
Flexible workforce and the role of the personnel manager

Mark Parkinson

The author

Mark Parkinson is Principal Occupational Psychologist, The Morrisby Organisation, UK.

Abstract

Discusses the role of the HR specialist as we approach the new millennium. Observes the shift in the workplace from office to teleworking and cyber-management, along with the potential problems of remote working, and the role of video conferencing and the Internet. Finally contrasts the changing pattern of working life with the benefits of a more flexible workforce. In conclusion, emphasizes the changes in work style of workers themselves and of the HR function, with the personnel specialist being seen as the conductor of a work interface: that between the virtual world of information, and the real world of people.

Prediction is a dangerous game. Not many years ago experts were predicting that electricity would be free, a product of the new "atomic" technology; and that most ancient of products, paper, would be consigned almost literally to the wastepaper bin. Yet in the mid-1990s atomic, or to be more recherché nuclear, energy is far from free. Indeed it is beginning to look extremely expensive for all sorts of reasons, not least what to do with all that glowing waste. As for paper, that is also proving to be difficult to abandon. Whilst there has been some movement towards the paperless office, via workflow systems and the like, the computer revolution has produced what can only be described as a tidal wave of paper. The demise of newspapers, magazines and books also looks rather a long way off. The moral is, of course, that some things just endure, other things actually do disappear ("jobs for life" springs to mind), and still other things surface of which we never dreamt. Own up, who actually saw virtual reality coming? Or, ten years ago, the rise of the mobile phone?

It seems realistic to assume that as with the other forces that mould our lives, HR is going to have to hustle along with everyone else. The Western world, as ever these days with a nudge from the East, is hovering on the edge of a new uncertainty. The old order of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s is most surely being turned comprehensively on its head. However out of the chaos comes a vision of a more flexible, shorter working and skilled workforce. But hold on, one moment the management gurus are predicting that a working lifetime will contract to somewhere between 50,000 and 75,000 hours; the next that in some countries, notably the USA, they are all busily putting in an extra month a year – month 13! Obviously the crystal ball is still a bit cloudy.

Meanwhile one feature of work that definitely is "flexing" is the workplace. The favoured alternatives are something akin to the offices we currently inhabit, but with one or two startling differences; or, teleworker land. Within the former, conventional office thinking is now moving to the brave new world of "hot seating". The ultimate expression of this is rumoured to be an IBM office in America. Here a warehouse is kitted out with 300 or so workstations; but the workforce amounts to 800. The logic is somewhat primitive, but cost effective. First come, first served, and a different desk each day if you are early enough. Poor forward planning or just too late: get out there and sell! But before you all rush to your commercial estate agent, consider that psychologically, this approach may not be too clever. Costs may be reduced, but the human price could be high. The human worker after all is a territorial creature who needs somewhere to call home, even at work. Treating staff like any other commodity may well only result

in low morale, a lack of company loyalty and less work rather than more.

The other big idea, teleworking, looks more promising. The latest figures suggest that 43 per cent of major UK employers have a teleworking pilot scheme. A British Telecom survey also suggests that teleworkers are up to 45 per cent more productive, which gives the lie to the notion that those working at home cannot be either personally disciplined or effectively controlled. Savings, over traditional employees, of between £6-£20K per head per year are also touted. Another surprise is that it is the manufacturing sector that is taking the lead. In the longer term it is reckoned that half of UK jobs could be teleworked. Just think how quiet the roads would be, and how clean the air. But what would we do with all that spare office space? Anyhow this really does look like good news for freelancers, part-timers, consultants and ecologists everywhere. However as HR professionals we should be aware that there are a few drawbacks. Working at home can lead to loneliness and inertia. It can also be a profoundly depressing and stressful experience – psychologically not everyone is up to it. That is because the border between home and work becomes very fuzzy and this in itself can be a major source of tension. The teleworker is also cut off from the emotional support organizations can offer and the immediate feedback of colleagues and boss alike.

Technology, as ever, may have some of the answers. Video conferencing, or communicating with a colleague who appears in a “window” in the corner of your computer screen, is just one. The upshot is that in this rather more virtual world the HR manager will not only have to be a master of the new technology, which can be used to monitor and control (hopefully without overtones of “Big Brother”), but also be adept at managing on what is essentially an information network – or, more globally, the Internet. This will require new skills and methods of management: the age of the cyber-manager may indeed be upon us. Interestingly all this looks like history turning full circle, from cottage industry through industrial and computer revolutions, back to cottage – or should it be “semi-detached”? – industry once more.

The change in the work environment also starts to dictate how we work. The means – video conferencing, more and more expert systems and the like – impact on the structure. Thus whatever the actual length of an individual’s working life, the pattern of work is changing now. The relentless drive towards flexibility; the increase in new jobs, almost entirely based on technical and professional skills or “brainwork” – the complete reverse of 50 years ago – cannot be stopped. The beginnings of a completely flexible work style are here: from flexi-time to flexi-year, to flexi-life? For most

“jobs for life” died out years ago, laying the pattern for up to five jobs in a lifetime with regular retraining. Charles Handy and Peter Herriot are undoubtedly right when they talk of new partnerships between employers and individuals, and the impact will be profound. The HR manager will need to hold the ring, to adjust to a pool of skilled but relatively transient work partners: “facilitation” and “work mapping” (closely matching individual competences with specific work tasks) will be the new watchwords. The new patterns will also lead to new challenges, such as how are the partnerships to be serviced and who will pay for “rolling” training? And, critically, how to recruit from a “moving” workforce? Already a major search agency is inviting IT specialists to transmit their CVs via the Internet. Can remote interviewing and psychometric testing be far behind?

Ultimately though, the fundamental change will be down to who actually does the work. Expertise and skills will certainly be at a premium, the intelligent worker having built up a specialist package of personal competences in co-operation with a range of employers. However the population of the UK is also ageing fast and, to exercise a fact which maybe even more telling, by the millennium the majority of workers will be women. The latter could be the clincher. The pressure to restructure work in order to integrate traditionally female roles will in itself force more flexible work practices into the system – a uniquely biological and potentially extremely positive pressure. So, advance warning to any male HR managers lodged in the past and still awaiting “reconstruction” – in future the majority of your workforce will be female, as may your boss!

The future looks exciting, but the HR role will most certainly change. In this time, and in this age, to carry on as usual is definitely not an option. Much of what has been described will change the actual way in which businesses do business. Thus HR professionals will not only have to be more involved in corporate decision making, arguably a more generalist role, but also learn to use the new technologies. To survive we need to:

- manage and facilitate;
- organize the freer flow of personnel between jobs and even between employers;
- accept that the information revolution can actually mean a greater focus on the individual, but as part of a more responsive and dynamic world of work; and
- realize that we are entering the age of cyber management where the task is more that of conductor, the orchestrator of an ever-changing interface: that between the virtual world of information and the real world of people.