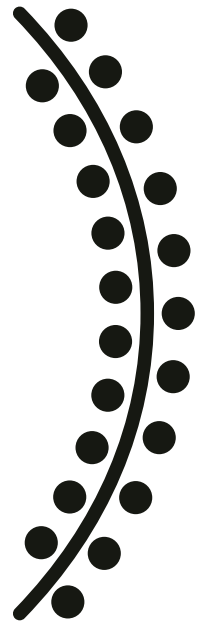


SMART

GALLERY



A host of departments have been recognised in the government's latest Smarter Working Awards. **Richard Johnstone** went along to hear their stories



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fforts to make the civil service more open to flexible and smart working are not new. Fifteen years ago, a landmark report by the then Office of Government Commerce revealed a plan to change how Whitehall offices worked after finding that “many government organisations today are housed in poor quality, highly cellular buildings which are not only unappealing working environments to potential new recruits, but also do not support collaborative working styles or allow for sufficient flexibility in team working”.

The *Working Without Walls* report set out an early model for smart working, including examples of improved working practices through better office design and new technology.

Although some of its conclusions sound amusingly dated with hindsight - “the use of mobile telephony is often a good way of allowing people more flexibility in their choice of work location” - the report did identify the scale of the challenge in getting government to change. “There has been an increase in the introduction and take up of flexible working practices, creating new models of working and new patterns of using office workspace,” it found, but added: “The UK government was perhaps initially slow in responding to many of these opportunities, hampered partly by concerns over the viability of managing geographically dispersed teams and overcoming the belief that ‘if you are not at your desk you are not working’”

Much has changed since 2004, and many government departments



have moved a long way on flexible working.

And as Kate Guthrie, the director of the Government Property Agency's smarter working programme, highlighted at the fourth annual Smarter Working Awards, the drive reached a milestone last year when the Government Estate Strategy included a pledge to roll out smart working across the civil service by 2022.

"For us I think this is a really important step forward in raising the profile of smarter working across the most senior levels of government," she said in an introductory speech.

She then set out the vision and mission of the smarter working programme in government. "It is about bringing together people, workspaces and technology, wrapped around with that corporate leadership, to create great places to work."

The awards themselves mirrored this mission, recognising examples of good practice in Whitehall and beyond across five categories: corporate leadership, workspace, technology, culture and people, and smarter working together. There was also a judges' award recognising the nominee with the best overall performance against the principles of smart working.

Corporate leadership

The corporate leadership award was won by

civilserviceworld.com

"By engaging our security experts from the start, we have devised a way of enabling smarter working in the most secure environment, delivering huge operational and personal benefits"
Alistair, GCHQ

the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, part of the Ministry of Defence, which was nominated alongside North Lincolnshire Council and Transport for London.

Trish Jakeman, smarter working programme lead at DIO, told attendees at the ceremony that her organisation's smarter working programme was a transformation intended to equip, empower and enable DIO's more than 4,500 staff, so that "flexibility should absolutely be treated as the norm".

DIO has made changes including distributing new laptops to staff, and moving from personal offices to an open floor plan.

DIO's corporate leadership was critical to driving the plan, Jakeman said. The

changes were championed from the top down by DIO chief executive Graham Dalton, with impressive results.

Jakeman said senior leaders in the organisation "believe in the change, drive the change and they are always wanting to see the successes brought about by the change".

"They are absolutely at the forefront of embracing technology, working flexibly and seeing work as an activity rather than a place."

Jakeman said her main measure of success for the programme was staff happiness, with increases in well-being and work life balance being picked up in internal staff surveys.

"I had an email from a member of our >>

wider DIO organisation last week, who unfortunately has been through some awful circumstances, and she wrote to me, 'I feel so fortunate to work for an organisation where the leadership puts people first and can be flexible in their approach,'" she said.

"That's what success looks like and that's what it's like to be part of a brilliant civil service."

