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Briefing

THE PEOPLE ISSUE

NOVEMBER 2015

When the Instagram generation rules the world, what will the firms fighting for business look like on the inside (and the outside)?

Inside all the people

Inside this month:

DLA Piper's international HR chief Carol Ashton on managing tomorrow's more diverse and demanding talent base

Industry insight on managing the risks of an agile workforce, and to make management information work for HR

And in our photo feature, an apprentice, a diversity leader, a projects chief, a business manager and a freelance lawyer

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New builders, new worlds

Letter from the editor

This time last year (which, of course, bears a striking resemblance to only yesterday), we were celebrating our first-ever cover shoot that successfully assembled a group of law firm operational leaders in one place at one time.

This year we decided to return to our trendy Shoreditch hangout to get to know some more fresh faces getting their hands dirty at the coalface of change.

They span not just departments, but generations. From a flexible lawyer, to a firm taking early advantage of legal apprentices, and significant bridge builders between business services and fee earning communities, these are the people building the firm of the future. Our sincere thanks to **DLA Piper**, **Pinsent Masons, Ince & Co**, **RPC** and **Withers** for surrendering them for a few hours.

We also chat to **DLA Piper international HR director**, **Carol Ashton**, about exactly what it takes to get increasingly diverse groups of talent to sing from the same song sheet – and preferably in tune – for consistent client service.

And finally, keep on reading for some awesome supplier perspectives on the tricky nitty gritty of top talent management.

Richard Brent, editor, Briefing
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Interview: Carol Ashton, DLA Piper

The international HR director of DLA Piper says that talent management of ever increasing employee groups depends on surfacing, and substantiating, open conversation about goals, needs and concerns.

page 06

Feature: Tomorrow's people

There are some strong forces gathering in law firms, building them up to behave rather differently. **Briefing** assembles the new wave setting out to refresh how legal operates.

page 12

This month's interview with Carol Ashton was transcribed by: TRANSCRIPTIONSERVICES from IntelligentOffice

Industry analysis index

The Briefing Interview

Group rethink

Law firms are increasingly composed of many communities under one roof. Creating the essential cohesive culture calls for care and attention to everyone, says DLA Piper's Carol Ashton

Words: Richard Brent
Photography: Simon Brandon

From shorter-term, goal-focused business projects to freelance legal capacity for clients' peaks and troughs, legal is gradually adjusting its operations to a world with a more contingent workforce.

Demand for greater flexibility – and autonomy – is spiralling out from the formal part-time arrangement, and fewer people work from their desks every day. But many more groups of people may need to fly in and out of the foyer to make their individual marks on a piece of work or project. This, of course, still takes place in buildings where the partnership model remains intact. Traditional and so-called 'disruptive' careers will now regularly need to work together for the common good – and it falls to HR to make sure everyone plays nicely.

Carol Ashton, international HR director at DLA Piper, has the daunting challenge of negotiating such societal and mindset shifts for one of the very largest law firms in the world (not to mention one named 'Game changing law firm of the past 10 years' at the 2015 FT Innovative Lawyers awards). So it's no surprise that she

"Try to understand where each community is coming from – and always be curious."

Carol Ashton, international HR director, DLA Piper recommends breaking things down a bit to make them more manageable. Employees aren't cogs in a machine – but a greater number of groups do need to be well oiled with individual attention to retain and nurture the necessary talent mix.

Reaching understanding

"There's no doubt that the firm to crack the successful management and motivation of a much more diverse workforce is going to be the winner," says Ashton. "But it's also going to be difficult. The challenge we have is to distil a technically tricky strategy into something that seems quite clear and straightforward to make it engaging enough to succeed."

For that reason, she explains, focusing on the workforce as a set of groups of needs should avoid overhaul and actively seek simplicity. It's a fundamental psychological truth that people will prefer to resist things that smack of significant change or interference.

"You can call it 'employee segmentation', but rolling out a shiny new workforce segmentation model would never work. Simple, personal conversations have so much power. And the answer is so often already in the room. Harness the communication opportunities that already exist, with simple tools such as SurveyMonkey, social media, meetings, conferences and existing internal networks to outline intentions and gather useful information. But you really have to get out there and talk – or rather listen – to people. Try to understand where each community is coming from – and always be curious."

A team of HR business partners has a big part to play at DLA Piper. Conversations are led by them across the global firm to ensure the employer value proposition is as accurate as possible.

