Mind the mobile gap

Examining the rise of mobile working and how, with a few exceptions, business technology is still playing catch-up

A white paper from Pegasus Software

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It's safe to say we're in midst of a mobile working revolution, with a recent survey[1] predicting the total global mobile workforce will rise to 1.87 billion by 2022, a staggering 42.5% of the total workforce. In France, they're so concerned about the rise of the 'work anywhere, at any time' culture that they've brought in legislation[2] regarding the 'right to disconnect', enshrining in law an employee's entitlement not to read emails outside of normal working hours. And, closer to home, figures[3] indicate that the number of people working remotely has increased to almost one-in-seven, which equates to over four million employees (or 13.7% of the workforce), a figure that will surely increase further still following 2014's UK legislation which gave all workers with more than 26 weeks' service the right to request flexible working.

What is mobile working?

Once a privilege given to a chosen few, or to field-based staff, mobile or flexible working is going mainstream and no longer just means the ability to answer emails and calls when out of the office. True mobile working provides employees with the ability to carry out exactly the same processes and procedures when away from the office as when in the office. This, when done correctly, increases efficiencies throughout the business and empowers employees with the ability to work remotely without any compromise to performance.

Why the change in working habits?

The rise in mobile working over the last ten years is no accident. A combination of factors has led to the concept of working more flexibly becoming firmly entrenched in the business world, with a survey[4] of 8,000 employees and employers across ten countries, finding that 75% of companies worldwide have put in place flexible working policies to enable employees to not only vary their hours, but to also use the latest technologies to work away from the office.

The digital revolution has transformed the way we live and work, increasing connectivity on a global scale and giving rise to the 24/7 workplace, where the inevitable consequence of 'going global' is that the business never sleeps. The spread of good wi-fi access, in conjunction with greater 4G coverage, advances in mobile technology and the explosion of cloud computing, has resulted in the ability to do business at any time, from anywhere.

With this 24/7 business environment, there's more pressure than ever for employers to help workers strike the right work-life balance. The ability to be almost as flexible with working arrangements as with personal and social lives can help here, empowering employees while ensuring their health and wellbeing.

At the same time, tech-savvy millennials are entering the workplace. With them comes a new set of expectations regarding instant access to information, services and products, not to mention technology. Constantly connected via multiple apps, devices and networks in their daily lives, they expect the same at work, with forward-thinking employers upping their game in terms of their mobile working offering in response to these expectations, hoping to attract and retain new workers and their accompanying skill-sets.

In a similar vein, new enterprises which have started business in the globally connected digital age know no different. The significant reductions in work accommodation costs that can be the result of an increasingly mobile workforce have meant that some start-ups have been more profitable more quickly because of remote working capabilities. Add to this the falling cost and rising security levels of mobile technology and it's easy to see that, for some start-ups in particular, going mobile has made the most sense from day one.

[1] Strategy Analytics, Global Mobile Workforce Forecast Update 2016-2022
[2] BBC News, 31 December 2016
[3] Office of National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey
[4] Flexible: Friend or Foe, Vodafone

Perhaps the biggest driver of the mobile working concept is the tangible business benefits that it can bring, including administration savings and improved service delivery. The aforementioned global survey[5] of 8,000 participants found that the majority of respondents believed performance had been enhanced as a result of flexible working, with 83% reporting an improvement in productivity, 61% reporting an increase in company profits, and 58% stating that flexible working policies had a positive impact on their organisation's reputation.

Playing catch-up

In light of all these benefits, it's difficult to see why the majority of businesses haven't fully embraced mobile working in its true form. While it's true that the rise of enterprise applications in the last two years in particular has certainly enabled more businesses to increase their mobile working capability, in reality, the business world is still playing catch-up to the increasingly powerful, intuitive and useful consumer mobile apps that are part of our everyday lives.

One of the main barriers to an increase in utilising remote working technology in the workplace is the lack of demand coming from certain organisations. Enterprise solutions are developed to meet particular business needs but, if the business isn't proactively seeking to advance its mobile working capability, there's no need for a solution. For many businesses, traditional organisational cultures and working practices can be the main hurdles to overcome when trying to implement more flexible working processes. The availability of technology itself isn't enough to change working practices; it needs to be supported by organisational acceptance that there is a need to evolve, aligning technology with people and overall business strategy.

