



## FLEXIBLE THINKING

Last month FMX brought together a group of office design, FM and property management specialists to discuss flexible working and the future workplace in a forum sponsored by RNM Systems. The group agreed that change was happening, driven by cost and environmental considerations, technology, and the expectations of the younger generation of workers. Some, however, wondered if traditional thinking was holding back progress in some organisations. Here, Luis Desouza of NFS Hospitality joins the debate, arguing that efficient management of flexible working requires businesses to define their approach to the new 'culture of absence'

**Flexible working is high on the priority list of many organisations today.** However, new ways of working will require a cultural change in the way we currently manage people and resources. How will businesses respond to the new 'culture of absence', in which staff will be working remotely and in a more flexible manner? Do businesses have the right culture, the right attitude and the right tools to support this new working environment?

One of the greatest challenges businesses are facing is dealing with the new culture of absence. The control systems we've had in place for 25 years that facilitate face-to-face management are not relevant in this case. We need to find a practical and effective solution to the issue of supporting and managing staff and teams in a flexible working environment.

Already transformational technologies such as videoconferencing and telepresence are becoming more commonplace, and these will support new working habits, addressing both carbon footprint and sustainability issues and responding to the requirements of Generation Y.

But the bigger picture is finding a new model that is able to replace the physical control of relationships with staff, such as clocking in and out. To meet modern business and green objectives, and also the needs of Generation Y, we need to move away from control in the traditional sense.

For instance, much of the new technology today allows people to sign in and out of sessions and change their working status, so they can contribute when appropriate and also have times when they are not

contributing but still engaged. This technology facilitates the management of the younger generation of workers, who may find that working flexibly, in their own environment, makes them more productive and creative.

The role of scheduling systems is even more important. It's no longer enough to schedule rooms and resources - we need to create work sessions where people can participate flexibly and even multitask. This capability needs to be a part of the new work environment.

The control hierarchy established in most organisations is used to control based on physical presence, but we should be moving towards control based on absence, which will probably be prevalent in a decade's time. And the toolset we put in place for managing flexible working needs to be appropriate to new working methods.

An example is the recent implementation by NFS of integrated technology for a major US law firm. The organisation, with 4,000 lawyers in more than 65 offices worldwide, was seeking a more integrated approach to room and resource management. More importantly, it was looking for a way in which its staff could use scheduling technology in a more flexible manner.

The solution was to design a 'self-service' interface which brought together these elements, including seamless integration with videoconferencing and telepresence technology. This enables flexible working and also provides the organisation with a toolset to manage this more efficiently.

Transforming traditional business culture is partly a question of trust. If we are to

replace face-to-face and presence-based management control with systems more suited to flexible working, we need to trust our employees to use their time efficiently when provided with the necessary tools, and not seek constant updates on where they are and what they're doing, as we too often do today.

It's about blending the technology that we need with real cultural change. **FMX**

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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