And accuracy is, of course, essential. "You need to synthesise a vast amount of data into headline insights to make the business case to the executive committee – but it's also a good idea to go back and test what you find," says Ashton. There's a risk of making assumptions about what groups may want based on media commentary and similar channels, she says, but any business change needs to be clearly evidence-based.

In DLA Piper's case, each professional community – business managers and project managers, for example – will have a regular operational meeting where information can be surfaced.

"People love to talk about themselves," laughs Ashton, but it's a serious point she's making, particularly if those people are facing similar challenges. It may only be a brief meeting or a short workshop activity, but managers should find a way to slot it in, she says.

A good example of these focus groups is the business manager community the firm has built up – people from a range of business backgrounds who, between them, take charge of the operations of the international practice groups and major jurisdictions (see Maddie Grindal, p13). "They are very dispersed, but they come together regularly to discuss operational matters and strategic plans – and they are very open to HR joining in and discussing the key issues at hand."

Creating consistency

The other side of segmentation, however, is that different groups need to meld to support true consistency in client service.

"Our big challenge is responding to groups in a way that simultaneously supports an overall integrated brand and set of values," admits Ashton.

Any process to protect this consistency is, of course, welcome – and the firm has just invested in a new recruitment tool to provide better benchmarks of success when it comes to selection and onboarding of candidates across all its international offices.

"We found ourselves staring at a vast number of recruitment processes across many countries. We've now replaced those with just a handful of end-to-end processes," says Ashton. "And it introduces a more efficiently consistent recruitment experience not just for us, but also for candidates as we improve how we respond to, screen and onboard our talent.

"In future we can also be much more scientific with the data about who's applying to us, and therefore which of our channels are working most effectively. Does it differ with the segment of employee, for example?

In the months ahead, we should be able to have some very interesting conversations about how we can use data to drive recruitment plans."

Ashton's HR manager for Germany – a high-growth strategic location – is, she says, part of an international team mapping out the processes the firm needs and prioritising the countries for piloting it.

On the other side of tenure, meanwhile, growth in the contract lawyer market (see p15) means firms are seeking strategic interaction with ex-employees no less than those they want to attract.

"There's definitely a group of what you might call 'boomerang' employees who you can welcome back. But more than that, business today needs to be more focused on building lifelong relationships. "Powerful connections can be anywhere and everywhere – and of course, ex-employees are also brand ambassadors, or even future clients.

"The challenge ahead is quite like the challenge for our firm in expanding so quickly to this point. We've some great alumni networks already, and now we're looking to join them up into a firm-wide alumni programme which – while keeping some local chapters – learns from different offices about the events and communications that work best."

But firms also need be more thoughtful about leavers in general, she suggests. "It's quite easy to keep good relationships with people who've left for a great new career opportunity. However, someone who just isn't going to make partner, or who has been counselled out in other scenarios, can still be relevant in an unforeseen future. Law firms probably need to be a bit more mature about how some conversations are handled."

Training together

DLA also tries to build greater consistency through its training activity – including for business services employees and the lawyers they support in tandem.

Ashton explains: "Our career academy programme covers career milestone events, running from new joiners at graduate level to a foundation academy if you join once qualified, and management academies for the senior associates."

But all are designed, she says, to ensure people are well supported and developed in their current role – while prepared for possible future promotion. Peers can come together to explore business and interpersonal skills relevant to their experience level. The firm had always run a parallel event called the Operations Academy for its business services functions. But two years ago Ashton decided the two streams would do better to converge.

"These days the split of career academy attendance is around 70% fee earners to 30% support. We took the view that both groups are facing some similar challenges when it comes to team or project management, and thought there might be real benefit in bringing them together for training."

An analysis of training needs, for example, identified aspects of commerciality and financial management for attention. The firm designed a business simulation game to focus on skills development, but which also served to build internal rapport.

"It's really quite competitive, which of course appeals to every last one of them," laughs Ashton. "But although some lawyers in some jurisdictions are very clued up on how the firm makes money and financial systems, that can somewhat depend on how open their manager is with information. In this exercise, they could find themselves sitting next to somebody from the finance team who hadn't really appreciated the stresses of managing a matter, or doing business development. It's fascinating to see them juggling all of that, and really exploring different perspectives on a challenge."

