

On-the-fly IT

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More and more workers aren't showing up at the office. Their cubicles are vacant, their desktop PCs idle.

Instead, they're working at all hours of the day from coffee shops, conference rooms, and customer sites. Take a look around your own corporate offices. There's probably a lot of empty chairs. The average occupancy rate of commercial office space from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. is between 30 percent and 50 percent, according to Cornell University's International Workplace Studies Program.

The challenge for IT managers is how to support this ever-growing legion of far-flung workers with all of the tools and information they need to do their jobs, anytime, anywhere. For example, Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble, a pioneer in business- and worker-agility programs, defines the workplace as "anywhere someone is trying to be productive, whether it's a P&G location or not," according to Mary Adam, P&G's director of North American Workplace Services.

Cigna, which has 3,500 full-time teleworkers and 7,000 casual teleworkers enrolled in its eWork program, wants employees to work wherever it's most effective for them to do their jobs, whether it's a spare bedroom or one of Cigna's corporate "touchdown" sites, which the company provides for workers without a designated office.

"A higher proportion of employees is working on the fly, but the IT infrastructure at most companies is still assuming they come into the office every day," says Michael Bell, an analyst at Gartner. What IT needs to create and support is an "agile workplace," which Bell says is "all about choice, flexibility and moving accountability for where and when work gets done out of the traditional office and to the employee."

Besides worker mobility, IT must also consider the changing nature of work. By 2006, people will spend nearly 70 percent of their time working in teams -- but not necessarily face to face, according to an agile-workplace study conducted by MIT and Gartner. That means deploying more collaborative technologies, such as Web-based videoconferencing, that peripatetic workers can easily and cheaply tap into, regardless of their location.

In the current economy, experts say, the main factor driving telework and a more agile workforce is cost pressure. Companies with formal telework programs say they save money on real estate, although some studies indicate that IT costs are higher.

In the first 12 months of its eWork program, which enables more than 10,000 employees to work from anywhere using all of the same IT tools they would have access to at a corporate office, Cigna saved \$1,500 per person. In the second 12 months, the company saved \$3,000 per worker, according to Lynne Kelley-Lewicki, director of Integrated Workscape Strategies.

At AT&T, where 17 percent of managers have no office but instead work full time from home or a customer location, real estate savings will total \$35 million in 2003. Other financial benefits include \$100 million in increased worker productivity and \$15 million in gains resulting from improved employee retention and recruitment, according to Joseph Roitz, AT&T's telework director.

Overall, MIT and Gartner researchers estimate that through 2006, agile-workplace strategies will reduce workplace and IT infrastructure costs by 10 percent to 15 percent. But for IT, helping to create and support an agile workplace isn't

just about setting up workers with laptop computers and at-home broadband network access. It requires a high level of cross-functional collaboration, navigating tricky company politics and fitting new technologies to employees' work patterns. Here are four key tips from companies leading the way on the agility front:

1. Don't go it alone. IT, facilities, corporate real estate and human resources departments must share information and work together to create a seamless workplace experience for employees, regardless of their locations.

In an unusual move, P&G combined its facilities and IT departments, cutting \$500 million from its bottom-line operational costs. Among other things, the combined department introduced hoteling and hot-desking, where offices become a shared resource that multiple people can use.

"We view the workplace as an integrated whole, including the chairs, desks, LAN jacks," explains P&G's Adam. "Before, if you were moving offices, you called one department to move your PC, another department to move your phone, and so on."

Now, all workers log onto P&G's Web-based portal, known as Company at Your Fingertips, to schedule office moves, order cell phones, set up an audio- or videoconference, or request a plumber or an electrician to resolve a building problem. "We put all of these things together in the way that a user thinks about them -- as tools to get their work done," says Adam.

Capital One Financial, also in the US, has transferred some IT professionals into its corporate real estate department as a way to ensure that space and technology needs are considered in an integrated way, says Chief Technology Officer Roy Lowrance. For example, the company has dozens of "telesuites," which are conference rooms outfitted with state-of-the-art Web-based videoconferencing technology to accommodate Capital One's highly collaborative, but highly mobile, corporate culture.

2. Make telework a standard operating procedure. Ad hoc telecommuting and under-the-radar work-from-home arrangements cost more money and cause a lot of headaches for IT. "IT has people coming in on dial-up lines and DSL. They have to prepare for all different security and access issues, and from a help desk standpoint, they're getting a lot of calls from people who are far away and need to be coached through a lot of issues," notes Tim Kane, CEO of Kinetic Workplace, a US consulting firm specializing in telework and integration of IT, real estate and human resources concerns. Kane is also president of the International Telework Association and Council.

