

IT Homeshoring

On the basis that work is something you do and not somewhere you go, we look at how more and more companies are turning to 'IT Homeshoring', says John Bancroft.

We live in a world where anytime, anywhere and any device connection is now possible. Work is literally

anywhere you want it to be and technology definitely makes working from home much easier today. Changing lifestyles, family dynamics, adaptable operational models, improved connectivity and skilled resource too far away from office locations for the daily commute are all playing a part in a more flexible approach to working. Companies, recognising the benefits are already, open to, and in many cases actively encouraging people to work from home.

There are cost savings to be made on office logistics, reduced salaries by accessing resource in rural places, improved productivity with less time wasted in 'informal chats' and a happier workforce. Yet, when it comes to your IT staff working from home – is this practical?

There are a number of things to consider when getting people to work from home. I asked Kirstin Duffield, Managing Director of Morning Data Ltd, who provide enterprise solutions to reinsurance and insurance brokers how easy is it to manage remote IT workers? "Managing remote IT workers has several elements to it. This includes inputs and outputs and whether the person has the natural ability to and is motivated to work from home. Some are; some aren't. There are always distractions, from a knock at the door or the nagging chores. However there are some individuals, who work extremely well remotely," suggests Duffield.

So, having highly motivated individuals working from home is possible, but what other issues need to be overcome? "The on-going issue is that of human interactions and what is going on within the office, snippets of information for





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example not easily picked up remotely," says Duffield.

"We have a stand-up meeting for 10 minutes every morning and run it as a conference call with those that are remote. We also post updates on new activity, and non-development news each day so they don't miss out on the 'coffee time chatter'. We also use instant messenger to communicate and chat to replace the question you might just have at someone's desk, mimicking the behaviour you have around a single location office" she concludes.

Support is one thing with the right technology in place, that could be successfully delivered remotely, but what about IT development – could this be delivered just as well from home? Trish Miles-Crust, senior consultant at Pro-Santé Consulting has managed a remote team who were developing an IT referral solution for GPs and implementing a clinical decision IT system in Hospitals in the UK. "You really have to get to know the individuals well first to successfully manage remote staff. They need to be experienced in all aspects of using electronic files, need to be able to understand instructions, and have detailed instructions of how to complete the work package."

She has also had positive feedback from a client, whilst utilising home-based IT personnel. "We had to analyse data from a clinical utilisation review and prepare a presentation and report back for the customer in a short timescale. We met the timescale and were congratulated on the quality of what was produced," concludes Miles-Crust.

HOW CAN YOU MOTIVATE, TRAIN AND DEVELOP A TEAM DISPERSED IN THEIR HOMES?

A combination of communication methods including the use of IT, helps to keep teams' engaged. "Use webcams; the face to human relationships is very important. Ensure meetings can be held from time to time within easy travelling distance on a day the person can be out and about. Ensure that the employer is seen to be making an effort to value and include the remote worker; no one likes to be left out of the game in the playground," recommends Duffield.

IT consultant Jane Pappa thinks that "organisations have a lot to learn.... Technology is purely the enabler. I feel organisations still think technology will provide employees with everything they need, but it goes further than that – they need to feel part of the business regardless of location and be able to share knowledge, communicate and collaborate easily with the right systems in place to enable this. Hence, I believe organisations need educating in this area."

ECONOMICS OF HOMESHORING

adizio is a technology platform for advertisers and has had a positive experience with IT homeshoring. Ben Shaw, web design business owner and senior web designer at adizio says: "In my experience I've had many clients having paid a lot of money to an offshore team, only to come to me to start the project over. Tech companies and startups are more product delivery driven, than time centric. As long as deadlines are being met and progress is being made, there is less of a concern as to the hours a homeshore development resource is keeping".

The economic situation is undoubtedly having an impact on businesses and has led to all companies looking at how they can better streamline operations to reduce costs. However, sometimes there is no choice and organisations have got to adopt a home-based operation. Paula Graham is director of Fossbox, a women-led social enterprise carrying out drupal-based web software and research on digital culture – focused around collaboration tools.

Fossbox also organise an annual conference and ad hoc skills workshops for women returners and CS students as well as artists, ranging from open source coding to mobile apps and soft-circuits. They've run sessions in partnership with The National Museum of Computing and BCS Women. "Everyone at Fossbox (all women) works at home on a freelance basis. We used to have an office, but the co-op who sublet to us collapsed in 2011, we lost our space, and we decided the overhead of running an office in the current tough climate was an unnecessary drain."

