



PRODUCTIVE TIME

Blaby District Council's Flexible Working Pilot



Summary

Blaby District Council seeks to operate family friendly policies and encourage the recruitment and retention of staff. Blaby recognised that flexible working could provide an effective contribution to this process.

Following discussions with the East Midlands Centre of Excellence an application was submitted for grant aid funding to formulate a draft home working policy, which could be implemented as a pilot project and evaluated upon completion. This case study highlights the key findings and benefits identified during the pilot project.

Quote

“Home Working has made such a difference to my work / life balance that I would have to think very seriously before accepting another job outside of Blaby District Council.”

Improvement through efficiency

Objectives

- To produce a draft Flexible Working Policy
- To run a Flexible Working Pilot
- To evaluate the findings of the pilot

Project background

Blaby's Performance and Organisational Development team established a small project team to oversee the management of the pilot, develop the technical requirements of the pilot and select volunteers who responded via an internal website advert. Volunteers for the pilot were short listed according to a list of pre-defined criteria before being accepted onto the pilot.

Prior to the pilot commencing, all of the volunteers met with the project team and were asked to keep a diary of their thoughts and difficulties throughout the pilot. Volunteers taking part in the pilot were given access to Microsoft Office Communicator which allowed them to chat informally with colleagues, it was hoped that this would minimise any possibility that employees could feel isolated.

Recruiting pilot volunteers

Surprisingly, there was a lack of interest in the pilot and volunteers were difficult to recruit. Despite this the project team refrained from forcing employees (of all levels) to take part in the pilot, doing so would have negated the potential benefits of the pilot, eliminated volunteers enthusiasm and undermined their personal drive to succeed.

The project team also noted a particular reluctance amongst managers to take part in the pilot. Initial reservations centred on how the scheme would work and resulted in a reluctance to take part in the pilot.

The project team overcame the recruitment problem by extending the timeframe of the pilot, and by effectively running the pilot in two phases. The second phase of the pilot essentially began following positive word of mouth communication by volunteers from the first phase of the pilot.

Therefore, effective communication, engagement and a commitment from the project manager that issues would be dealt with quickly helped to engage line managers who had at first being reluctant to recommend that their employees take part in the pilot.

Review meetings

Regular review meetings were held between the volunteer staff, volunteer line managers and the project team. The review meetings were held to identify and address workflow problems, monitor the risk of volunteer isolation, and ensure the pilot was kept to a manageable scale to ensure that the lessons learned could be extracted on completion.

The project team facilitated open feedback sessions, typically within a group environment, and also held separate feedback / information sessions for line managers.

Enabling home working

The pilot at Blaby highlighted that office processes need to be flexible to meet the demands of home working, and that some office procedures may need to be modified to ensure that efficiencies gained by home working are not lost to inefficiencies achieved trying to meet the demands of the task.

The pilot identified that an authority/department will need effective infrastructures in place. The pilot at Blaby was very successful, and it was agreed that home working should be introduced as a permanent policy. However, Blaby does not as yet have a sufficient telephone system in place so as to allow home working to be made available to all employees, thus negating the attractiveness of the home working policy at present.

Benefits achieved

It was anticipated that flexible working would aid the recruitment and retention of employees, free up office accommodation, reduce car parking congestion and benefit the environment. Based on the existing body of research it was also envisaged that that home working would also improve the Work-Life balance for employees of Blaby District Council.

The following benefits were identified on analysis of the results and volunteer feedback from Blaby's pilot project:

- Productivity increased by an estimated average of 11%
- All volunteers participating in the pilot reported an increased quality of life due to a better Work-Life balance
- Volunteers reported lower stress levels due to the removal of a daily commute; and an ability to work without spur of the moment interruptions, although volunteers were still contactable by telephone, e-mail or office communicator
- Environmental savings were delivered by volunteers eliminating the daily commute by motor vehicle

- Reduced office costs will enable the Council to delay potential office expansion and development costs
- Home working volunteers reported that they felt they were offering the customer a better service than when in the office because of the flexibility in their working days
- Service to Blaby's customers did not suffer, customers were still able to contact people by telephone using the same number
- Efficiency gains are steadily accumulated with employees being more productive at home due to less interruption, inefficient ad-hoc meetings or just because they work in an office environment. Gains are measured by either output or objective
- An example of improved service due to home working can be found in the Revenues and Benefits team who have been able to recover a significant amount of overpaid Housing Benefit over the course of the pilot, this has been attributed to the adoption of more flexible working patterns.

Transferability

Effective communication is essential to the success of any project and this was especially true with regards the Flexible Working pilot where, initially, there was considerable reluctance by some managers to allow their staff to take part in the pilot.

It was, upon reflection, a very good idea to run the project as a pilot because the initial volunteers were very focussed and committed to ensuring the success of the project. The pilot commenced with a very informal structure but with a strong support network and effective network of communication.

It was much more manageable to run as a pilot and it became evident that, irrespective of which area a pilot volunteer worked in, the teething problems were the same.

Role of RCE

The East Midlands Centre of Excellence awarded grant-aided funding of £10k to establish a home working policy within Blaby District Council and facilitate the pilot project.

Using the Brent RSe Return on Investment Model, the EMCE and Blaby DC forecast that cashable benefits totalling £268k, non-cashable benefits totalling £988k and a qualitative service improvement of 44% could be delivered over a period of 5 years from commencement of this project.

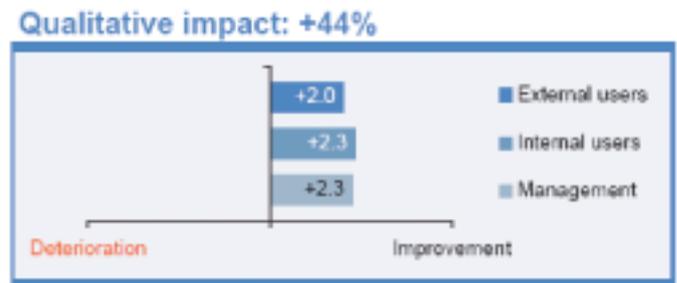


Figure 1 – Analysis of qualitative impact

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