Another session takes on team leadership and effective delegation. "That's a challenge for everyone, but while the skills are the same, deploying them can be subtly different, depending on discipline. The trick's to ensure you have people who are truly peers in terms of status and experience so the value of sharing is maximised."

At certain levels, she says, training takes place on a regional basis to reflect operational structures and ensure cost-effectiveness – but some managers might be sat in a room playing out scenarios with people from the other side of the world.

"It isn't just the power of learning from people performing different roles – there's also the power of perspectives from different jurisdictions and practice groups," she says. "That's an incredible integrator."

Secrets of succession

And joint knowledge-sharing ties to another of Ashton's new projects – more detailed talent mapping for tighter succession planning.

The firm is evolving a 'future leaders' programme which, she says, draws on the traditional "nine-box" talent-mapping method – internationally recognised for pipeline management by mapping all team members across a grid on the basis of both current performance and future potential.

But as with work toward segmentation, her main advice for a strong succession plan would be to avoid over-complication rather than following reams of methodology.

"You don't need lots of HR jargon. You know who your people are. Rank them and map them onto the grid. Just talk about who's where and who's now ready for the next step – and who will be ready in a couple of years if they have the right experiences under their belt."

The plan is to roll this process out to business services career planning – but the model won't be mandated if it simply doesn't fit with a certain team or local market dynamic.

"What we're encouraging is the process of knowing your talent really well, ranking people in terms of readiness for promotion and future opportunities, and identifying what those with the highest potential need to move up. It's one thing to think more systematically about your three-year partnership pipeline – but quite another to decide on the components for action and ensure they're consistent."

However, as with finding ways to break down the workforce, she says the driver is to have more open career planning conversations across the board.

"It's the same with performance management," she adds. "You'd think the benefits would be very clear. You're just being transparent about expectations by agreeing objectives, aligned to firm strategy. But performance management is often under-utilised because it's reduced to a question of process, when the real value is the quality of the conversation.

"We know lawyers are sceptical of any hint of bureaucracy. Performance management fits quickly into that category. And for the lawyers reviewing, it's outside their comfort zone. Lawyers love their practice and clients, and maybe some business development, but the people stuff is hard. It can be messy, and the benefits aren't immediate. People hide from it if they can.

"But if they're hiding, they probably don't prepare, and if they don't prepare, it's poorly handled. So perceptions become self-fulfilling." Again, she says, the mantra is always to simplify. "Simplify the form, reduce the time it takes, and improve the functionality of any system you use. You also need a package of coaching support, and to persuade performance managers to admit, or to accept, that they might need some help."

Sharing the workload

One thing for professional services to diligently avoid, stresses Ashton, is positioning HR as police officer – frantically chasing up a flurry of forms and compliance with unpopular process.

To this end, some DLA processes are now run from a shared services centre (alongside some areas of finance and BD) in Warsaw, Poland. DLA first transferred some 50 processes over an 18-month UK pilot (in Birmingham), and the Polish base will expand on this to manage around 80, from performance management to promotions. Poland currently supports activity in jurisdictions such as Germany and the Netherlands. Next on the cards will be something similar for the UK and Asia.

"This means we can free up HR talent to move up the value chain," says Ashton. "My team used to be primarily generalists – so competence levels were thinly spread. Now, there's a matrix of generalists and firm-wide specialists, with shared services support.

"Of course, location is partly based on labour arbitrage and cost efficiencies, but it's also about the talent pool. The quality of HR talent in Poland is really high, including many employees who are incredibly well travelled and able to speak several languages."

But they're yet one more group (within a group) for HR to get to grips with if they haven't – and they'd better do that quickly.

"These individuals are alert to the fact they're highly marketable. They've no fewer expectations of their experience and future opportunities than many others who work for us," says Ashton.

It seems that the kaleidoscopically contingent talent pool today's leading law firms need just keeps spinning. It may feel like a dizzying ride, but law firm management might not need a massive overhaul or brand new ways of keeping pace. Invest in improving the quality of conversations according to Ashton – and remember to keep it simple. ●

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Feature

Tomorrow's people

There's a new gang in legal town. Between them, they're building future growth out of greater flexibility. Editor, Richard Brent, rounds them up. Photography: Jonathan Goldberg

In the last issue of Briefing (October 2015) we outlined how firms are recruiting a more diverse talent pool to build a fairer, more flexible and more efficient future. Some new recruits are introducing new ways of working, some want new things from work, and some are even bravely bridging the worlds of lawyer and business services in new leadership roles. In this year's edition of our annual People issue, we thought it would be nice to meet them.

