing annual savings were pegged to be in the \$680million mark. And IBM isn't the only company cashing in. Gartner reports that Sun Microsystems saved \$300 million during the past three years from its iWork programme. Cisco Systems' distributed work strategy reported a return on investment of 300% from real estate savings and reduced employee turnover and the county of Los Angeles reduced employee turnover by 25% for its telework population.

ON THE UP AND OUT

Of course, IBM was not the first organisation to look at ways in which to free its workforce. Dr Martin Cooper, who invented the cellphone in 1973 while working for Motorola, knew that people needed the freedom that comes from anywhere, anytime telephony, in contrast to being tethered to a desk or a car. Although it would be many years before the cellphone gained its widespread popularity, today it is often the first port of call for workforce mobility.

Bob Brace, Nokia's VP of enterprise solutions, was in SA earlier this year to show how far the cellphone had come and where it was going. A new range of mobiles developed specifically to meet business requirements are due to be released shortly. These will not only provide essential business applications like e-mail and Internet browsing on the run. Instead, these devices are able to access corporate applications and data, receive remote IT management and support, swap calls to voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) when the network becomes available, support session initiated protocol-based rich call services, and effective management of security settings. And looking forward, Brace said that he expected voice over wireless LAN functionality to be available in 18 months.

GO BIG, GO HOME

Despite greater functionality built into the cellphone, most knowledge workers will still need the back-up of desktop or laptop computer for more information intensive work. And with the growth in connectivity options from ADSL and wireless to HSDPA and 3G, companies will now be able to empower their employees with access to business applications and corporate data.

Citrix Systems SA country manager Chris Norton agrees: "The Technology to support a mobile workforce is extremely mature. The only thing that is needed is same form of connectivity. Quite frankly, if you have the connection you can work at home the same way you work at the office".

Historically remote access to the business was achieved by dialing into the specific server. Today however, is a different story and there are various ways of enabling access to business applications and data. The most common methods make use of client server application, where an application to the employee's computer speaks to the business' server; Web applications are accessible through portals, intranets and the Internet, or application streaming, which enables work to be even if systems are offline. The choice of solution will depend largely on devices being used, the communication channels available and which application will be required.

Regardless of the method used, Norton says that focus must be placed on delivering the best possible access experience for users, administrators and management.

Each type of user wants a different type of user experience. A general employee wants to access whatever is required to fulfil their job requirements with the systems completely invisible. The administrator, on the other hand, wants complete visibility of the systems so that he or she can identify and address any problems that may be occurring. And the management wants transparency

,with IT enabling the business rather than providing an obstacle," he explains.

STAY SAFE

It comes as no surprise that Gartner's Telework Maturity Model notes that management technology-centred concerns mostly revolve around security, safety and the cost of acquiring and maintaining remote access and mobile technology. Even in secure, locked down networking environment, management has a heightened awareness of security risks.

Nevertheless, Simon Perry, CA's VP of security strategy for Europe, Middle East and Africa, says security technologies and best practices do exist to enable remote access to be conducted securely. However he does warn that many companies still operate under inaccurate perceptions of security measures.

"The question I always ask companies is whether they feel that back end systems are adequately secure. If they're relying on 'security through obscurity' or assuming that an application is safe because it is currently disconnected from the outside world, then they're going to have problems," he explains.

When you look at security for external access projects you have to break it down into two areas. Firstly, you have to ensure that everything is secure to begin with, and in this don't assume that a firewall does anything for you. Secondly, you have to focus on secure remote authentication and authorisation technologies."

Having laid the 'secure' foundation for remote access, companies must still look to maintain the security measures inline with that come with remote access. This means that identity measures like user Id and password policies need to be strengthened and newer options like biometrics considered. The way the employee is connecting to the network wired or wireless may also be used to determine access levels.

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Perry adds that tight controls will need to be established regarding data migration and movement, especially moving critical data onto mobile devices: "At present the industry's security models are generally user-centric. It checks the user and grants or denies access accordingly. However, data-centric models are required as well, where the security controls look at the data itself, regardless of the platform it currently resides on."

And then there is the device. From cellphones to desktops, all devices must be self-securing and, as Perry puts it, "anti-everything" anti virus, antispayware, anti-spam and have a firewall. Disk encryption should also be a consideration for companies dealing with highly sensitive data. Of course the like hood of your workforce conscientiously ensuring that all security measures are up to date is slim. So the ability of the IT department to remotely diagnose

and patch a machine is vital.

ROADBLOCK AHEAD

Ultimately, no amount of technology will make a virtual workforce successful unless managers are willing to change their style.

'The fishbowl principle' where employees can be seen to be working at their desk will no longer apply and management will need to apply different rules to how their employees are managed.

IBM SA's country GM Mark Harris agrees that this shift is not easily achieved. "As a manager it was often difficult for me to let go of the visual control of employees but as time went by the results spoke for themselves," he says.

Of course, it is the results that matter and Hamlyn points out that employees should be guided by outcomes rather than strict adherence to office hours. "A good leader knows how to bring the best out in their people and quite simply a mobile or virtual workforce requires a good project sense. Outputs must be defined and the stakeholders made accountable for the results and measured on those," she says.

NOT ALL ARE VIRTUAL

At IBM, mobility is increasingly an option chosen by employees, but Harris warns that it is not an option that suits all personality types or work functions. This is something that will need to be seriously considered in conjunction with department.

In its Telework Maturity Model, Garner recommends that companies start by identifying employees who are already adopting a mobile work style as well as workgroups and job functions such as sales and service teams that lend themselves to a virtual workplace to participate in a pilot project. This will provide senior and middle management with issues that need to be considered before extending the roll out within the company, while those employees within the pilot team can decide whether that type of working environment is suited to them.

COMING, READY OR NOT

Ultimately, it will not be technology that drives workforce mobility, it will be the people. External pressures on the workforce, both financial and environment are unlikely to subside and employees will either strengthen the business to become more flexible or move to a company that will. 'Bending' the corporate rules will not provide the answer to this dilemma. Instates it will set a precedent, which could land the company in the labour courts.

The iGeneration will also be a driver for mobile adoption. Born into a world already enabled by the Internet, the iGeneration will be keen to use their tech-savvy skills to do their work differently and could become frustrated by the restrictions of the traditional office.

The question is will your company be an adopter or a scrambler? With planning, a virtualised workforce could save money and improve performance. Leaving it too late will probably cost you money and relieve you of your star performers.