"We use an ad-hoc range of free collaboration tools and also run it locally, but we're in the (slow – we're working around paid work) process of doing codesign research to work out something simple and coherent to support collaborative working from home aimed at non-profits and SEs.

"I'm also about to start a project with QMUL with an emphasis on supporting CS graduates to think entrepreneurially – again, I think homeshoring could be something we'd want to support here. But returners are probably the main 'constituency' which would benefit from this," recommends Graham.

Shaw of adzio suggests that continued economic pressures will ensure that there is likely to be a growing demand for home-based workers in the UK. "The role of 'freelance manager' has become a familiar recruitment term, proving the growing trend. The duty of this full time employee is to manage the homeshored development resources. The demand for offshore IT and development has grown in the past decade, this has allowed 'homeshorers' to be more competitive with rates."

What are the positives and pitfalls of managing

enterprise IT in a home environment and what are the up sides? Well there appear to be a number of benefits to having a home-based capability. Keeping costs down, maximising efficiency, improved employee welfare and also access to experts. At the same time, when disaster strikes there is no other choice, but to work from home. Britain is increasingly seeing more adverse weather conditions that on more than one occasion have brought the country to a standstill. Duffield of Morning Data explains how home capability can help.

"We have three remote workers and all our staff are able to work remotely as an integral part of our Disaster Recovery (DR) plan. Last February when we had a metre of snow we were all able to work from home from first thing in the morning right through each day, with no interruption. The phones were able to be put on divert to a central mobile and we continued largely as if nothing had happened.

"We are also based in Dorset and our client base is in London, thus a remote worker in Kent has obvious advantages for reducing costs in the event client site meetings are required at short notice. However, the majority of their time is spent deep in cerebral thought over complex program development, so no need to normally be in an office. The long term benefits probably centre around the retention of skills, not just women having children, but men too, and also enable the company to be more flexible in the event changes happen, like someone is required nearer home to care for a sick relative, injuries that make commuting difficult or perhaps managing stress in the workplace."

GETTING CONNECTED

Implementing the technology to work from home should be pretty straightforward for IT companies. However, Duffield warns that "there are different issues within a home, the residential nature of the supplier of, say, the broadband connection means if the line is breached by builders it may not be repaired for some time, but with mobile data connections this becomes a little less of an issue, especially as the connection is only for one person."

Trish Miles-Crust, senior consultant, Pro-Santé Consulting agrees, but also says that "Home workers should be provided with good equipment and fast broadband. Dial in support should be available from a help desk when required and regular calls with colleagues set up, including weekly team teleconferences. It is useful to have access to one person back at the



