Thames Water Case Study

Background

Thames Water has been providing people with water for over 400 years, initially within the public sector and now as a private sector operator. Since the year 2000 Thames Water has been part of the RWE Group and is the managing company for RWE's international water business operation. RWE is the third largest water utility company in the world and also operates in electricity, gas and environmental services. 2002 turnover was €2,850m, of which the UK regulated business accounted for 60%. The UK & Ireland region combines the regulated water and wastewater activities of Thames Water Utilities Limited, providing services to 15 million people, alongside commercial interests including water industry outsourcing, utility contracting, and infrastructure management. There are a wide variety of job types ranging from meter readers, customer service agents, plant and infrastructure maintenance personnel, professional engineers and project managers, research and development staff, and product sampling and testing laboratory personnel. The average monthly number of employees in 2000 was 12,074 across the whole of Thames Water's businesses.

Working Patterns

A range of working patterns have been around for a very long time, for example 24 hr call-out to fix burst mains or failed pumping stations. Flexible working has now spread in other directions particularly in the call centre and other customer service areas which before privatisation would probably have been restricted to the traditional nine to five hours. Flexible working arrangements include various shift patterns, part-time working, weekend working etc. but the organisation only recognises three work bases: office, field and occasional home working.

Call centre workers are offered a wide variety of working hours and flexible patterns and are supplemented with temporary staff during the two peak billing periods. Office

workers also have varied contracts including part time and some grades can work compressed weeks.

Field workers include those who are based in their vans for much of the day. After a detailed risk assessment screens in vans were repositioned to avoid the potential back injury hazard of after a detailed risk assessment identified that twisting to look at a screen. Field workers also include those involved in the practical aspects of highway working, laying pipes, digging up roads etc. They have to be flexible to fit in with traffic flows, peak congestion and overnight working.

No staff are categorised as home workers but many do work from home occasionally, perhaps to complete a report or any task requiring uninterrupted concentration.

Drivers

The work of the organisation is increasingly enhanced by 24/7 operations, both from the point of view of highway working and to provide the necessary customer service levels. Some outside and highway work can also be influenced by the seasons e.g. longer days and better weather in the summer make it more efficient to dig holes and replace mains at that time of year. This kind of thinking leads to a focus on developing appropriate working patterns.

Although the legislation on flexible working requests for parents has not been a main driver, things like part time and flexible working for women did create a backlash of resentment amongst the predominantly male workforce. That led to a policy of allowing anyone to ask for part time working and an expectation that the default response from managers would be 'yes' to such requests. This has also resulted in a change of attitude from one where women were feeling ashamed about working part time, to one where it is much more acceptable for all, *"we don't want this to be an issue about working parents or people who are carers – we want it to become the way that we work."*

People now expect a reasonable work life balance and sparing them the difficulties of commuting into the office at peak times or driving to a depot simply to pick up tools or a van can reduce stress levels. Such expectations also have an effect on recruitment, particularly of graduates and professionals because *"people in the labour market know that they can demand [greater flexibility] they want to spend their leisure time doing what they want to do, not sitting in the car on the M4."*

Challenges

In order to make it work there must be effective performance management with really good key performance measures and systems that monitor those measures.

Communication is identified as a particular issue, especially in an organisation trying to align people with a new vision and get them to appreciate how their work fits into the whole process of meeting customer demands. That is difficult even when everyone is co-located and becomes a greater challenge for teams that are working in more mobile and/or flexible ways.

Ensuring that the organisation meets its duty of care responsibility to employees regardless of where and when they are working is a challenge, particularly if increasing numbers are working from home on a regular basis.

Equitable solutions can be difficult to identify and implement for professionals within a traditional culture of working unpaid hours above contracted hours. There are problems around the expectations of actual hours to be worked by part timers and these difficulties of perception are especially difficult to resolve when considering compressed weeks.

It can be more difficult for managers to make assessments based on the suitability of individuals, their job and the particular business drivers, rather than simply apply a one size fits all approach. Equipping managers with the necessary skills and tools to accomplish this is an ongoing challenge.

Summary

Thames Water is a large organisation that has been through considerable change over recent years. They are developing their services to be more customer focussed and are recognising that flexible working is a business led rather than an HR led project and that means having to "*readdress all the health and safety, communication, company culture issues as part of that implementation."*