Smart Flexibility

Moving Smart and Flexible Working from Theory to Practice

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This book aims to provide a guide for managers in implementing what I am calling ‘Smart Flexibility’ in their organisation in a business-focused way.

The approach to the subject is informed by five key ideas. The first is that the time for ‘evangelising’ about the benefits of flexible working is all but over. The point is how to achieve these benefits in the real world. So the main area that people are interested in now is about the practicalities. Hence the title of the book, *Smart Flexibility: Moving Smart and Flexible Working from Theory to Practice*.

The second key idea is that ‘flexible working’ needs to be implemented in ways that are progressive, business-focused and hit a range of benefits across the Triple Bottom line. It’s great to offer family-friendly options to staff. But it’s not enough. Working smarter and more flexibly needs to be central to corporate strategy, not a bolt-on to help those with caring responsibilities and to be generally nice to employees.

The third key idea is that implementing Smart Flexibility does not fall within a single specialism. Though flexible working projects may often be led by HR, Property or IT professionals, successful implementations are interdisciplinary. To achieve benefits across a broad front of increasing efficiency, improving agility, reducing costs, increasing employee satisfaction, widening opportunity and improving environmental performance requires coordinated action and getting everybody on board.

This integrated approach includes technology changes, culture change and physical changes back at the office, as well as facilitating new locations of work. That’s why in this book there are sections covering issues such as office layout, desks and storage. How things change ‘back at the office’ is an important ingredient of making Smart Flexibility a success.

The fourth key idea is that for Smart Flexibility to succeed, there has to be a robust empirical basis for change. Achievements have to be measurable. In some quarters flexible work and work-life balance are seen as being somewhat fluffy concepts, incapable of measurement and likely to add to company costs. If the approach is woolly, the outcome may indeed be fluffy. So it is important at the outset to establish metrics. It’s time to put some grit in the fluff, so to speak.

A fifth key idea is that we’re in an age of transition. The world is changing fast. The old ways are becoming increasingly less credible. But with the pace of change in technologies and the often slow pace of behavioural and cultural change in organisations, we’re only in the early stages of transformational change in the way we work, and in the ways we think organisations should operate.

Within the book there’s also an additional focus on change in the government sector. This is not only because I have done a fair amount of work in the sector, but also because the need to change is particularly acute in the current economic crisis. I also believe that
changes to national and local government can be particularly beneficial, and relate to wider benefits that new ways of working can deliver for society.

There is no alternative to change. The issues are around whether we do it well or do it badly.

This is not an academic book as such, though I hope the reader will find it has a sound academic underpinning. Academic research into new ways of working by its nature tends to lag a few years behind what companies are actually doing at the leading edge of business transformation. While this book references appropriate research and hopefully throws up some new ways of looking at things, it is not primarily concerned with theoretical models or proposing new concepts. Except when making a specific historical reference, I’ve tried to ensure that most of the studies referred to are dated within the last five or six years.

By focusing on what companies and public sector bodies are actually doing in the real world, my hope is to paint a lively and informative picture of how organisations are making the most of the new opportunities for Smart Flexibility, and the techniques for doing likewise in your own organisation.

The book focuses on larger organisations – private, public and voluntary sector – as these have a commonality of interest. They face a different set of issues from the micro-business and the home-based self-employed. We do include references to smaller businesses that are growing in smarter ways, where it illustrates aspects of smart and flexible working that have a wider importance.

So the book is written for a corporate audience – that is, it is not written to provide advice to the individual employee seeking more flexibility or for guidance on how to run a home-based business. There are numerous other resources out there to provide advice for the latter market. The guidance provided in these pages is for the manager in a large organisation managing teams of employees on a smarter and more flexible basis, or providing the corporate facilities, resources and policies to enable them to do so.

The book is based on 18 years of implementation work and related research. Working inside organisations, reporting on the changing world of work for Flexibility.co.uk, and carrying out research for a range of government agencies on the impacts of new ways of working, I’ve had the opportunity of seeing what works well and what does not. The book also benefits from the collective experience and wisdom of the Smart Work Network, a collaboration network for large organisations implementing smart and flexible working. I’ve tried to crystallise that experience in these pages in a framework that I hope is helpful for managers seeking to implement more advanced forms of flexible work.

Smart Flexibility: Moving Smart and Flexible Working from Theory to Practice ‘does what it says on the tin’. Chapters 1 and 2 briefly outline the context, principles and drivers – the reasons why companies are interested in becoming flexible and how the world is changing to make it both possible and desirable. Chapters 3 to 12 focus on the practicalities with case studies to show how forward-looking companies and public sector organisations are adapting to the challenge and gaining the benefits.

In Chapter 13, there is a look at the wider impacts on the world and how organisations can dovetail their strategies for Smart Flexibility with wider environmental and social benefits. Finally, in Chapter 14, there’s a brief look forward to what might be next on the horizon, in the continuing story of Smart Flexibility evolution.

I hope you find the book both useful and enjoyable, and that it helps you on your journey as you help your organisation to modernise and succeed in the new world of work.
Note on the Case Studies

I’ve included in this book 10 case studies of organisations that are embedding Smart Flexibility in their working practices – though they may call it by various other names. Five are from the private sector, and five from the public sector. The achievements or approaches of several other organisations are mentioned, with references to where you can follow up for more information.

There are, of course, other companies and public sector organisations out there on a similar track. The ones included here illustrate various aspects of leading practice in implementing Smart Flexibility, whether it’s the use of technologies, innovative working environments, or techniques for cultural change. There are many things we can learn from each of them. One thing they have in common is, each in their own way, adopting an integrated and strategic approach to achieving Smart Flexibility benefits across a number of fronts.

Several of the people I spoke to in the course of the interviews described it as a ‘journey’, involving a lot of learning and sometimes mistakes on the way. I don’t think any of them would describe their journey as being at an end: there are always next steps and a key principle is about being adaptable and being open to the future.

For more case studies, and a bit more detail on some of the cases included in the book, it’s worth checking the Flexibility website at www.flexibility.co.uk/cases.