Handling with care

Maddie Grindal is one of DLA Piper's business managers – a role introduced a decade ago, but which is now a powerful force in a sector fully waking up to commercialisation.

"The firm saw opportunities for further efficiencies in the way business was managed in the form of non-lawyer professionals to work alongside senior management," she says. "As any firm grows, so does management responsibility. It takes up an increasing amount of time. The firm recognises that a large part of a partner's responsibility must always be fee earning. Some tasks they also need to undertake will be better handled by a professional manager."

Specific responsibilities reflect the focus of the practice group head that the business manager is assigned to support. They work right next to their lawyers, Grindal says. "They develop an intimate understanding of the practice group, allowing them to drive performance."

However, the remit has also evolved. "Many now take on extra responsibilities, such as working with a specific country or region. Fresh perspectives can make the matrix that much more effective."

Currently on Grindal's desk are a "smarter resourcing" initiative across several teams with the goal of improving profitability; the business case for a potential lateral hire; and setting the agenda for her (real estate) practice group conference. She's also reviewing the responsibilities of every UK office managing partner and practice group head.

She works with the firm's legal project managers on pricing as well – particularly on larger pitches. "In the past, I might've been more closely involved in monitoring work management against agreed fees. Today this is increasingly handled by project managers."

Maddie Grindal, business manager, DLA Piper

Her career in business development roles for other law firms is, of course, also very significant. "Our global platform gives many opportunities for cross-selling and strategic analysis of key clients and targets – and that's a rewarding part of the job," she says.

Projecting forward

Head of projects at Ince & Co, Ian Kehoe, says his role is nothing less than to transform how business services operate to support fee earners and growth. The firm's central programme management office set up for this purpose has three permanent change experts (from IT consulting, broader business consulting and Kehoe's own law firm change background) – and they all report into a director of change and transformation.

But the wide-ranging reality of the job means that Kehoe also dips into the full depth of the firm's talent pool to assemble effective project teams from whoever's available to help.

"We essentially second people in from the rest of the firm for aspects of projects such as training and project finance," he says. "A commercial accountant currently spends two days a week working for us, with similar arrangements for communications and admin support. Between us we own any firm-wide or strategic projects, from systems implementation to rolling out a new global operating model or delivering a programme of training to enhance lawyers' BD capabilities. Right now we're even overhauling fee-earner performance management and reward."

Ian Kehoe, head of projects, Ince & Co

His involvement is greatest at the outset, he says – defining the issue and devising a solution. Delivery then falls to others to make happen, with Kehoe switching into governance gear (he sits on a governance board).

"We spend a lot of time with key stakeholders, updating them on how the overall portfolio is performing against timelines and expected benefits. Sometimes it's just a question of convincing people – usually partners – of the case for a change.

"We've also introduced two sub-board-level forums for operational management and commercial leadership to ensure that anything reaching the board has already been properly critiqued and well communicated."

Another thing that helps is a bespoke methodology he has developed with an external provider. Some 50 business services employees across the UK, Europe, Middle East and Africa and Asia Pacific have now been trained in Ince & Co's project disciplines, which also makes them qualified project managers by the Association of Project Management.

But crucially, says Kehoe, the approach has been tailored to a law firm environment.

"In any partnership, the softer side of change management is that much more important. A corporate typically has a stronger central executive. In a law firm a lot of people can exercise close to veto power.

"We now have key project stage gates for persuasion and gaining approvals – vital in the earliest stages of something new.

"The other key point is that you're trying to convince hundreds of incredibly smart people – so your logic really needs to be flawless. We will present proposals to one another and try to tear them apart."

Thirst for experience

Jonathan Kay was the very first lawyer Pinsent Masons recruited to represent its Vario brand – a sub-brand of self-employed lawyers the firm hires and offers to clients for temporary assignments, or perhaps to meet sudden peaks in demand more cost effectively. The flexibility of this appeals to Kay as much as it does to the clients.

You might assume those drawn to the flexible lawyering model are simply people in search of freedom – who've grown tired with aspects of a full-time, permanent job. But Kay went straight in to trailblaze the new way of working at Pinsents after qualifying there.