Another reason for the lag between enterprise and consumer technology is the disconnect between what end-users expect and want, and what the business actually needs. Employees may want the portable, stylish and functional devices they're so reliant upon in their personal lives, but corporate IT departments need to know that the devices they're supplying to staff are as secure as they are durable. But, if businesses don't do enough to facilitate mobile working they run the risk of fostering an underground

[5] Flexible: Friend or Foe, Vodafone

culture of bring-your-own-device (BYOD) or buy-your-own-apps, leaving the business vulnerable to security breaches.

The real challenge is for businesses to successfully navigate various enterprise ICT solutions that support a range of operating systems, while keeping up with employees' preferences for certain technologies. What's needed are technologies that support both a BYOD environment and a mobile, flexible workforce, while ensuring optimal security.

Rapid development

As organisations are demanding more and more solutions to bring about greater mobile working practices, software developers are responding with the advent of new solutions specifically intended to manage the challenges associated with the growing needs of the mobile workforce, working hard to remove the complexity for businesses. By offering easy-to-manage, integrated services that support multiple devices across fixed and mobile networks, software developers can ensure the world of work keeps pace with the mobile revolution.

Two examples of where technology has already caught up with this huge shift in working habits are in the areas of field sales and payroll.

Payroll

One area where new solutions are doing away with unnecessary complexities is payroll. With the right solution in place, organisations can provide employees with remote access to their payroll-related information such as personal data, pension information, holiday entitlement, payslips and P60s. Not only can employees access this data on the go via a mobile device or web browser, but the capability is there to edit their own information too.

This remote, 'self-service' access for employees takes the pressure off busy payroll teams by eliminating payslip printing and postage and the extra admin involved, as well as the time it takes to respond to employee enquiries. With employees responsible for their own data entry, there's also less margin for error as no re-keying of data is required. What results is a faster, more efficient service provided to all employees, and a payroll team which has to spend less time on admin, leaving them more time to focus on value-add activities.

Sales

A different area of the business that can benefit from mobile solutions is sales. The time lapse that occurs between taking an order while visiting a customer and the actual placement of the order with head office can lead to delays in fulfilment and even cancelled orders if the required items are not in stock. But the capability now exists to place orders instantly via a mobile device while with the customer.

Mobile apps are available with a live link to the back-office order processing system so that sales orders can be placed instantly, including taking the customer's signature, without the usual delays in orders being submitted to HQ. The sales person can check stock levels and the customer's account status, including customer-specific pricing; they can also suggest alternatives for out-of-stock items and showcase additional products. This minimises the possibility of orders being cancelled due to stock unavailability and can add extra value to a sale. Working in this way also reduces admin time for sales people, allowing them to spend more time on the road pursuing further orders. The sales cycle is shortened, with order updates readily available every step of the way, increasing efficiencies for the business and improving the overall experience for the customer too.

Set for take-off

With the business world rapidly realising the many and varied benefits that true mobile working can bring, not only to employee satisfaction and productivity but also to the bottom line, the pressure is on for technology suppliers to provide the much-needed solutions to facilitate the comprehensive changes to working practices that are required. Developers are rapidly creating solutions which meet the complex demands of businesses, meaning that it won't long before the potential business efficiencies to be made by going mobile become par for the course for organisations the world over. The mobile revolution is set to ramp up, meaning enterprise solutions are set to improve further still. Good news for business and great news for profits.

Swiftclean is a leading company in building services hygiene compliance, offering technical advice and services to a range of industry sectors. They are using Pegasus Web Xchange with Payroll Self Service across their UK operations.

With a field-based workforce spread across a number of sectors, payroll administration was a significant overhead for Swiftclean. Printing and postage costs for payslips were high, and weekly calls from employees who hadn't received their payslips through the post were not uncommon.

"The cost savings and service improvement associated with Payroll Self Service meant that the decision to deploy the solution was a no brainer. We calculated savings of over £1200 each year through eliminating printing and postage from the distribution of payslips, and we're also able to provide a faster, more efficient service to our widespread employees."

Sandra Lay, finance manager, Swiftclean