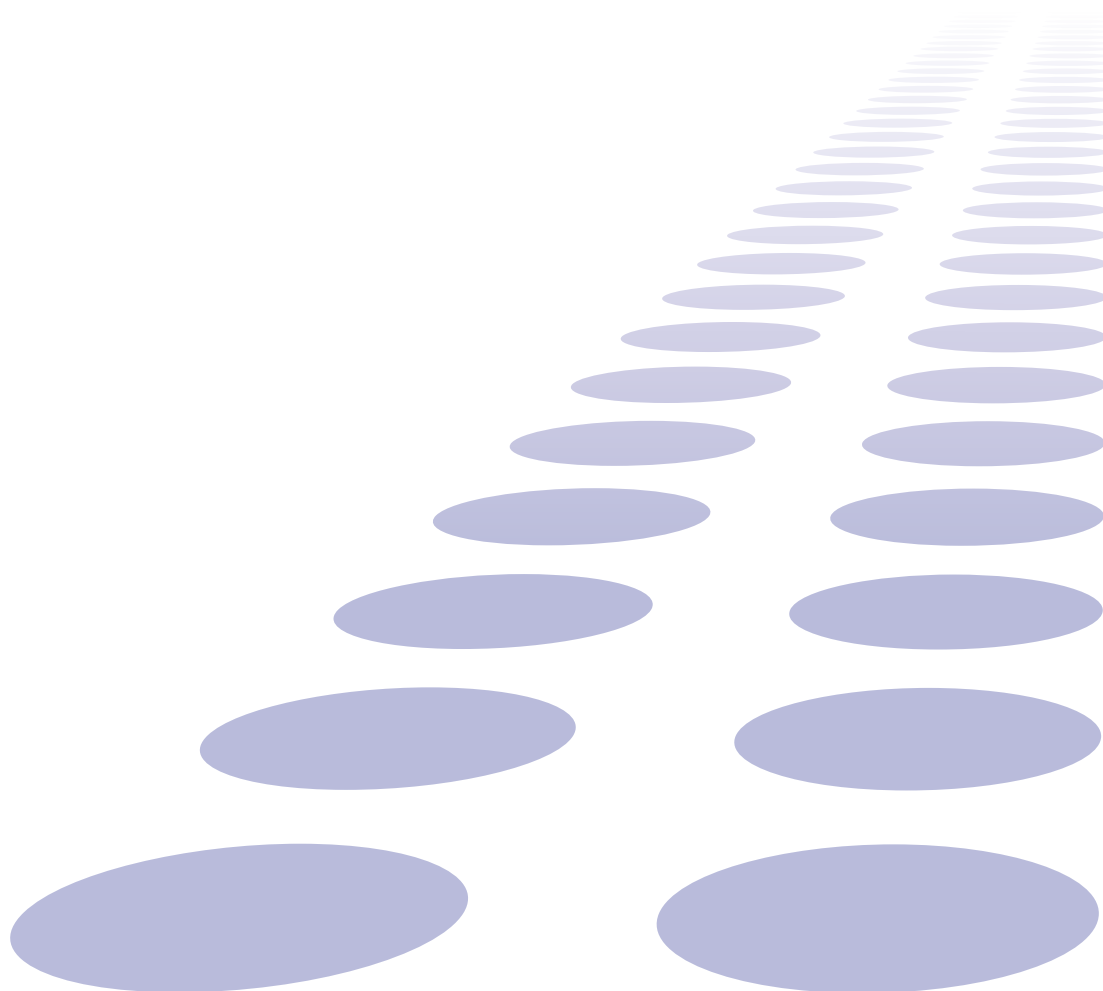


Next Generation working practices need Next Generation Telecoms



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Increased competitive pressures, the advent of better communications technology and the changing scope of many job functions are changing the world of the workplace. There is an increase in the demand for more flexible working practices as employees adapt their working habits to achieve a better work/life balance. Organisations need to embrace these evolving working practices in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, and the necessary adoption of innovative communications technology should be a top priority. In response, the telecoms sector needs to combine advanced network capability with a progressive, collaborative mindset to make the new vision a reality. The combination of this next generation mindset and capability is a concept that ntl:Telewest Business calls Telecoms 2.0.

