

THE FUTURE OF THE WORKPLACE

**Interview with
MARTIN HELLAWELL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
SOFTCAT PLC**

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In a series of interviews with Spectrum Workplace, companies consider the changing requirements of both the business and the employee.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

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THE INCREASING ADOPTION of dress-down policies – and not just for Friday – raises an interesting side issue: how does a company ensure that employees, who don't usually need to be suited and booted, are suitably dressed when they need to go out and see customers?

Softcat have a novel solution: offering a free shirt ironing service. Pointing out the rail of freshly pressed shirts hanging on a rail waiting to be collected by their owners, CEO Martin Hellowell says this perk ensures that when staff go out to meet customers, they look professional.

"It's difficult to be anti-corporate when you are a plc," he observes. "But having a dress-down environment is seen as a benefit and I think companies will continue to get less formal in dress codes. We have one dress-up day, which is Monday, and the rest are dress-down days. But when people go out to see customers they need to look the part."

It's the little touches like this that make the difference when the business, which provides IT infrastructure to the corporate and public sectors, is trying to attract and retain recruits. There are some 1000 staff across six offices, of which 400 are based at HQ. Softcat recruit "a lot" of young graduates every year and

experience high rates of attrition during the first year of employment – though those who make it past that first year tend to "stay for ever."

Hellowell strongly believes that employee satisfaction is one of the drivers to achieve Softcat's desire to give worldclass customer service, and cites the company having come top in the 2016 Great Place to Work 'Best Large Workplace' category. The judging for this award highlighted good communications and leadership and an improved sense of corporate social responsibility. "Where we don't score so highly, but it's the same for all companies, is pay and rations," says Hellowell. "It's human nature for people to say they would like more money."

Money aside, what attracts and satisfies and keeps the new generation of employees? "It's about lack of hierarchy and being able to create vibrancy," Hellowell replies.

It's also important to give staff kudos for their achievements, which is a reason why Softcat enters whatever appropriate award scheme is going: any individual achievements or business wins are communicated throughout the company on large screens on the walls.

What has particular appeal to a young workforce, suggests Hellawell, is a company's investment in technology. "I would say this as I'm in IT, but it's incredibly attractive. Millennials have been spoiled rotten in terms of the IT they have at home and they expect to get the same standard in the workplace. It's hard to attract them without it. We like face-to-face communication but being an IT company technology does play a large part in how we work."

So the company allows staff to bring their own devices to work, and they have the use of video-conferencing facilities.

The company provides quiet spaces where people can go to relax or snuggle up in bean bags or play video games. There are facilities for playing 'walking football', table tennis and pool. Every day, before and after working hours, music is played in the building, with staff taking turns to create a play-list. There is also a focus on well being, with staff getting subsidised rates at the local gym, having access to free fruit and subsidised food - and being encouraged to take lunch breaks. "A lot of organisations seem to frown on people taking their full break but we encourage it," Hellawell says. "I want them to do something relatively healthy at lunchtime. I think that's good for productivity in the long term."

Staff benefits include regular barbecues in the summer, complete with steel bands, and a free bar every Friday night after work. Then there are foreign holidays as rewards for special achievements, and not just for sales staff.

Hellawell estimates that these incentives cost a seven-figure sum annually, and thinks of this as an investment more than a cost. "They are two sides of the same coin. Everything you invest in has a cost; this is an investment with an intangible return."

"The physical environment also plays a part in employee satisfaction. We want to be seen as vibrant and dynamic and we want people to be engaged and motivated, and the workplace needs to reflect and facilitate all that. To me a good physical environment is an important part of the mix but it is not an end in itself. And is nowhere near as important as the people."

Softcat provide stand-up desks, both for general use and specifically for the use of people with bad backs. "We're probably not gold standard in terms of ergonomics but we do give training in correct posture," says Hellawell. "I was a bit sceptical about stand-up desks at first. I thought they might be another fad, that people would use them for a

week and then get bored and want to sit down again. But I was proved wrong. People do use them, and they use them a lot."

Talking of standing up, Hellowell believes it's important to encourage staff not to be too static. "We encourage them to go and see someone who sits four desks down rather than phoning or emailing them. We also have something we call 'power hour' two or three times a week where we encourage people to stand up while they're making phone calls. It creates a very different atmosphere and it also encourages people to make more calls because it's obvious to everyone that if they are not standing up they're not on the phone!"

But while Hellowell doesn't need convincing that offering a good workplace increases productivity, he suggests that it's difficult to prove. "It's a gut feeling that it has to be a contributing factor and that there's a connection between wellbeing and engagement and getting the offices right," he muses.

"I'm sure there are certain professions, and even parts of our industry, where you could put things in place to track how things affect productivity but at the moment the only way to measure it would be to compare two groups of

staff, one in a nice office and one in a less pleasant environment."

One obvious debate centres on how much office space is now required in the first place. "It's a very interesting and difficult question," says Hellowell. "We used to be very much office based but now 45% of the staff can be out at any one time so we're trying to adjust the culture.

"The easy answer is to offer flexible working and let people work where they want but the ramifications of staff engagement are significant. A big reason for our success is that we have people working physically with each other day in and day out. I have seen other companies, particularly American ones, where their offices are like libraries because there are so many people working from home. I think that is distracting for the business."

He points out, though, that American corporations IBM and Yahoo have recently both come out against home working. In any event, some people don't even want to work from home, certainly on a permanent basis, preferring to be in the office. "Others want to come in at seven am and go home at four in the afternoon, and companies will have to try to accommodate that as much as

they can," says Hellawell, "but we do have to fit around our customers, who generally work between nine and six."

Hellawell isn't keen on hot desking, apart perhaps for staff whose jobs routinely keep them out of the office. "It means people don't have a 'family' to work with in the office," he asserts, "and you get this morbid atmosphere where people don't really know the people sitting near them on a particular day"

So he doesn't see hot desking as a fashionably convenient way to reduce premises costs. More important, he suggests, is getting the right density of people to space. "Energy is important. The more you spread people out the more you lose that energy. But there has to be a line in the sand; our Manchester office is very dense and I love the buzz there but it got to the point where it was difficult to hear yourself speak, and that isn't a sustainable way of working."

Interestingly, staff surveys show that the biggest source of dissatisfaction is located just outside the building itself. It's lack of car parking spaces. "It's a huge problem," says Hellawell. "Even if the local station was on a main line, which it isn't, and we provided a shuttle service to the office, people would still want to be able to drive. We tried car sharing schemes but they tailed off after

a while. The rate we take on new people makes this an ever-increasing problem and a company can't simply solve it by moving because new office builds have even less parking space."



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