

The end of the workplace as we know it?

What are the effects of virtual working and globalisation on employee communication and engagement? And how are developments in technology, diversity and greater environmental awareness changing the way we work in the office, on mobile and at home?

At the latest Comma Partners event, 25 senior communications interims gathered to hear Michelle Pattison - Global Agile Workplace Director at Unilever - share her experience of how office working has changed to meet the needs of this truly global business.

“How employees receive communication and interact with their colleagues and employers in companies like Unilever has been changing fast, enabled by the technology we have at our finger tips today. In our traditional ways of working, as with so many businesses, time and attendance were the key measurement of employees. There was no argument about where you worked and when you worked. At Unilever, we have introduced our Agile Working programme which values the performance and output of our people. For us, time and attendance are artificial barriers that can be removed allowing employees to have a far greater say in how they work. It builds our capability around the world, it safeguards business continuity and keeps a far more diverse pool of talent in our business. It’s win-win all round,” Pattison explained.

Across its global business, Unilever is committed to building great places to work and to giving employees much more choice in its ‘anytime, anywhere’ working model. It seems that while technology has enabled this progress, it is not in itself the main driver, as Pattison pointed out:

“Our strategy is to double our growth whilst reducing environmental impact by making our working methods innovative yet sustainable. And that’s where the Agile Working programme comes in: an approach that enables everyone to work with maximum flexibility and with minimum constraints. In short, it’s a total culture change around how work is done.”

Concerns

A number of themes emerged during the evening discussion about how to get buy-in for adopting the new ways of working. It was clear that business leaders need to “walk the talk”. A no travel policy for example, will niggle employees if the senior leaders jet the globe at will. Modern thinking on office space where there is no personal ownership of space can only be effective if management don’t insist on keeping their private offices – it needs to be a very egalitarian approach to getting the work done. It is fairly easy to understand the positives for those who want to juggle family responsibilities with their



job but for many younger workers, the office environment remains an important hub for their social interaction.

“No one is forced to work remotely. We still have many people working in offices. The great thing about being an agile workforce is that when they wish to work differently it’s an option for them. Being an agile workplace is a fantastic attraction and retention tool for us,” Pattison explained.

Another concern was the on-boarding and integration of new staff. It’s easy to see how a flexible working model can be effective with an established team who know each other and already understand the company culture and values. But it is more difficult to immerse new people in the culture, the brand and the values of the organisation if people are not together in offices.

“It is more difficult but it’s not impossible,” argues Wendy Chivers, a senior communications professional working with one of the world’s largest agile workforces, a large technology business. “Making the most of the technologies available and ensuring that there are detailed support systems in place is essential. Communication across a global virtual team requires the use of real-time digital channels. Virtual conferencing, virtual learning and development programmes and web-based annual reviews are just part of the communications mix used on a regular basis.”

Engagement

Richard Davies, who at eBay pioneered the use of video-conference facilities for employee events with the award winning European Team Brief commented, "Virtual events can be a great engagement tool. It works really well if you can bring staff together locally, so there's an element of face-to-face engagement built into the programme. Making the event truly interactive and engaging needs a lot of planning. Ideally, you want a team of local hosts - people who are confident to speak up and use a microphone - who can help you involve the local audiences."

“Even in times of reduced travel budgets and increased virtual communication, companies need to remember the importance of relationships, particularly in countries like Brazil, where face-to-face is very definitely their preferred cultural and work style,” points out Ellen Hake, a consultant specialising in change communication, cross-cultural business and training. “If people get to know each other in person and develop relationships, they can then use virtual, distance communication methods more effectively.”

Understanding when face-to-face is really necessary and setting clear expectations around how and when one to one, team and corporate communication will happen and through which channel is fundamental. For those at the event, the most important factor was the capability of people managers.



A weak people manager in a traditional workplace will not be any better in an agile one – and quite possibly worse. Focusing on improving the soft skills, teaching them to have the right conversations with employees at the right time is an important part of the internal communications remit now it seems.

Plan for success

While there is broad agreement that cost efficiencies, role capability and productivity levels are the key drivers of change across many of our global businesses, for some organisations it is the rationalising of a real estate portfolio that is the catalyst; for others a reduction in travel costs or an environmental and sustainability agenda help to initiate the change. In all cases, the people outcomes are similar: individuals adopting new patterns of work that fit in with their lives, teams of people working cross-culturally, across geographies and in differing time zones. The communication challenges are significant.

Part of the communication role is to help teams create the visibility around how and when they will communicate with each other and to share their expectations around delivery and accountability. The value of any face-to-face time needs to be maximised to tackle conflict perhaps, to share insight and build important relationships. And in designing virtual communications and events communications professionals need to be creating experiences that people just can't afford to miss out on.

“Don't assume everyone will be pleased about this step to agility,” cautions Carolyn Esser former Global Communications Director of Logica (now owned by CGI). “Line managers need to be up to the job. They must be able to explain clearly why the changes are happening and quite specifically what the implications will be for the teams concerned. They need to think in detail about the logistics of how it will work for their teams - for example, are there specific days where people must be in the office? Can people opt to work at different office locations? What will the company pay for in terms of home infrastructure? How will the team communicate with one another and how frequently? How will individuals be held accountable within their work group?”

Lucy Parker, who is currently studying global business from an anthropological perspective, observes, “Successfully embedding new approaches to working depends on line managers having the right kinds of conversations with their reports to ensure that anxieties and concerns are dealt with. A lot of line managers get limited support in having these conversations. Indeed, the very change in working necessitates a different people management approach from before. Too many companies have reduced the quality or frequency of management training they offer so that the crucial ingredient - those line manager conversations - gets overlooked or goes unsupported and a successful programme roll-out is jeopardised.”



Summing up the hot topics of the evening, Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners, stated, “Interims can be a real asset in businesses which are becoming agile; they have already adapted their own work style and are used to working in changing workplaces. Specifically, their knowledge of different sectors enables them to share learning about getting the best out of communications and in helping line managers to build their confidence in team communications in new environments.”

About Comma Partners

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com.