Workplace

The workplace award went to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for its Our Future Workplace programme. The department beat fellow nominees Ofgem and the Department of Health and Social Care.

John Graddon from DCMS revealed it had developed its smart working plans in response to a capacity crunch at its historic 100 Parliament Street headquarters, with a little help from "Colin Collaboration" and "Bobbie Booth".

These were the two characters created by the department to get staff involved in what Graddon called "light, informal and jargon-free" conversations about office design as part of a "once in a generation reshuffle of the whole department".

Change was needed as DCMS grew from around 380 staff to nearly 1,300, which Graddon said was "great news for the department, but terrible news if you want to sit down".

Four possibilities for a revamped floor-plan were set out - ranging from a design that emphasised the flow of the building to one that emphasised collaboration.

"The committee did what all committees do and went for the one in the middle," Graddon said. "But to get the whole department organised around a smart working concept was something we were really proud of."

Staff were also involved in trying out lots of different furniture options.

"We went to different suppliers and said, 'Please lend us some of your stuff and we might buy it,' and we set up a showroom," he said. "We said to all staff to come and work at it, come and hold your team meetings, and then we'd zoom in [with Colin and Bobbie] and give a tour."

The aim was to ask targeted questions, Graddon said. "What does your team do? Do you do a lot research? Well, here's a furniture solution for that. Do you meet a lot of stakeholders? Here's a furniture solution for that.

The characters "worked really well for people who were kind of a bit bemused by the whole thing", he added.

As well as savings from additional rent

costs, Graddon said the changes have begun to change the department's culture. "In a smart working survey, the most popular answer was people saying that [their team] really use the collaboration spaces," he said.

Technology

The Government Communications Headquarters, GCHQ, won the technology award for its work developing a solution to implement smart working while maintaining the security standards needed for an intelligence and security organisation.

At the event, Alistair of GCHQ set out how one of the most secretive organisations in the world had opened up to smart working. "Our security model has been based on a big wire fence and some very limited connectivity," he said. "We still have to

security experts as brakes. Knowing that our brakes were so good allowed us to move quickly and take bigger risks. They helped us find safe ways of opening up."

He highlighted that most of GCHQ's remote working system used the standard commercial cloud services, but with some bespoke kit. The take up for this scheme was such that "we now have an appreciable number of people who rarely come into our top secret buildings", he said.

Culture and People

The Welsh Government scooped the culture and people award for its Merthyr Tydfil pilot, which was set up to test flexible working approaches in the office. The award recognised the work that can be done without a big overhaul or tech revamp.



"It is about bringing together people, workspaces and technology, wrapped around with that corporate leadership, to create great places to work"
Kate Guthrie, Government Property Agency

fence but we manage, rather than avoid the risks around smarter working in a highly secure environment which has enabled thousands of our people who work outside the wire, saving us millions of pounds."

GCHQ has some of the top security experts in the world, he said: "people who really understand how to get this wrong".

There was some resistance to the project in the early days, but Alistair then began to use the organisation's experts like brakes on a racing car.

"Brakes make a racing car slow down but that is not why racing cars have brakes," he said. "Brakes allow racing drivers to go faster most of the time, and slow down when necessary. We used our

"Our office in Merthyr is quite new, so we couldn't justify investing in changing the property hugely, and we also didn't have an IT solution ready," said Natalie Stewart of the Welsh Government. "This is all about the culture change."

Intensive staff engagement took place ahead of the pilot period, including with trade union representatives to create simplified HR policies, which led to the removal of core hours.

The pilot has led to Merthyr Tydfil becoming the Welsh Government's most engaged office, according to the Civil Service People Survey, and a video presentation at the awards showcased positive testimonials from staff across the organisation.



Ruth, a deputy director in the office, said giving staff the opportunity to have more control of where and when they work, providing they meet the business needs, has empowered individuals. “If people feel they have that control, they are more likely to be happier and deliver a better product, so as a manager you tend to notice that your team is more engaged.”

