Agile working – are you a leader or a laggard?

Ellie Rich-Poole, Partner, HR
Eton Bridge Partners
The challenges and benefits of adopting a more agile working environment were under the spotlight when Eton Bridge Partners hosted a business breakfast for senior professionals. Chaired by former FT journalist and co-author of Future Work, Alison Maitland, the event included practical initiatives and valuable first-hand advice from an expert panel, all of whom had successfully persuaded their organisations to adopt agile working in one form or another.

**Introduction**

The panel comprised:

Alison Maitland, Author and Journalist
Clare Dyer, HR Director at BBC Television
Ben Dowd, Business Director at Telefonica O2 UK
Claire Fox, Global HR Director and Child Safeguarding at Save the Children International
Adrian Dyer, “City Dad” blogger and International Shipping Trade Manager

Claire Fox and Adrian Dyer both featured in the Power Part Time List 2015.

This breakfast seminar continues our series of events looking at leadership and follows on from April’s event Achieving Balanced Leadership: what really works?
The research, conducted by consultancy and jobsite Timewise and funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, says employers are failing to capitalise on changes to the way people work, to get the skilled workers they need.

Agile working takes organisations beyond flexible working and requires a whole new level of trust and accountability. It establishes a greater degree of autonomy for the individual and a concomitant reduction in management control, which makes some leaders nervous.

“Making the shift to a new working model for the digital age goes far beyond traditional flexible working arrangements. It is about a wholesale shift in work and management culture. It is for everybody, not just a few individuals. It enables greater autonomy for everyone about the way they work, and that is based on mutual trust and accountability. But unfortunately, in many workplaces, trust is a scarce commodity.”

Alison Maitland

Yet 95% of our invited audience agreed that more agile working would make their organisations more attractive and retentive. Although many organisations represented were making moves towards agile working, 75% of the audience felt they should be doing more, more quickly.

Our expert panel and our audience shared a number of stories and examples, some inspiring, some clearly difficult, but all helping us to draw out themes that any firm aspiring to agile working will want to consider.
For many, the concept of agile working encapsulates a logical and fundamental extension of flexible working, enabled by technology. Smartphones, tablets, 4G and more widely available WiFi has made working from home, in the field or in the local coffee shop far more commonplace.

This flexibility extends to when people work, as well as where. This might mean redefining working hours to accommodate people’s family commitments or to better meet the needs of an organisation working across multiple time zones.

For those in technology, such as Clare Dyer, former HR Director for BBC Digital and now HR Director for BBC Television, the term ‘agile working’ is associated with the agile methodology used in software development, with its focus on collaboration and self-organising cross-functional teams.

For the BBC’s digital team this way of working changed the environment from one of people working in silos to an atmosphere of increased trust, improved communications and collaborative working.

“This by giving employees greater autonomy, freedom and control over their own destiny, great ideas were coming out.”
Clare Dyer, BBC Television

Initiatives that have benefited include iPlayer, which expanded far more rapidly than anticipated as a result.

The move has also helped the BBC compete more effectively for digital talent when brands such Google can offer higher salaries. The BBC was also able to mirror Google’s policy of allowing employees to spend 20% of their time on projects for which they have a personal passion.

As agile methodology encourages face-to-face communication in scrums and daily cooperation between developers and the business it is not always compatible with flexibility in time and place.

“In its purest sense, agile technology development works best in proximity, you are getting together, you are constantly in communication, and the benefit is that you can manage your own time within the outputs you need to deliver. It’s not about where you work, it is about how you work and the control you have over that.”
Clare Dyer, BBC

There lies one of the core challenges of implementing agile working: balancing the desire to give staff flexibility and autonomy while coordinating effectively with colleagues and providing service to customers when and where they need it.
Three levels of benefits

When agile working is well implemented, it can produce advantages for the environment, for people and, crucially for organisational leaders, measurable benefits for business too.

Environmental benefits
The environment benefits of agile working can include a big reduction in CO2 emissions as people travel less to the office and more meetings take place virtually. For big brands with large workforces a move to flexible working can have a great impact on the organisation’s carbon footprint – and its reputation.

“In 2010, I attended a conference on sustainability which talked about the genuine business reasons behind reducing CO2 emissions and the financial sense that made.”