Telecoms 2.0 has arrived with perfect timing to enable organisations to empower their working practices. Traditional business models have evolved to where employees are no longer tied to one set office location. Instead staff are choosing to work wherever and whenever they need to. The enabler to do so is already here: Next Generation Networks (NGNs) are allowing organisations to work more innovatively. Organisations can deploy mobile and flexible working models to drive both operational performance and employee wellbeing. They can also be confident that they have a resilient network which can deliver data, voice and internet services to employees regardless of their location.

As it becomes increasingly difficult for organisations to differentiate themselves from one another, innovation has become a critical factor for success. Reviewing the way in which organisations communicate should be high on the agenda as communications, and in particular how to get the most out of technology investment to meet specific operational requirements, has become one of the most vital ingredients of that success. There is a shift away from a traditional headquarters and branch office model towards one that is driven by information access and delivers communications to employees wherever they are based. More and more organisations are evaluating the benefits of mobile and flexible working. That can mean working from home, on the move, or from different offices - or all three.

Reality versus misconceptions

Major UK employers such as Lloyds TSB¹, IBM² and GlaxoSmithKline³ have all moved towards a flexible working model, and in general the country's workforce has an increasing desire for more flexible working patterns. However, initial misconceptions that flexible working is 'simply a euphemism for sloth, apathy, staring out of the window and random surfing of the Internet'⁴ has prevailed, meaning managers can be faced with difficult choices when evaluating the merits of flexible working. The fear of decreased productivity remains, but advanced network capabilities and converged applications are now readily available to address many of these concerns, providing the technology is appropriately applied.

Organisations are also asking questions around operational implementation:

- **IT implications:** How does technology enable effective flexible working and fit in with current infrastructures? How can remote IT support be managed, and what is the return on investment?
- **Security:** The security of data remains a hot topic and the past couple of years saw some of the most high profile data losses to date in the UK. How can organisations be sure that a flexible working policy won't increase the vulnerability of their data and leave them exposed?
- **Teamwork:** The success of a team depends on its ability to work as a collaborative unit. Will it continue to be effective if personnel aren't all based in the same building?

The benefits are, however, becoming clearer as those organisations that have embarked upon flexible working policies start to share their knowledge and experience. In fact, rather than declining productivity, businesses are seeing employee effectiveness grow following the adoption of flexible working, as so called 'dead-time' between offsite meetings and improved staff morale takes hold.

¹ http://www.lloydstsb.com/about_itsb/equality_and_diversity_page.asp#worklifebalance

² <http://www-05.ibm.com/employment/uk/graduates/life.html>

³ <http://www.gsk.com/careers/work-life-balance.html>

⁴ <http://www.boris-johnson.com/2007/07/26/working-from-home-and-the-transport-system/>

The Business Case

In the past, flexible working policies have been viewed as very much benefitting the employee rather than the employer, yet this isn't always the case. Organisations stand to benefit from a wide range of advantages.

Facilities costs

Managing, renting and maintaining office space is one of the biggest expenses for an organisation. If organisations were able to be more agile regarding where staff work and how they access information, then they would have the potential to significantly reduce operational costs. For example, research by ntl:Telewest Business found that if UK local authorities reduced their building stock by just one per cent they would be able to save £1.1 billion⁵. This is a substantial sum that could be reinvested by an organisation – and, in the case of local authorities, into public services.

Attracting and keeping the right people

Away from the bottom line there are less obvious advantages that a flexible working model can bring. An organisation is only ever as good as the people it employs. Retaining and attracting the best talent has always been, and will continue to be, an important business issue for a number of reasons.

Firstly, recruitment can be a painful and lengthy process. Secondly, it can be exceptionally costly. *The 2006 CIPD Labour Turnover Survey*⁶ found that it cost £8,200 to replace an average employee, rising to £12,000 for senior managers. And thirdly, in recent years competition for the best candidates has become increasingly tough, meaning that distinguishing your organisation from others is challenging and imperative.

Why an employee chooses one workplace over another is often a very personal decision, but there is no doubt that a good work/life balance is an increasingly important consideration. In a 24/7 world, flexible working takes away the burden of coming back from a meeting and thinking you'll have to log on at 7pm to deal with your emails. Instead, you can clear your inbox on the train and when you get home spend some quality time with your family or friends. The value of this benefit may be difficult to measure financially, but it has clear advantages for the employer in increasing employee satisfaction and enhancing workforce motivation.

Happy employees = improved productivity

Staff in the UK reportedly work some of the longest hours in Europe and so striking a good work/life balance has become an increasing priority. Yet demands from both the office and personal life mean that a happy medium is often difficult to obtain. As such, employees are increasingly cutting into their free time in order to complete work tasks when technology could prevent them from having to do so. With flexible working, employees can better juggle their personal responsibilities with their professional lives.