This view was echoed through the video. “It’s definitely reduced the stress,” said Julie, a grants officer. “I deal with quarterly claims, so every three months when the claims come in I tend to have a day or two working from home. If I’m in the office I can get through about three reports a day. I worked at home a couple of weeks ago when I had my claims in and I got through seven in one day.”

“I don’t think we could go back on some of the steps we’ve taken – it is just the way that we work now,” added Ruth. “To go backwards would feel slow. It would mean that we weren’t as sharp in being able to deliver and I think it would have a real, detrimental impact on the engagement of staff. It feels like the flexible working pilot in Merthyr is just the way it is run now, it’s no longer a pilot.”

The other nominees in this award were the Food Standards Agency and North Yorkshire County Council.

Smarter Working Together

This award, won by the Ministry of Justice, recognised the part of the public sector that had done most to help spread the principles of smart working. GCHQ and North Yorkshire County Council were also nominated.

Matt Brennan of the MoJ’s smarter working programme said the department had helped make a significant contribution across government to smarter working. Its smarter working playbook and its Get Smart game, designed to get staff thinking about new ways of working, have been adopted by all of government as part of the Government Property Agency’s smarter working toolkit. The department brought the game to Civil Service Live events, where it was played by people including

‘IF GCHQ CAN DO SMART WORKING, ANYONE CAN’

Speaking to *CSW* after winning the technology award, Alistair of GCHQ explained how the organisation’s smart working drive had supported its wider aims, and how it had overcome its initial reluctance.

“We employ most of the people in the country who know what a bad idea this is, from a security point of view,” he said of allowing staff to work remotely. “The trick was converting those people and, to be fair to them, it wasn’t a hard sell. We said to them, ‘we’re going to have to do this anyway, so you can help us to do it safely,’ and they immediately got onboard.”

“There was a time when I wrote a blog to say, ‘this is what we’re going to try next on smarter working,’ and I got deluged by emails from security experts saying, ‘you really don’t want to do that,’ and they would come

and tell me the technical reasons why that was a step too far. And then we’d step back and try something else.”

But these were not seen a u-turns, he said: “We’re pushing the boundaries as hard as we possibly can, and we absolutely need people to just step on the brakes and say, ‘That’s too far.’”

One of the reasons for pushing the boundaries was that smarter working matched GCHQ’s other priorities, including neurodiverse recruitment.

“GCHQ makes a big thing of neurodiversity in our recruitment because one of the things we say about that is that GCHQ is where success depends on great minds not thinking alike,” Alistair told *CSW*. “And some of those people really don’t like looking at other people in the eye, and those people can engage on a level playing field with everybody else [with smart working], which they’ve never really been able to before.”



As a result, and despite assumptions to the contrary, GCHQ is not slow on workplace transformation.

“By engaging our security experts from the start, we have devised a way of enabling smarter working in the most secure environment, delivering huge operational and personal benefits,” he said in his presentation at the awards.

“What organisation, hearing this story, can put up a good case that they can’t allow smarter working? If GCHQ can do it, anyone can, and GCHQ has.”



The GPA’s Kate Guthrie; Awards judge Julian Barker; Cabinet Office minister Oliver Dowden

civil service chief executive John Manzoni.

“We’ve also contributed to the development of policy strategy and implementation of smarter working by sharing our knowledge and our experience across the GPA, contributing to key publications including the smart working handbook,” Brennan said. “We have also provided support assistance and guidance to many departments through one to one surgeries and bespoke presentations to stakeholders.”

The MoJ has also been monitor-

ing the effect of its own smart working polices, asking questions about their impact in the department’s people survey questions, which has led the GPA to consider recommending that departments use similar questions in the future. ■

The judges’ special award, which recognised the best overall performance against the principles of smart working, went to North Lincolnshire Council. Read more about their projects at <http://bit.ly/CSWsmart>.