The Work-Life Balancing Act

A growing strain is being placed on public organisations to 'get with the program' and evolve their working practices around agility, smart working, and greater work-life balance…

The blurring of the lines between Public and Private Sector practices. It's becoming a real dichotomy for PSOs isn't it? A nuisance even. And it's all down to those pesky, annoying things known as 'people'. They're just getting so demanding these days! Cuh!

First there are those 'people' to whom the PSOs must provide services. The ones who demand (nay expect!) those services to be delivered in the manner and formats that are convenient to them, just like in their private dealings. It's almost as if they think their tax pounds ought to be used in a timely, efficient manner or something. The very idea.

And then there are those on the other side of the fence. Those working in the Public Sector. And that lot are apparently after some new-fangled thing called 'work-life balance'. I ask you. It's getting beyond a joke.

The thing is, when it comes to delivering more agile working practices, that is the literal truth.

According to recent research, nearly 90% of senior decision makers across the globe now see organisational agility as critical for success. And with smart working – the need for greater flexibility, agility, and responsiveness – in turn seen almost uniformly as pivotal to that organisational agility, it should come as no surprise that more and more PSOs are looking to a blend of people and technologies to provide the answer.

The problem is that, while the desire to start adopting the kind of flexible, agile working patterns and practices required is one thing, actually adopting and adapting to them is quite another. Especially for the Public Sector. Indeed, historically, most PSOs have been ill-equipped to deliver or manage such change.

With mobile and remote access technologies having made it possible for millions of employees to live and work in a manner that would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago, the Nine-to-Five, fixed workplace is a thing of the past for much of the private sector. You might even say that the idea of working 'non-traditional' hours is old news.

It is a very different deal for an organisation in the public sector however, which, by its very nature is a much less moveable feast. Unlike private industry, the Public Sector is highly and publicly regulated.

Agencies must therefore balance usability and accessibility against compliance.

They need to ensure every dataset and record is more than adequately protected and that all devices are adequately secured. They simply cannot afford to do otherwise. And they must also do all this on budget. Often a shrinking one. And without hindering the end user in the process. That's a pretty big ask even for a well-equipped IT function, much less your average, straitened PSO trying to juggle legacy technologies with IT resource and expertise shortages.

The answer? It is not simply a matter of drafting in and deploying the right technologies and the right people – although these things are, of course, essential – but of striking the right balance between three things: technologies, people, and process.

There are, at least, examples of such occurrences however.

Morriston Hospital in Swansea, for example, whose management team recently hit upon the idea of using administrative staff to address particular clinical bottlenecks. It decided, during the height of its winter demand, to draft in employees with no medical expertise but whose other, technological, skills and knowledge could be utilised to relieve pressure on its doctors and nursing staff by to helping to reduce logistical delays.

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These employees were charged with using their largely technology-based experience to chase up things like scan results and the delivery of medication. A simple enough idea, but one hailed as a great success.

If such strategies in no way suggest a panacea for complex issues such as seasonal NHS overcrowding (of course they don't), they do hint at the kind of creative thinking and flexible uses of tech resource that PSOs can start turning to their advantage in order to address the forces impacting their operations. (Okay, pun pretty much intended.)

The fact is that the advent of the smartphone and its cousins really has revolutionised how people work; checking one's work email at home, in a restaurant, or queuing for your half-time Bovril and pie is not nearly the oddity it once was. (Indeed it's pretty much par for the course these days).

The hospital's scenario also hints that, for a PSO's working practices to be considered truly 'agile', more than 'agile working' maybe needed.

If the underlying objective of today's PSO is to empower itself to become 'smarter' – to embrace key technologies to drive greater flexibility, agility, and responsiveness – it also needs to anticipate and address other important factors to consider the more human forces impacting its operations and how these can and must be tied into technology investments.

Only then can it fully empower its human capital to deliver the smarter, more flexible working patterns needed, and provide those people with the support and technologies they need to underpin those practices.

The real lesson here? It's not simply a work-life balance that needs to be struck. But a work-life-technology balance.