Kelley-Lewicki says Cigna "made a conscious decision to grow eWork into an embedded service and not make it a program, which is something special or something that you subscribe to." As an embedded service, eWork provides mobile workers with all of the same IT tools they would have if they were working at the insurer's corporate office. These include a standard laptop and broadband network access to all necessary software applications and databases, regardless of whether the employee is at home, a company hoteling facility or a customer site.

As an e-worker's needs change, different suites of software can be automatically downloaded, says John Duffy, a senior vice president at Cigna Systems. "As a guiding principle, you want to try and keep the e-worker process as transparent as possible," he says. "You want to have the look and feel of the desktop the same at the office as at home."

3. Study work patterns, then adopt technologies and policies to fit. Before implementing new technologies, IT needs to discern how much mobility workers need in their jobs and whether the bulk of their work is done individually or collaboratively. "If an organization is like Sun Microsystems, where workers can work anytime, anywhere, IT is going to have to put its greatest emphasis on anywhere, anytime connectivity -- things like remote servers and virtual private network capability," says Gartner's Bell.

At Capital One, most work is accomplished in teams, with the company's 8,000 knowledge workers spending an average of four to six hours a day in meetings or otherwise out of their individual offices. "Nobody can sit in an office all day and get his or her job done," Lowrance says, noting that the IT at Capital One's new West Creek campus reflects

that **working style**. Among other things, it includes wireless LAN access throughout the facility, so employees can tap into e-mail or presentations from anywhere in the building, and dozens of team rooms equipped with Web-based videoconferencing facilities and electronic whiteboards.

"I'm always thinking about how people work, what's inhibiting work and looking for game-changing possibilities," says Lowrance. "If you want agility, don't start with technology. Start with the company culture, then force technology and the company culture to work in harmony," he says.

4. One size doesn't fit all. It does little good to copy exactly another company's best telework practices because each organization has its own set of workstyles and unique culture, experts say. Consequently, each company needs to come up with its own telework strategy. Cigna, for example, provides the same set of tools to all employees, regardless of where they're located.

Meanwhile, after a yearlong telework pilot project, the **Treasury Department's Office of the Inspector General for Tax Administration is considering offering workers different levels of telework services**. The decision came about after outfitting all teleworkers with a high-end combination fax machine, printer and scanner at their homes and learning that most workers actually use only the printer.

The agency also gave all teleworkers, who are mostly auditors working at various business sites, a standardized laptop computer, but later had to retrofit many of the PCs to accommodate power users who have more demanding computing requirements, says Joseph Hungate, CIO of the office. Regardless of the specific telework strategies companies deploy, experts agree that all IT organizations have to redefine their domains well beyond the walls of the corporate office. "There will be no real decline in this trend," says Bell. "It may be paused now due to the economy, but it will continue, and the pressure will increase when the economy comes back."

Changing the Game With IT

"If you want agility," advises Capital One CTO Roy Lowrance, "don't start with technology. Start with the company culture, then force technology and the company culture to work in harmony."

That's the way the strategic technology group within Capital One's IT organization assesses the potential of all new technologies.

Lowrance says IT screens new technologies with a constant eye toward how people perform their work, and looks for what he calls "game-changing possibilities."

As part of the screening process, the IT department develops usage scenarios for all new technologies. A recent example is Web conferencing technology from PlaceWare, which earlier this year was acquired by Microsoft. IT considered how meetings are conducted currently and how employees' behavior might change with Web technology that lets participants dynamically share presentations stored on their laptops.

"With PlaceWare, you log onto a Web site, and everyone sees the document or presentation dynamically. It means people don't have to predistribute documents, and you don't have an issue with managing people's attention, which you have when they're at a meeting and paging through paper documents distributed to them before the meeting," Lowrance notes.

IT is developing a similar usage scenario for RDF Site Summary (RSS) technology as a possible e-mail replacement at Capital One. RSS is an XML format that enables users to aggregate information from a variety of sources into a single Web-based application.

"What happens now is a lot of people publish information updates -- about projects, meeting agendas, etc. -- via e-mail. With RSS, they'd publish updates to a Web site, and there would be a browserlike client to view all of these updates in one place," Lowrance says. Essentially, it would change the way the entire organization communicates.

"We constantly look at technology to make sure it's not just incremental," he adds. "Anything that is not game-changing is not interesting."