SMARTER WORKING

learning lessons from Covid

For many teams across the Civil Service, the arrival of lockdown meant rapid change; a possible reshuffling of resources or a shift in strategic priorities but almost certainly the adoption of new working practices.

The Workplace Experience team within the Government Property Agency (GPA) was no different. For them, it meant that one element of their smarter working remit – remote working – became their main focus, as they drew on everything they had learned up until that point to help others make the transition to a new way of working.

Prior to lockdown, the 12-strong team were making steady progress towards their objective of getting 70% of all Civil Service departments to a level of smarter working maturity by 2020 and 100% by 2022.

Every Civil Service department had its own smarter working programme or initiative and a senior sponsor in place. Maturity assessments were being undertaken; an extensive portfolio of support packages and products were available; networks of smarter working practitioners were busy sharing and implementing new ideas; technology investments were being made and workspaces overhauled.

In the words of Kate Guthrie, Deputy Director for Workplace Experience and Smarter Working Programme Director, they had been successful in "raising the volume" on smarter working, highlighting its importance and benefits and getting it onto departmental agendas. Two organisations – Ofwat and Ofgem – had already reached smarter working maturity and, where applied, 75% of People Survey respondents felt that smarter working was helping them be more productive

Time to change focus

But then everything changed. With lockdown in place, Kate found herself chairing a new cross-government task force, comprising her team, CSHR, the Government Digital Service, Health and Safety Executive, Government Security Group and Crown Commercial Services. Tasked with supporting the Civil Service's remote working capabilities, their immediate focus was to ensure departments had the advice, guidance and practical tools to help them facilitate safe, secure and productive working at home for tens of thousands of people.

Within just two weeks toolkits – for leaders and teams – were swiftly repurposed and issued, containing guidance on everything from wellbeing and remaining connected through to remote team leadership and maintaining inclusion.

"Lockdown has certainly accelerated the adoption of certain smarter working practices"

The broader smarter working programme was temporarily paused at that point but is set to recommence in early 2021 (with eyes firmly set on still hitting those 2022 100% adoption targets). While Kate is understandably keen to reignite the programme, she's also keen to ensure valuable lessons learnt from this rapid change are applied as the Civil Service continues to transform.

"Lockdown has certainly accelerated the adoption of certain smarter working practices," she explains. "Previously, one of our greatest challenges was that some leaders were unsure how to lead people who they couldn't see, for example. Lockdown could have exacerbated this, but we've seen plenty of evidence of departments and leaders now getting on top of that issue, realising how people can still be productive at home and supporting them to be so. Many people now feel more trusted and empowered as a result."

"It was also an opportunity for some departments to consider their approach to getting mobile technology into the hands of more people for the first time; people who had never worked from a laptop before or been able to access departmental systems and services remotely. But to do all this, we had to provide a lot of support, advice and guidance – and that required a sizeable effort."

Time to change again.

Kate's team has since shifted focus again, thinking about the hybrid working model (a mix of remote and office working) that they predict will emerge in the coming months and the role that smarter working has to play. There's an extended remit to look at creating great places to work and enhancing the 'people experience' while not losing sight of the original smarter working pillars (people and culture; leadership; technology; and workspaces). And there's a desire to help build communities, connections and team cohesion (both physically and virtually) while also maintaining levels of social interaction.

There's also a significant emphasis on capitalising on the lessons learned from the past few months which is why the workplace experience research agency Leesman was recently commissioned to survey civil servants about their experiences during lockdown. Of the 26,000 respondents, 80% claimed that they were well supported to be productive within the home environment. Roughly the same number (81%) felt they could effectively share ideas and knowledge from home while 82% reported no problems accessing the technology.

However, the experience clearly hasn't been good for everyone and it was some of the lower scores relating to this that have most intrigued Kate. Seventy-two percent were happy with their work-life balance while working from home and 68% with how connected they felt to colleagues and the organisation. Other lower scoring areas included creative thinking, collaboration and social interactivity; activities which may be better suited to an office environment.

Planning for the future

"This is the first credible data set we've had on what to persist with post-lockdown," says Kate. "It's making us think about what's required to make the hybrid model work. We're building a better understanding of the types of activities which may be better delivered (for some people) at home, and those which are more suited to an office environment in order to remain productive and to protect people's work-life balance. It's helping us think about our workplace design and our programme's future focus areas and is already being fed into the workshops we're running and the guidance we're providing on how to adopt that hybrid model in future."

In the move towards a hybrid model, Smarter Working Business Partners will again likely have a big part to play. A real pre-Covid success story, each was assigned to a cohort of departments and tasked with helping them prepare for their maturity assessment in a way that went far beyond merely hitting their assessment target scores. Drawing on lessons learned across the Business Partner network, they were able to advise on appropriately tailored business change activities, designed to help departments realise their full smarter working potential.

❝ We're building a better understanding of which locations are best suited to which activitie ❞

Another powerful tool is their Smarter Working Reflective Change Book, a document designed to help departments reflect on what worked well for them, both pre- and post-Covid, and to feed that into their own smarter working programmes. It helps facilitate a discussion around processes, structures, ways of working, choice and flexibility as well as what's required to be productive and the sort of working culture, they want to create.

Next steps

While there have certainly been a number of positives to emerge, there is a nagging fear that lockdown's contribution to the smarter working cause might not have been entirely positive. That's because working from home has often been conflated with smarter working – and the past few months may have cemented that misconception in some people's minds.

> **Smarter working is about so much more than just having the capability to work remotely, whether that's at home or elsewhere**

Smarter working is actually a far bigger undertaking. It's about having the technology, workspaces and flexibility to make the best possible decisions about how, when and where to work, to best serve your customers. It's about culture, leadership and behaviours. Working away from an office space is just one consideration within the broader smarter working offer.

"We do face a tricky predicament," continues Kate, "because we've been able to use lockdown to help people think differently about how or where to work. However, we don't want lockdown and remote working to become synonymous with smarter working. That's especially true of people who might have had less-than-ideal experiences of home working during this time. We don't necessarily want that association to remain. As someone who has home schooled an eight-year old, for example, I'm so pleased that he's been able to return to school so that the smarter working freedoms available to me can be associated with normality and business as usual, not just with lockdown life."

"In fact, that's the next big test. I feel we're still selling the benefits of smarter working so it will be interesting to see whether, post-Covid, that's still the case or whether people will simply see smarter working as part of business as usual. Ideally, it will soon be the latter, meaning that ways of working will evolve to the extent that they're embedded within the fabric of departments and continually improved as part of their ongoing transformation.

"It's actually relatively simple to provide the tools, connectivity and fabulous workspaces to make smarter working happen," she concludes. "What's more challenging, yet really important, is the shift in behaviour – among leaders and individuals – to make the most of these resources. If the behaviours aren't right, if leaders aren't leading properly and if people don't feel they've been given the necessary 'permissions' to work as they see fit, then smarter working won't work. And that's why smarter working is about so much more than just having the capability to work remotely, whether that's at home or elsewhere."

Kate Guthrie
Deputy Director for Workplace Experience and Smarter Working Programme Director, Government Property Agency

As a Change and Transformation specialist, with a 20-year Civil Service career, Kate has led numerous transformation projects and programmes within a variety of departments, including the Cabinet Office, Ministry of Defence and Welsh Government. Kate is particularly passionate about the difference smarter working makes to people, teams and organisations and she's working across Government and the wider Civil Service to drive the smarter working agenda and the ambition of great places to work.