Dana Denis-Smith



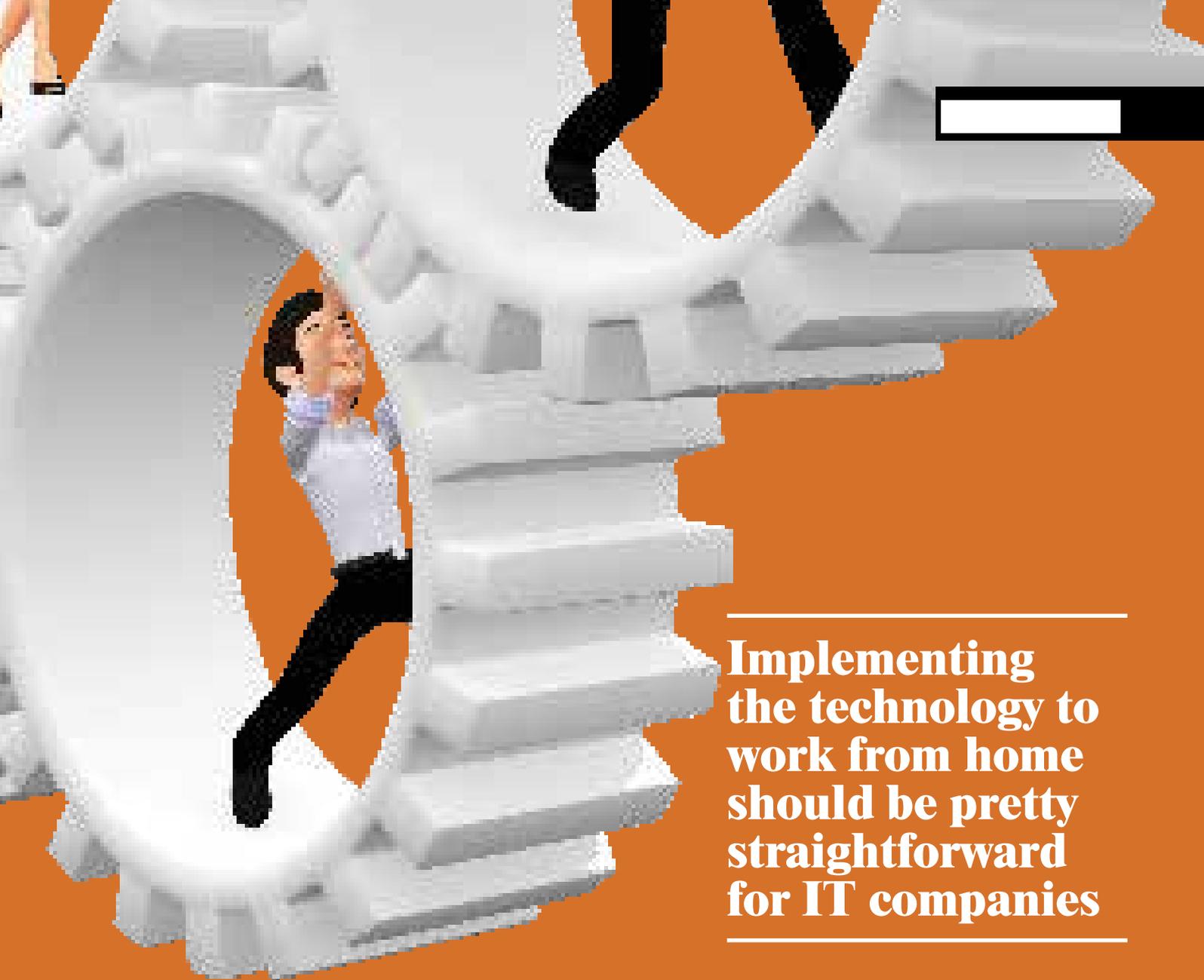
Jane Papa



Kirsten Duffield



Patricia Miles-Crust



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office to coordinate and act as the link between the company and the home workers. They can also ensure that regular communications about social events are shared.”

Security is generally something that people consider to be a risk, but Duffield of Morning Data dismissed this as an issue: “No I don’t believe so. If the infrastructure is set up by the employer, and protocols are adhered to, the same security measures can be deployed as if there was another branch office.”

SO IT MAY BE POSSIBLE, BUT IS IT PROFITABLE?

Working from home is clearly of benefit to the employee, but does the company profit? There are some hard cost savings by having remote workers – from a logistical point of view you don’t have to provide a desk, telephone and other office facilities. Are there any other hidden benefits? Duffield suggests that there are a number of things to consider, “I believe so, with the right individuals and the right infrastructure, good quality VPN and regular interaction, it is possible to save the commuting time, increase morale and the value of the job the person fulfils, and indeed their loyalty to a supportive and practical thinking employer.”

As more and more companies recognise the benefits of flexible working there is a lot of potential to tap into a highly skilled, home-based workforce. FI Group many years ago built a large IT services enterprise that managed to create a

successful model that tapped into predominately women at home to deliver a range of IT services.

Obelisk is a firm of 180 lawyers across two divisions that is successfully using the same model to use home-based legal experts for client assignments, ranging from two weeks to 18 months. Dana Denis-Smith, CEO took her inspiration from the FI Group model, is aware of some of the challenges, but provides some helpful advice. “People management in a remote environment can be quite intense as it requires a strong strategy of engagement. It requires a re-think of management and a more proactive management style, so it has to come with a clear strategy to encourage remote work. I don’t think it affects team building as different methods of engagement with the teams can be employed. Brand building is crucial and getting the team’s to buy into that is needed. Building a team that is effective should be tailored to an organisation to reflect the structure, the business objectives and culture. If those elements are clearly communicated and the management is proactive, my experience is that teams deliver and are capable of developing a culture remotely.

Clearly it is possible to utilise IT resource from home. There are many benefits to IT homeshoring, but maintaining the team element and ensuring people keep engaged are critical for success. Getting it right can save money and lead to a more engaged and happy workforce.