

Flexible Working Business Case Is Clear

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<http://www.claremontgi.com>

Link: http://www.freshbusinessstinking.com/business_advice.php?AID=2005&Title=Flexible+Working+Business+Case+Is+Clear

The screenshot shows the homepage of Fresh Business Thinking. At the top left is the logo 'Fresh business thinking.com'. To the right is a dark blue banner with the text 'Get the best for your business now >>' and 'Rollover for Terms and Conditions.' Below this is a green navigation bar with the text 'The online business resource for entrepreneurs'. On the left is a sidebar menu with links: 'Fresh Business Thinking Home', 'News', 'Events', 'Business Advice' (highlighted), 'Forums', 'Documents & Forms', 'Newsletters', 'Video', 'UK Business Search', and 'Sign up for free newsletters'. The main content area has a '< Back to list' link and a grid of category buttons: 'Business Profiles', 'Cashflow Clinic', 'Company Car', 'Finance', 'HR', 'ICT', 'Internat', 'Interviews', 'Legal', 'Sponsored Editorial', 'Management', 'Marketing', and 'Personal Finan'. Below the grid is a 'Business Advice' section with a green arrow icon. The article title 'Flexible Working Business Case Is Clear' is displayed, followed by the author 'By Ann Clarke of Claremont Group Interiors'. The article text begins: 'It's getting on for twenty years since we first started talking about flexible working. Interest in the subject was so intense at its peak in the mid 1990s that we were seriously asked to consider nothing less than the death of the office itself. The world with which we were presented was one in which we could work from home if we wanted as an alternative to soul-sapping commuting, desk-bound grind and vending machine coffee. It hasn't happened...'

It's getting on for twenty years since we first started talking about flexible working. Interest in the subject was so intense at its peak in the mid 1990s that we were seriously asked to consider nothing less than the death of the office itself. The world with which we were presented was one in which we could work from home if we wanted as an alternative to soul-sapping commuting, desk-bound grind and vending machine coffee.

It hasn't happened like that of course, but that doesn't mean it hasn't happened. In fact, a survey carried out by the CBI in September 2008 highlighted just how mainstream flexible working now is. Almost half of the firms and public-sector organisations polled by the CBI said they now offered teleworking to staff, a sharp rise from 14 per cent two years ago and 11 per cent in 2004.

The uptake of flexible working has been encouraged by both the pull of business necessity and the push of legislation which has given an increasing number of employees the right to work flexibly. There has been much agonising of the usual rights

and responsibilities kind about this legislation but the business case for flexible working is pretty clear. It can help organisations to retain employees without disrupting the business and can even make them more productive. It can also help to cut the cost of workplace ownership.

The business case may be clear, but there remains the ongoing problem of how to implement the many variants that we lump together under the banner of new ways of working. What was originally seen as an alternative to the 9-5 routine is now more normally something that people do in addition to their traditional work in their traditional workplaces. The home is not an alternative to the workplace but an annexe to it and unless firms address the issues that inevitably arise, the introduction of flexible working will fail to yield the expected results and may, in some cases, be counter-productive.

To take just one aspect of this, the health and safety issues involved are complex, but all rely on one fundamental principle. This is that workers have the same rights and needs wherever they are. The company has the same obligations to its homeworking employees as it does to its office based staff. Many of these obligations are laid out in the Health and Safety at Work Act and include the need to supply appropriate equipment, carry out risk assessments, offer training and generally provide a safe working environment. Related legislation such as the Display Screen Equipment Regulations is equally applicable as is the Disability Discrimination Act.

What this means is that the idyllic image that has been frequently peddled of a happy homeworker sitting in casual clothing at a sun-dappled kitchen table with their laptop while the kids play with a Labrador at their feet remains a fantasy. (And if you don't believe that this is a common perception, try Googling images of 'telework' and see what you come up with. Research also shows that 15 per cent of teleworkers work naked, which should keep the brakes on teleconferencing somewhat.)

Homeworking is just one aspect of the way that work has changed. Not only has the world been transformed into an enormous office - as anybody who has recently sat on a train or been to Starbuck could tell you - the office itself is no longer what it was just a few short years ago. Gone are the days when people could expect large workstations, L-shaped to cope with a bulky CRT monitor and piles of paper, with space allocations of 14 square metres per person seen as the norm by the British Council for Offices.

An increasing number of offices now resemble clubs or universities, places in which you'll find rows of whatever employees happen to be in at that time sitting at long, bench-type desks, laptops plugged in or working with a flat screen monitor, shoulder to shoulder with their colleagues. This might be a problem except for the way that so many offices have adopted a wide range of spaces through which employees are expected to move depending on what they are doing, campus-style. Here you'll find meeting rooms, conference rooms, break-out space, quiet space, cafes, even leafy glades. The mobility evident in the outside world has been brought indoors. In too has come a more relaxed aesthetic, characterised by natural imagery, brighter colours, softer finishes, warmer textures.

The main driving force for this change has been technology of course. Blackberries, WiFi, laptops, PDAs, 3G mobile phones have made location increasingly irrelevant and firms have been quick to respond by adapting the way they use space. But it is not only technology that is relevant here. Employees increasingly want more say in how and where they work, at home, on the move and in the office. For many organisations, clients and suppliers too are demanding a home from home when they are on site, so they can work anywhere. The greatest crime is to be out of touch and our workplaces have become centres for communicating and not just somewhere that signifies the company's existence.

Case Study

Belden

Belden is one of the world's largest designers and manufacturers of high-speed electronic cables, connectivity products and related items for the specialty electronics and data networking markets. Belden has over 5,000 employees worldwide. The UK arm of the business recently located to new offices in Manchester and took the opportunity to look at several key areas of its business.

David Stokes of Belden explains: The growth of the business in North Manchester meant we had to find a solution that meant people were able to work together rather than in clusters in a variety of offices. I am head of IT for the UK, so had some experience of facilities management and design issues but we chose to work with Claremont to broaden our expertise in key areas. I am also away travelling a lot of the time so the ability to rely on a project manager on site at all times was very important.

Cabling is our business so we ensured we could show off our own expertise through our new premises. So we've included features like glass floor tiles so people can see the cabling and also open access server rooms. It's a great bit of branding.

In terms of communication we've balanced open plan space with cellular space so people can get the right mix of teamwork and privacy. We'd never had video-conferencing facilities before, but we've already seen a dramatic reduction in the amount of money and time we spend travelling. The installation we have now is fully interactive so we can work in real time on white boards as well as having face to face meetings. Not only does this make it far easier to hold meetings and means we can be flexible in co-ordinating meetings quickly, we've already seen significant reductions in our travel budgets. We've calculated we're saving at least 18 per cent already which is great for the bottom line and also, because of the reduction in journeys, great for the environment.