

## **The Long and Winding Road – How to Reduce Commuting Time!**

Commuting times in the UK over the last ten years have risen dramatically and has become part of the UK work culture with not particularly positive effects both on the individual and the company alike.

Long hours stuck on the road in traffic jams or on an overcrowded train, often with no spare seating, impacts on the quality of life for the individual and can cause stress demonstrated by headaches, queasy stomachs and rocketing blood pressure. This can create a heavy burden on health. For the company this can impact on the bottom line as productivity reduces due to exhausted staff who can not deliver their full potential. There are even implications for the UK economy with congestion costing £20 billion per year. With the intended rise of 14 billion more cars on the road in the next ten years the problem can only get worse.

In order to combat this situation the traditional 9-5 working day has to be challenged and companies need to find alternative ways of allowing their staff to work.

HR has a big part to play in supporting companies to introduce new methods of working to reduce commuting times.

Suggestions that could be implemented are flexitime, flexible working, staggered hours, compressed hours or home working.

Public sector organisations have long run the system of flexitime where staff are required to be in the office for set core hours eg 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 4pm. The core hours are operated within a period of long office opening hours eg 8am to 6pm allowing staff to start early or later. Records are kept of hours worked signed off by line managers. Extra hours worked are banked and are taken within a given reference period. Managers need to coordinate the working hours of their department to ensure there is sufficient cover provided and monitor staff for potential abuse of the system.

Flexible hours, which was initially introduced by family friendly legislation for women returning from maternity leave is growing in popularity for all staff. This can take many forms – the introduction of part time working, job shares, term time working and to some extent earlier/later starting times which can incorporate staggered hours. This can be for both men and women.

The hours remain constant and are not shifted around without sufficient prior notice which allows easy management and planning. The benefits to the work/life balance can hugely impact on productivity and ultimately the bottom line.

An alternative is compressed hours whereby staff work their full working week in four days for example rather than five.

Homeworking is the ultimate in reducing commuting time and congestion. With the growth of technology in IT and telecommunications, there are huge benefits to be gained by companies considering this option. Homeworking can also reduce office costs if staff are allowed to work from home on a regular basis. All the company need do is provide hot desk space for when employees need to attend the office.

For meetings, many companies are starting to make use of teleconferencing facilities which can reduce the need for physical meetings. Teleconferencing can take place via audio facilities; dialling into a prescribed phone number or video conferencing which can be by computer using webcam.

Many companies can be wary of homeworking not quite trusting that their staff will be working rather than chatting with the neighbours or watching daytime TV. A system of performance management needs to be put firmly into place with managers closely monitoring that performance objectives are being achieved. Under-performance should be dealt with in the normal manner of using capability or disciplinary procedures.

Health and safety for homeworkers should be paramount with documentation in place for risk assessments.

The "out of sight out of mind" scenario can often exist so managers need to ensure that they regularly communicate with their homeworking staff either via phone, email or team meetings.

Where companies are not prepared to recognise the benefits of implementing such initiatives, with the assistance of HR, they should promote ways to reduce the stress of commuting incorporated into a travel policy.

The encouragement of car sharing or pooling to reduce congestion on the roads can also be considered helping to promote the green movement in the UK. Individuals can take it in turn to drive, thereby reducing stress somewhat.

Using different methods to commute can sometimes help depending on the length of journey the use of a bike, bus or train could be considered.

Promoting wellbeing campaigns with stress-reducing lunch time workouts or reduced gym membership may be other considerations.

HR should be working with companies to look at implementing some of these initiatives and be the champions in reducing commuting times to the benefit of all concerned.

By Sandra Beale FCIPD  
[www.sjbealehrconsult.co.uk](http://www.sjbealehrconsult.co.uk)  
07762 771290  
info@sjbealehrconsult.co.uk