Ben Dowd, Telefonica O2 UK

Benefits for the individual
Claire Fox is a particularly inspiring example whose life has been positively transformed by a move to agile working. Claire works four days a week in her role as Global HR and Child Safeguarding Director for Save the Children International. This includes one day working from home.

Since then, by working with other leading organisations and taking advice from the best, we’ve gone from being laggards in sustainability to leaders.”

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“’I want big jobs with big opportunities, this isn’t about taking my foot off the gas because my two boys are little, I want to drive my career forward AND spend plenty of time with my family. As a result of agile working, I am definitely better at my job, I have seldom been so on top of emails as when I do them on my commute, and I never move work challenges forward as much in my head as I do when I am out running. There are lots of problems that wouldn’t get solved if I tried to stay in the office all the time.”

Claire Fox, Save the Children International

She’s a passionate advocate for agile working and stresses that her decision does not mean she has any less commitment to her career.
This flexibility and increased productivity has enabled Claire to write a book (Work/Life Symbiosis: The Model for Happiness and Balance), train for the London Marathon 2016, attend the gym regularly and captain a tennis team.

City Dad blogger, Adrian Dyer, is another example. He broke the mould when, as a trade manager for a City-based international shipping company, he successfully requested additional paternity leave after the birth of his second child and then, on return to the office, suggested flexible working.

“My employer agreed I could do a four and a half day week on a trial basis, which is still ongoing, and that allows me to have two hours at home on my own which I use to update my website and work on the coaching business that my wife and I run.”

Adrian Dyer, “City Dad” blogger and International Shipping Trade Manager

Business benefits
Some organisations need more convincing than others about the potential business benefits of agile working. Fortunately the evidence is rapidly accumulating. And it’s coming from some of the biggest brands.

O2 chose to adopt flexible working as part of its commitment to sustainability and as a pragmatic and rapidly implemented solution to anticipated congestion caused by the 2012 Olympics (see case study).

Ben Dowd, O2 Business Director and one of the architects of the scheme, employed an external firm to objectively measure the business benefits of the concept. In an employee survey 90% of employees said they were at least as productive as they were at work, with more than a third saying they were more productive. 40% of people planned their day differently, with meetings become fewer and shorter.

90% gave two-thirds of the commuting time they saved back to the business, even though this was not a requirement of the scheme.

In a follow up survey nine months later, 70% reported greater levels of productivity and flexible working was the second most commonly mentioned reason when employers were asked what made them stay with O2.

Clare Dyer reports similarly impressive results within the BBC’s digital department. As a direct result of putting agile principles at the heart of the way they worked, innovative ideas were developed and a culture of open learning and sharing became embedded within the team. In addition, employee engagement scores increased by 10%, high performers were retained, productivity increased and cost savings were made.
The future of work is more than just flexible working for a few people. It’s about autonomy for all and a shift of cultures. Business leaders need to lead by example to embed the move from a culture of presenteeism to one of agile working; from a preoccupation with hours worked to results achieved.

Agile working requires a cultural shift

Even leaders who adopt flexible working themselves can face doubt or criticism from peers and colleagues.

“Some colleagues see my approach as a refreshing change, while others think I am completely nuts when I run my 9 mile commute home or possibly some people that perhaps a bit of a slacker when I leave at 4.45pm to pick up my boys, but fortunately I have managed to deliver on big projects, so I am showing I get things done and bring value to the organisation. Despite any concerns people might have, I don’t think they can argue with that.

“I always ensure I deliver, but before that I ensure that what I am expected to deliver is reasonable in a four-day week. If I am organised and plan well, it is perfectly manageable.”

Claire Fox, Save the Children International

At the BBC, traditionally a hierarchical and highly scrutinised organisation, the digital team had always been seen as something of an ‘odd child’. The adoption of agile working did little to remove that label and the move is still somewhat countercultural. But other departments are watching developments, and the results, with interest.
For Ben Dowd, organisations that get the best results from agile working are those that use it to deliver culture-centricity. He acknowledges there was a degree of tension between O2’s office workers who could benefit from agile working and those working in call centres and retail stores who had less flexibility.

By introducing some flexible hours and improved work scheduling it became possible to improve availability for customers and the working environment for these staff too.

O2’s adoption of flexible working for office staff was triggered and accelerated by the anticipated travel problems resulting from the Olympics.