The creation of Vario was a strategic decision for his future career as much as for the firm.

"As a March qualifier there weren't quite as many jobs available – but I also wasn't quite sure which practice I preferred," he explains. "The Vario concept was being talked about behind the scenes – so it was suggested I go and speak to the partner responsible." Both he and the firm took a gamble.
"I was the guinea pig," he laughs.

The arrangement enables a breadth of experience, which he says will prove particularly useful if he'd like to work in-house. His first assignment, for example, was a piece of litigation for a major bank – an area he hadn't even considered. He was brought in for six months. He stayed for two and a half years.

"The beauty is to be thrown in and learn from lots of different situations," he says. "Working in-house you aren't judged by your PQE. You're just another lawyer, so you're exposed to more challenges. I'm learning industries from the inside out."

Kay stayed on his bank assignment because it continued to interest him – but he could have moved on. The much-hyped freelance lifestyle benefits of 'being your own boss' are secondary to skills building, but the appeal is real.

"For one thing, I don't need to sit there and time record. There are timesheets – but they're effectively a record of weeks worked. It's my own business – and I'm primarily on assignment to develop my own skills and career. If I don't want to do a particular assignment I can give my reasons. I'm not just a pawn to be moved from place to place."

However, he says, Pinsents has proved good as its word at providing the more flexible framework within which to shape his career.

"I simply said to them that I'd really like a commercial contracts position next – and they found a role to fit." He has now been on that brief – for AXA Insurance UK – for four weeks of a 12-month contract.

With only two assignments under his belt, the model is clearly nascent. But there are now around 150 Varios at work for Pinsents (and themselves), from newly qualifieds to those with 25 years behind them.

The only freelance myth, perhaps, is poring over piles of contracts in your pyjamas. "I haven't worked from home much or been terribly mobile to date," he admits. "But that's partly because I want to be in the thick of it. In-house learning curves are steep – and of course the new guys have to toe the line a bit and make up the office numbers," he laughs. "But plenty of Varios work from home two or three days a week – and as I've just got married I'm thinking a lot about the opportunity of more flexibility in my future. I'm fitting my career around my life, rather than vice versa."

Jonathan Kay, lawyer, Vario, Pinsent Masons

Work and pay

Legal apprentice Alex Hirsh is the very newest of our new wave of legal worker – but he too has enjoyed some of the freedom of choice. He joined Withers just over a year ago, after it became one of the first to offer ambitious future solicitors an alternative route (to university) for qualification.

The story was almost very different. "I was all set to

go to university, but suddenly reflected that I was quite passively following the path without really having the passion for it," he admits.

He came across the Withers position advertised on the government's website for all apprenticeships nationwide. "I began to look at apprenticeships because I wanted to work, but also be in an environment that would support me in gaining qualifications," he says.

Alex Hirsh, legal apprentice, Withers

Reflecting on his first year of apprenticeship, he says he was quickly thrown into the demands of working life in legal – and that's definitely the deep end.

"You don't really know what to expect when you've never worked in an office before – but I've already had the opportunity to do a broad range of tasks. They've been brave enough to pass me some big challenges." That includes a lot of drafting of course, such as assisting the firm's charities and philanthropy team with documents for charity incorporations – and also handling client correspondence.

He says there's a certain need for initiative – which the firm welcomes in those it trains up. "Legal research takes up a large part of my time. I'm expected to use legal resources to prepare an initial position or solution – and that process provides an opportunity to develop and put my research skills into practice."

At the same time, he's exposed to business development, working on press releases and client reminders about service lines, and has been involved in networking events, he says – so is honing commercial skills alongside legal ones.

His contract gives him half a day a week for formal study, which means finding a rare quiet spot somewhere in City life.

"The advantage of the apprenticeship is that within minutes of finishing that studying, I'm back to work and applying what I've just learned."

Any other big responsibilities? Well, Withers is one firm that has worked closely with regulators to draw up new formal standards for future apprenticeships under the government's Trailblazers initiative (guidelines that were published in September 2015). Hirsh is one of the faces of that work. He wants to be an ambassador for the route to others who can follow in his footsteps as doors hopefully keep on opening to a fairer, more diverse future.

