



chapter 13

HRM and high-performance workplaces

HRM in practice: The home office

In 2011, UK government minister, Philip Hammond, suggested that Londoners might consider working at home during the 2012 Olympics to ease congestion in the capital. This gives a political spin to a long-running debate on 'teleworking'. In the popular discourse, employers have claimed that having employees working at home saves on overheads, and that employees also take fewer sick days. Employees see it as giving them more flexibility over their time (often promoted as a way of combining work and domestic care responsibilities), but have also reported problems of loneliness and social isolation and, for women workers, an extension of the 'double shift' of paid work and domestic work.

Home-working is not something new but was previously mainly confined to manual work. The widespread diffusion of networked information technology in the last two decades has, however, opened up IT-based home working to a whole range of white-collar and managerial employees. Confederation of British Industry figures report that the number of employers offering at least some home-working rose from 14 per cent in 2006 to 46 per cent in 2008. In addition, mobile technologies now mean that there is a growing intermediate group of mobile workers who are not tied to an office but are in communication with their organization from a range of locations (BBC News Magazine, 2011).

A useful definition of telework is that it involves 'the decoupling of work activity from one material workplace such as "the office" ... as well as from prescribed working hours, work schedules, scripts and practices' (Tietze, 2002, p. 385). This clearly poses a challenge to traditional models of management control over employees' work (which often rely on being able to see the workers) and the usual person-to-person collaboration that is the basis of most work.

To illustrate the contingent variables that can lie behind the success or failure of teleworking, Taskin and Edwards (2007) looked at two Belgian public sector

organizations that had introduced it. The first was characterized by routinized and hierarchical white-collar work with a management culture emphasizing strict time-keeping and minimizing absenteeism. At the time of the research, the organization had just moved to a new open-plan office building (a structure based on visual supervision). The management had proposed telework as a 'reward' for meeting performance standards, and it was attractive to the employees as a means of removing themselves from a disliked work situation. Despite this, the project was abandoned because only some employees did work that fitted performance measurement and because of the clash with the dominant organizational culture of direct control. The authors concluded that this seems to confirm previous research indicating that 'strong hierarchies militate against telework by generating a lack of trust in employees when away from physical oversight'.

The second organization was also a public sector bureaucracy, but it had successfully introduced telework as a way of improving working conditions and making the work more attractive. Management exercised control through the development of a high-trust culture and the use of electronic communications. Employees, for their part, increased their number of emails and other e-contacts to maintain 'visibility' with management and co-workers. The two cases suggest that culture may be more important than structure in determining the success of teleworking, although the workers in the second organization were also more skilled than those in the first. Telework thus seems most likely to be applied to groups such as knowledge workers and managers rather than employees with little autonomy.

Stop! What do you see as the advantages to a company of its employees working from home? What would be the disadvantages?

Sources and further information: For further information, see Bryant (2000), Taskin and Edwards (2007) and Tietze (2002).

Note: This case was written by Chris Baldry at the University of Stirling.