For other organisations the change will be slower. But small changes in the right direction can have still a significant impact.

“An employee survey showed that people wanted a flexible working policy and since then, we are allowed to come in or go later one hour earlier or later once a week. It might sound tiny compared to some of the examples we’ve heard about, but it means a lot to me as I can pick up my child from school or take him in one morning a week. For my company, it is a big leap and it feels like a great benefit for employees.”

Adrian Dyer, “City Dad” blogger and International Shipping Trade Manager

The impact of a small change that gives employees enough flexibility to spend more time with the people they care for should not be underestimated.

The increasing predominance of millennials and their successors in the workplace will force the pace of change. They join organisations with a new set of expectations, fuelled by a lifetime of digital connectivity.

Discussing this phenomenon in 2010, authors Jeanne Meister and Karie Willyerd concluded that the emergence of ‘web commuters’ would force corporate offices to reinvent themselves and work-life flexibility would replace work-life balance.

Five short years later this vision is fast becoming a reality and organisations are encouraged to embrace and capitalise on the movement rather than resist it.

As Claire Fox put it, “agile working is not just a nice thing for employers to offer. It’s the critical next step to maximising the potential of a workforce.”
Is your organisation a leader or a laggard in agile working?

> Are you clear about the benefits you want to achieve and how you will measure them?

> Does your organisation cultivate a culture of mutual trust in which people feel they can work autonomously?

> Are your organisation’s leaders role modelling agile working?

> Is your business embracing widespread agile working as an inevitable cultural shift in the way people work?

> Is agile working available to everyone?

> Do you confidently talk about your company’s policy on agile working as a way to attract talent?

If you can answer yes to all these questions your business is likely to be in the top quartile of businesses shifting to agile working.

Eton Bridge Partners can help you attract the talent that will thrive in an agile working culture and connect you with people who are already making it happen.

If you would value this kind of proactive advice please contact Ellie Rich-Poole at Eton Bridge Partners on 01753 303 600 or email: ellie.rich-poole@etonbridgepartners.com

If you are interested in receiving our newsletter and details of future events please email info@etonbridgepartners.com

www.etonbridgepartners.com

Recommended further reading

Future Work, Changing Organizational Culture for the New World of Work
Alison Maitland and Peter Thomson, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014

Work/Life Symbiosis: The Model for Happiness and Balance
Claire Fox, LID Publishing, 2015

Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives
Madeleine Bunting, Harper Collins, 2005

The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow’s Employees Today

The Shift: The Future of Work is Already Here
Lynda Gratton, William Collins, 2014
Case study
At O2, the London 2012 Olympic Games provided a catalyst for moving to a much more flexible and agile way of working, as Ben Dowd, one of O2’s longest standing directors, explained.

It was however, a warning from the organisers of London 2012 that O2 would have no access to their Slough HQ – close to one of the Olympic venues at Dorney Lake – over the six-week period of the Games, which provided an additional prompt.

“Our customers were asking us about flexible working and, as leaders in technology, this was a fantastic opportunity to authenticate what we were doing – effectively drinking our own champagne before serving it up to customers,” he said.

A campaign to maximise use of the intranet and ensure employees had the tools to work remotely proved hugely successful and, says Ben, there were plenty of proof points that demonstrated to customers that it worked.

“90% of employees said they were achieving at least the same level of productivity and 34% said they were more productive. Given the average commute was 1.5 hours, 90% of people used a third of that time for themselves and gave on average 60 minutes back to the business, which was amazing. We effectively managed to change the culture in one day.

“When we surveyed them nine months later, on average, 70% of employees said flexible working enabled them to be more productive and although 20% preferred face-to-face interaction, technology has enabled us to do things such as live stream conferences and events so there is a physical sense of being involved as well. Overall, flexible working is one of the top two reasons why people stay with O2.”

One of the questions he is often asked, said Ben, is how you know if your employees are working.

“My answer is you have to trust them to do their job, the feedback that the time they saved was fed back into the business was very powerful and we believe if people are feeling good, they will be more productive.

“It’s also important that the board acts as ambassadors for flexible working and continuous improvement. If you are seen as a leader who doesn’t believe in presenteeism, it is hugely powerful.

“I leave at 5.30pm so I don’t miss bathtime with my children, although I may check in later online. By setting an example, you show everyone it is ok.”