

Flexible working reduces office accommodation costs and drives culture change

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Bridget Taylor
Director of Strategy
Customer Service Direct

Customer Service Direct – a joint venture between BT, Mid-Suffolk District Council, and Suffolk County Council – adopts an innovative operating model in partnership with BT Workstyle

Executive summary

Customer Service Direct is an innovative joint venture between Suffolk’s local government and BT. CSD was faced with the task of centralising its staff in a new building in Ipswich. But the organisation had some 650 Ipswich-based staff, while the new building had space for only 450.

CSD turned to BT Workstyle who identified and scoped a flexible working solution and helped to design the overall work environment. BT also renewed the organisation’s infrastructure, including IP Telephony to support hot desking. The intensive use of space led to the requirement for additional facilities in support of high utilisation rates. For example, meeting areas were sized to support a highly collaborative environment typical of a modern authority’s back office.

Centralising services in the new building under flexible working has enabled CSD to reduce accommodation charges by 25 per cent, and the joint venture is looking to reduce operating costs by around another 25 per cent in the first three years. Flexible working has also provided a better working environment for CSD people and changed the organisation’s culture by improving daily interaction between management and staff.

Marketplace

Customer Service Direct (CSD) – a joint venture company between BT, Mid-Suffolk District Council, and Suffolk County Council – is designed to deliver services more efficiently to the citizen. The venture got off the ground just as Suffolk County Council moved into a new building in central Ipswich, which replaced a collection of ageing offices spread in and around Ipswich.

Bridget Taylor, Director of Strategy at CSD, explains: “We were very fragmented. Different services all had their own networks and their own desktops, so there was no integration or connectivity. This not only made costs difficult to manage but also it did not serve as a coherent platform on which to provide public access channels.”

Business opportunity

As Suffolk County Council was moving, a second modern office block adjacent to the new County Council building also became available. It would form a perfect headquarters for CSD, but there was one problem. CSD had around 650 Ipswich-based staff but the new building would accommodate only 450 at the most.

Case study

Suffolk County Council

“When people come into the building they say it’s got a real buzz. Flexible working creates energy and transparency. The new ways of working that we have put in place with the help of BT really do change the organisation’s culture dramatically, in a way that I don’t think you can bring about through any other method.”

Bridget Taylor
Director of Strategy
Customer Service Direct

BT solution

Says Bridget Taylor: “The traditional approach would have been to go looking for another, larger building. But we treated the problem as an opportunity to reduce CSD accommodation needs through flexible working. We were looking at a ratio of 3:2 in our office space requirements. The BT Workstyle team had worked with other local authorities in developing and implementing flexible working and so understood the complex issues involved.”

Many CSD people are transactional workers who sit at screens processing payroll, pensions, or invoices and who clearly needed a fixed workstation. But there was also a significant number of mobile staff, whose jobs involved them in spending time with customers in face-to-face meetings, or simply travelling around Suffolk in the course of their duties. These so-called agile workers provided the elasticity that would make flexible working more viable.

Offices worldwide

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The BT Workstyle team was involved in identifying and scoping the solution, designing the overall work environment, and specifying the appropriate technology platforms. The intensive use of space led to the requirement for additional facilities in support of high utilisation rates. For example, meeting areas are sized to support a highly collaborative environment typical of a modern authority’s back office.

A flexible and responsive technological environment was required. BT defined a technology roadmap for CSD that converged voice and data. This meant only a single network connection to each desktop was needed to connect both computer and telephone. BT installed a structured cabling system, to a plan that enabled desks to be installed in a grid together with network printer stations and breakout areas for collaborative working, designed after the BT Workstyle group had analysed work families, team-by-team requirements and the spatial needs to support business functions.

A key technical element in flexible working was the adoption of Voice over IP which means that all any staff member has to do is key in his or her four-digit identity code into the telephone in any desk and that telephone then assumes their identity, so all calls are routed to them automatically

The solution had to be implemented prior to the organisational structure being finalised, within tight budget and time constraints. Each team was allocated a number of fixed and “hot” desks. BT worked with Suffolk CSD managers and the HR service to establish people’s working styles, making decisions around screen-based applications, rather than the paper-based processes that had been used previously.

Results

CSD did not have the luxury of a pilot or trial period. Because of the County Council’s move, CSD had to re-locate in just six days, over three successive weekends, without service interruption. The organisation was up and running again within hours. Bridget Taylor says: “Moving in was not without pain and not without people complaining or being anxious. However, it’s surprising how quickly everyone adapted to the new way of working. I think that there are very few people who would want to go back to their old offices.”

Centralising services in the new building under flexible working has enabled CSD to cut costs significantly. Accommodation charges were reduced by 25 per cent because the organisation is using only 450 desks, PCs and phones instead of 650. And the joint venture is looking to reduce operating costs by around another 25 per cent in the first three years. As well as cutting costs CSD, is making more efficient use of its space. Traditionally, office desks are occupied around 50 per cent of the time, while CSD has raised its occupancy to around 75 per cent.

Flexible working has provided a better working environment for CSD people and also improved daily interaction between management and staff. It’s no longer necessary for managers to create opportunities to meet staff, because they are together all the time. And managers get a better handle on what people are doing because they are out and about.

Bridget Taylor concludes: “It’s a great leveller in terms of hierarchy because everyone has exactly the same facilities – even the chief executive doesn’t have his own office. People get used to it very quickly and they accept you being around in a way that you just don’t see when you are locked away in your own office.

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Main BT products and services

- Integrated workspace design approach, and converged voice and data solutions
- BT Workstyle teamed with Suffolk Council’s HR department to enable the most effective use of staff time and resources

