

## Interchange Group practices what it preaches

When companies and organisations come to Interchange Group for advice on mobile and wireless technologies, they can be sure the business efficiency specialist knows what it is talking about. Interchange not only extols the value of the mobile information revolution to others, it embraces it wholeheartedly itself through its GreenWorking programme.

In recent years, the UK-based company has been moving over to a sustainable business model for remote and mobile working. Today, its workforce is almost 100% remote or mobile working, with only one or two employees manning a storage facility. Many staff have even found that they no longer need to travel with laptops and are able to rely on their BlackBerry devices for all their mobile working needs.

### Powerful technologies

Since it was founded in 1976, Interchange Group has specialised in a business technology. Latterly the company's focus has been on introducing the benefits of remote working, mobile and wireless technologies to a wide range of public and private sector organisations.

"We believe that advances in mobile and wireless technologies can transform the way UK businesses operate, bringing widespread benefits to both staff and businesses. Given that, it seemed logical and sensible for us to take a dose of our own medicine," Interchange Group managing director Phillip Jones explained.

"The rise of the mobile information worker is one of the most remarkable business phenomena of our times. Remote and mobile technologies have the power to transform the way businesses are operated, structured and managed, bringing about significant benefits in terms of productivity, profitability and business sustainability."

According to the Labour Force Survey, undertaken by the Office for National Statistics, over 3.4 million people – or 12 per cent of the working population – now regularly or permanently work from home. That figure has grown by a fifth in the last ten years.

### Experience and insight

Interchange's decades in the technology business have given the company an extensive insight into the difficulties businesses can experience when staff are physically separated from their customers, suppliers, colleagues and support services. Jones sums up their expertise trenchantly as, "We're good at erasing the effects of that physical separation."

Times have moved on in recent years, as the company came to realise that remote and mobile ways of working are more than just means to solving a problem, they are positive influences in themselves, bringing benefits to both employees and businesses.

### The Interchange experience

Interchange's own experience is a case in point. Over the years, the company expanded, absorbing other companies and, in the process, inheriting a legacy of buildings and facilities spread in four locations around the country. This inevitably led to inefficiencies and extra costs. For Interchange, as with many public and private sector organisations, the answer lay in exploiting mobile technology and rebuilding their business processes around it.

"It was obvious that, for us, the concept of the physical office did not conform to a sustainability agenda" Jones said. "Though many of our staff had office bases, they still spent most of their time on the road leading to communications problems and raising questions about the effectiveness and green credentials of the office-based model".

"The harder we looked, the clearer it became. It was time for Interchange to switch to a remote and mobile infrastructure – a virtual office, if you like. The technology was right, the time was right and we had a top-down commitment. We've never had cause to regret that decision."

### Better connected

The transformation started with the closure of one of Interchange's main offices, transferring roughly 45% of the company's workforce to flexible working. Those employees were given the option of relocating or working from home with a PC, broadband internet and communicating via a BlackBerry wireless handheld device for mobile phone, email and data.

"It's significant that even at an early stage, most of our employees opted to work remotely. Far from feeling cut off from their colleagues, most of our mobile information workers said they were in better contact with their teams. And there was the added advantage of being able to organise their time and their work as it suited them."

That first foray into mobile working was so successful that two years later Interchange decided to bite the bullet and close two further offices, with the final office being closed during 2009.

Technology gives Interchange home and mobile workers wireless access to the company's document management system and a knowledge management system, as well as a field service system for processing sales leads and time tracking.

### Core requirements

Any company can transform the way it does business by going mobile, according to Jones. "With many homes already equipped with the core technical requirements for voice and data connection – broadband and Wi-Fi – and most householders familiar with using the technology, it's usually surprisingly straightforward. And as the technology advances, equipment is becoming faster, more powerful and easier to use – as well as more cost-effective for businesses to purchase."

More and more businesses are thinking like Interchange, waking up to the fact that they can improve their efficiency and achieve a greater return on investment from adopting remote and mobile working technologies.

### Measurable benefits

The quantifiable advantages of using IP and wireless technologies to gain increased accessibility and flexibility are very wide-ranging, from faster decision-making and improved productivity to reduced travel costs and higher staff retention rates.

Internal processes can be improved and speeded up. For instance, directors can authorise cheques and undertake other business transactions by email instead of physically.

With no time wasted in a daily commute, remote workers arrive at their desks easier, quicker and less stressed. Instead of spending hours on the road and in long-winded meetings, technology can bring together virtual teams in multi-locations through conference calls or video conferences, covering the same ground more efficiently and in less time.

Infrastructure savings can be significant. Telecoms giant BT, for example, saves around £70 million a year on accommodation costs alone since more than 80% of its teleworkers became remote workers. In addition, there's evidence that remote working produces a more

motivated workforce, leading to reduced staff turnover and sickness absences.

Last but not least, the environmental and sustainability case for GreenWorking is compelling. With organisations constantly on the lookout for ways to reduce their carbon footprint, what could be greener than a home-based, congestion-busting workforce meaning fewer travel based CO2 emissions, less time lost travelling, a much lower cost base and higher productivity? Its not all one sided either; employees' work life balance has improved as well – a true "win-win" situation.

### Changing attitudes

Having decided to 'go remote', organisations need to make a series of important decisions. "Delivering flexible working solutions is not a 'one size fits all' affair," said Jones. "To make sure they optimise the benefits of this way of working, it's vital that organisations prioritise their business needs and select the right technology."

"Though technological advances are undoubtedly an important driver for change, we see the current situation as being as much about attitudes to working as a response to what technology has to offer."

"Remote and mobile working practices mean changing the whole company culture, looking afresh at the way people work - GreenWorking. That's a radical step for a lot of companies, so it's vitally important that changes are managed well."

"Organisations need to ensure they have the right staff in place and that they train and motivate them in their new role. They need to look at their business processes and adapt and improve them."

"Many businesses still cling to working practices that are outdated and wasteful in time and energy. Technology can help us change that, giving us more flexible and productive ways of working, while helping working people find a balance between family life and meeting the needs of today's businesses and public sector organisations."

"We think of flexible GreenWorking as smarter working. At Interchange we've seen the proof of that at first hand," Jones concludes.

### For more information:

You can find out more details about Interchange products and services and find out more about how an Interchange Remote or Mobile Working solution can help your business become more agile by visiting our website at [www.interchangegroup.com](http://www.interchangegroup.com) or why not talk to us direct:

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