According to a recent RAC report, *The UK Commute: Healthy or Hazardous?*⁷ the UK employee spends on average 54 minutes commuting, with 10 per cent enduring more than two hours to reach their place of work each day. This time could surely be more efficiently spent if they were enabled to work remotely. Employees could avoid the stress associated with a long commute, allowing them more personal time in the mornings and evenings - increasing productivity and alertness levels during working hours. Research conducted by ntl:Telewest Business found that 48 per cent of office workers believed that not having the stress or exertion of commuting would make them feel healthier, benefiting both the employee and the employer.

⁵ http://ntltelewestbusiness.co.uk/news_events/news/2008/end_of_an_era_for_town_halls.aspx

⁶ <http://www.cipd.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/A5316993-E9EB-413D-A673-D1D6A5063DD3/0/recruitretntsurv06.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.racfoundation.org/files/theukcommute.pdf>

Practical solutions in focus

ntl:Telewest Business provides a converged solution. IP Multimedia has the capacity to support a large number of remote and flexible workers. It is a fully managed, network-based service, providing advanced IP voice and video communication as well as comprehensive, secure instant messaging capabilities. Ideal for large or dispersed organisations looking at hot desking and home working, its functionality and flexibility includes voice and video calling, instant messaging and file transfers, audio/video conferencing and shared white boarding. ntl:Telewest Business works with organisations to ensure the most appropriate services within the solution are deployed for each customer and then supported by its vast, Next Generation Network.

In practical terms, the benefits are numerous. Presence indicators enable the organisation to identify which colleagues are online and when to call, thereby reducing 'telephone tag' and unanswered messages. The ability to give everyone a teleconference number means conference calls are easier to arrange and more accessible. Integrating voice solutions to the collaborative working environment means materials and ideas can be better shared during a conversation.

Office costs – taking stock

In the spring of 2008, ntl:Telewest Business conducted a study which indicated that by implementing more flexible working patterns, local authorities in the UK could save £1.1 billion in reduced building running costs alone, as well as improve job satisfaction for their 2.1 million employees.

The study was based on 2007 *Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA)* local authority statistics which show that councils across the country currently own £116.9 billion of buildings⁸ (excluding council houses). Reducing the stock needed by just one per cent would save a total of £1.1 billion. Currently local authorities raise £24 billion annually through Council Tax. This could be topped up if existing stock, often in prime central locations, was sold or redeveloped in conjunction with the private sector.

The ability to realise these savings could be driven by implementing advanced networks that link all council workers. It would also enable them to access the information they need while working from other offices or from home, freeing up valuable space in office buildings which can then be sublet or sold. Flexible working practices can be deployed quickly and easily without incurring the need for a large capital outlay.

Importantly, flexible working could actually improve frontline public services by enabling citizens to reach staff irrespective of their location, ensuring faster responses to queries. In addition, given the urban locations of most council offices, greater home working would cut the environmental impact of staff commuting from suburban areas as well as potentially reducing congestion in towns and cities.

Reinvesting the money saved in further improved public services would consequently ease the increasing pressure on local government finances. The combination of rising costs, 2008 central funding increases of four per cent and a cap on council tax rises mean that the majority of local authorities will need to find efficiencies or new sources of funding if they are to continue to supply services at current levels.

Breaking down the barriers to remote working

The next generation network capabilities and cultural attitudes of Telecoms 2.0 should see providers offering more powerful flexible working solutions by combining advanced NGN capability with a more service-driven mindset.

NGN capabilities are a leap forward from conventional networks in the way they enable remote and flexible working. Previously, individuals had to use fragmented applications and services – data connections of variable speed and quality, juggling mobile and home phone calls, limited file server access and little visibility of where colleagues were or how to get in touch with them. On the other hand, NGN capabilities enable communications tools to converge into one working environment. Given that they carry converged IP services, they enable data, voice and internet traffic to be carried over the same high capacity telecoms service, which means that organisations can better exploit advances in communications technology, by deploying applications tailored to their specific needs.

Coupled with a collaborative customer approach, and adopting a customer centric attitude that is business needs driven, the delivery of business solutions based on flexible working business drivers can be achieved.

⁸ CIPFA Local Authority Assets Statistics at 31st March 2007, published January 2008. SIS Ref.97.07

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