> **SOME FLOURISH BOUNCING IDEAS ROUND THE WATER COOLER AND ENGAGING WITH COLLEAGUES. WITH REMOTE WORKING, EMPLOYEES MUST TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR OWN PRODUCTIVITY**

A good work/life balance is a vital element in recruitment. Flexible hours are increasingly a prerequisite for jobhunters in a job spec, as is the option to work from home – wherever that may be.

By taking the costly and time-consuming daily commute out of the equation, Sheldon explains, employees can give their company a few extra hours by working from home. At the same time, they are able to see more of their family, so it can be a beneficial arrangement for both sides.

But there are disadvantages to remote working too. True, there may be reduced head office costs, but there is also the requirement for significant investment in communications and technology.

As Davison explains, it can also make staff progression and career development harder as it can be challenging to move people into management roles if they don't have a fixed base. The team dynamic can take longer to form, too, as bonding and relationships are slower to develop.

From a corporate perspective, he adds, it's harder to instil a set culture or corporate values. There are also practicalities around information and cyber security.

"If you want your business to be able to work in multiple locations, ideally you set up this landscape at the start," Davison says. "It's much easier than introducing it later. It's hard to create multi-location teams in an existing business that's never done it before as all of the processes, procedures and tech may not be suited to operations that span multiple locations."

THE HUMAN TOUCH

There's also a danger that remote workers can feel isolated and under pressure in a different way to their nine-to-five peers.

As Parrott points out, remote working is not for everyone. "Some people need human interaction, and the accountability that follows. Some flourish in the ability to bounce ideas around the water cooler and engage with their colleagues. With remote working, employees must take charge of their own productivity.

"In turn, their employer needs to set meaningful and realistic key performance indicators (KPIs) that are tailored to them, and trust they will be getting the job done. Employees are accountable for achieving those KPIs, which takes self-discipline, and is not everyone's cup of tea."

Sheldon agrees that performance and personnel management are potential problems. "If an employee is not performing well, traditional management techniques fall down. Performance management is not just about getting rid of people, it's about support and training."

He adds: "Remote working from globally spread offices can be quite isolating, especially with small teams. Human interaction is important.

"The companies that implement remote working best are those that get the mix right – using video conferencing to ensure people feel part of a team and ensuring employees come together periodically."

With this in mind, Appleby organises a staff event in London each year where all team members from offices across the world attend. The event has a business angle, but it also gives representatives from within the company a chance to meet and share ideas.

Meaningful interaction and engagement are crucial. The long-term success of global working largely hinges on an effective remote manager providing sufficient support to their team and giving them the right tools and space to do their job. The managers must be effective communicators and sensitive to cultural differences, and ensure everyone knows what's expected of them and when. They should be available whenever needed and make time for face-to-face meetings where possible.

But there are limitations. From an HR viewpoint, it's harder to conduct appraisals because performance is harder to track. As Davison points out, although people who work remotely tend to be self-sufficient (which is a positive), if there's a problem, the HR process can be more complicated.

"I've noticed that if you have a team member who's less constructive than others, if you're all sitting on the same floor the problem tends to resolve itself naturally," Davison observes.

"Remote teams that encounter the same problem don't self-fix or it takes longer. To remedy this, my teams are set up to be collectively responsible. There's an ethic in the team that they either 'all succeed' or 'all fail', so negative behaviour is tackled internally through shared accountability."

There's certainly no shortage of legal questions for employers planning to work remotely. Where do an employee's employment rights exist? How do those rights correlate with an employee's statutory rights in their place of residence? Which rights are more relevant and can you apply global policies to local employees? What health and safety risks arise from remote working? There are also potential issues over managing sickness and absenteeism, or disciplining an absent employee. All of these difficulties can be dealt with, but employers need to be aware of their responsibilities and commitments and plan for them.

As Parrott explains, the contract of employment and having appropriate policies in place is fundamental in not only defining rights and obligations, but in having clear policies for remote and flexible working, personalised KPIs and periodic performance reviews.

"These are critical," she concludes, "in ensuring that expectations are set and managed, and that everyone is working from the same page." ∎

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