



Comment Article

360°IT – Get off your bike and on to technology

By Clive Longbottom, Service Director, Quocirca Ltd

The Coalition Government has made noises in two directions regarding the mobility of the UK workforce. First, they've been talking up the concept of "social mobility" - people's capability to transcend their background and succeed purely on merit.

In some countries, this may be possible, but the UK is built on a deep-rooted hierarchy where it is difficult for a lad from the streets of Bolton to hob-nob it with the heir to the Earldom of some southern Shire. For every "boy done good", there still remains a much larger number at the top from the Old Boy Network of Eton/Harrow/Oxbridge.

The second thing the Government has been shouting about is the concept of straightforward workforce mobility. The idea here is to dust off Norman Tebbit's old directive to "get on your bike" and go where the jobs are.

The opposite has already been tried, with the likes of the Department for Works and Pensions (DWP) upping sticks and moving to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In some cases (such as the DWP's), this has been largely successful. In others, it has been a temporary relocation - the prestige of a London HQ has proved too much of a pull compared to, say, Birmingham or Manchester.

Indeed, a quick search shows how many organisations have relocated their UK or European HQs to London in the past few years - Vodafone, Canon and New Look among them. Others have moved to more tax friendly non-UK locations with the equivalent locational cachet.

Whereas getting workers "on their bikes" to follow jobs to London is essentially feasible, moving them to Switzerland or Lichtenstein may be beyond the capabilities of many caught in what is perceived as the "spiral" of unemployment in parts of the North.

Yet bringing thousands down to London and the South East won't work either. House prices mean we'd need to provide large amounts of social and other low-cost housing. Existing infrastructure would also struggle - traffic jams in the South East are already at epidemic proportions and public transport during the rush hour is probably banned under the Geneva Convention. And although there's a common perception down South that the likes of Manchester and Liverpool are smog-ridden wastelands where children have rickets and finding someone in work is like looking for dragon's teeth, in fact the UK's two neediest areas are both in London.

But we *can* provide employment mobility quite easily - provided the Government raises its expectations a little and invests where it's really required. For the most part, people are reasonably happy where they are - in an area where they've grown up, where they're near family and friends and where they know what's what. (And for Northerners, where they don't have people taking the mick out of their accent or asking where their whippet is.) It's just that there is a lack of available jobs where they are located.

Actually, that's not quite true. The problem is they don't have access to available jobs. Many of today's jobs aren't dependent on location. As a service economy, fewer employees are required to be present on the shop floor to carry out their tasks than ever before. An insurance claim can be dealt with in Carlisle just as easily as it can be in Croydon, an electronic order can be taken in Sunderland just as easily as in Surbiton. By changing expectations just a little, we can create a flexible, efficient, effective workforce that is far more location-independent.

Of course, the concept of home working has been around for some time, and many organisations have tried the use of remote offices. But these haven't worked as well as hoped, for three main reasons:

- *9-to-5 mindset.* You have to be seen to be working - clocking in, clocking out and being in a chair.
- *Social aspects.* Working from home can get pretty boring, and the lack of true social contact can start to affect workers' effectiveness - or sanity.
- *Technology.* When home working started, standard telephone or ISDN lines were needed to provide the connection for the employee to the rest of the world. These were very expensive which meant that biggest user of home working turned out to be BT, which had access to the technology at somewhat cheaper prices that you or I could get them.

In terms of tackling the 9-to-5 mindset, moving from a time-based approach to a model based on deliverables works well. Here, agreeing deliverables with a person means that if they, say, do 100 agreed items correctly within an agreed timescale, then everyone is happy. Do them quickly - and correctly - and get the rest of the day off. Do them slowly - or mess them up - and work a little longer to meet the deadline.

When it comes to improving the social aspects of remote working, though, we need to invest in better technology. Broadband is far more ubiquitous than it used to be, but UK plc runs the risk of becoming a broadband backwater if it sticks to the lacklustre Digital Britain targets. If home workers could be provided with immersive video conferencing and full communication and collaboration capabilities, the social aspects of home working would be far less of a problem. If the best way to do this is through the use of shared premises with shared infrastructure, even better - the employee gets the opportunity for real social interaction, yet can still work from home for large periods of time.

But the main thing here is that the employee can be anywhere in the UK - they don't have to get on their bike, they can stay where they are, supporting their local community and putting money into the local economy. They can carry on using their own infrastructure (indeed, possibly lowering the strain on infrastructure in other areas).

Employment mobility should not involve the mass movement of people - it just needs more efficient movement of electronic packets and more employers who trust their employees to meet agreed deliverables rather than clinging to the clocking-in machine.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, O2, T-Mobile, HP, Xerox, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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