Diversity driver

On the subject of diversity, Donna Halkyard, head of inclusion and diversity at RPC, is responsible for ensuring her firm's talent hunt leaves no stone unturned. It's a hot potato of an issue for a profession that has struggled long and hard to lose its 'old boys' label – and from gender balance pledges to social mobility metrics, firms have made some big strategic announcements this year.

But one move might simply be to hire somebody for the job full-time – and Halkyard is another first in this regard. "That's not to say that the firm's business leaders hadn't done anything on diversity and inclusion before," she stresses. "But appetite had grown such that it was clearly time to take on a dedicated specialist."

One feels that RPC was also canny to look outside legal for lessons. This is Halkyard's first law firm after diversity positions at the likes of Ford and BAE Systems. "Moving between sectors keeps things fresh and interesting for me personally," she says. "But industries also pose very different challenges, which you can learn from when forming your plans."

In engineering, for example, the issue is entrance to the profession where there's a big gender imbalance. "There are relatively small numbers of women going into engineering," she says. "For professional services, it's very different. There's a much more balanced population applying and joining firms, and you need strategies for the retention and development challenges."

At BAE, Halkyard did a lot of work at secondary school level, reaching out to teachers and career advisers to correct misconceptions about the range of careers available – which can now map across to the profession's focus on social background as a diversity priority. For example, RPC works long-term with one specific London state school on a package of career advice and support. That's alongside internal work on raising awareness of meritocracy, power and privilege.

"We also need to explore the links connecting diversity challenges – for example, between social mobility and race and ethnicity. A decade ago, a lot of work would focus solely on women, or a sexual orientation, or disability. We now know that we need to stop singly badging people with an identity, but see individuals as more complex. Organisations need to be more sophisticated around inclusion."

Practically, she says, "single-strand networks", such as for women or LGBT employees, need to share learning more effectively. RPC is also partnering more with other companies, and even its competitors. For example, it's one of 10 firms collaborating on a recruitment initiative targeting LGBT students to demonstrate a supportive work culture across the board. Moreover, she adds, the weight of numbers helps with work streams such as engaging governments around diversity objectives for business.

Another practical aspect of driving diversity is continually gathering data for the business case – illustrating how it can improve informal problem-solving, for example, or may strengthen governance. At BAE, Halkyard designed a diversity toolkit to channel such evidence into personal actions for staff – and she also brings that experience to bear today.

Donna Halkyard, head of inclusion and diversity, RPC

"People have different learning preferences. Some will happily read interesting articles, but others may prefer a group setting. I've put toolkits together for line managers on unconscious bias, with DVDs of live acted scenarios, as well as questions to prompt meeting-based debate. Ultimately, there's often no absolute right or wrong over how you communicate."

But communicate, critically, you must. "The goal is to drive self awareness, as well as awareness of difference in all its guises," says Halkyard. "And how people can flex their personal styles to create an inclusive environment for all." ●

Empowering the people

INDUSTRY ANALYSIS INDEX

Briefing Industry Analysis

Agile or fragile?

Don't open yourself to the opportunities of agile working without fully reviewing the risks, says Gillian Walton at Purple Skies

The concept of core hours is on the way out. Everything is now agile. We've had agile programming and agile project management, and now we have agile working. Why? Not only can we request flexible working – we have technology at our fingertips, 24 hours a day, that truly allows us to work differently.

The demands of life are pushing us out of nine-to-five working, and contact with people on the other side of the world is easier than it has ever been. That leads to less need for travel – and so law firms' clients are far more accessible. They, in turn, are demanding a service from law firms that fits their needs.

Fresh focus

It's not just about doing the same work in the same way, at a different time and place. Focus should be on the output and how well the work is done. It's about outcomes and performance, empowering people to work in the way that best enables them to maximise productivity. Rather than concentrating on time and attendance, focus changes to results and delivery.

One size will not fit all, however. As with all change, agile needs to work for your firm and the specific outcome you want. Needing to change the way you work from nine to five, five days a week at an office, to an environment where outcome and performance are the sole focus, is a huge transition. The change requires support from top management, and trust and responsibility are key. Only when top management fully supports the change will agile working be effective.

Then the benefits of the change need to be clearly established and communicated. Having a clear perspective on the end result and purpose can help everyone to understand what will happen and the reasons for it. This provides the basis of establishing what's required to implement the change. For example, there may be a series of projects to achieve the end goal. This will need to be broken down into more manageable chunks.

When working in an agile environment, transparency and communication are crucial. And technology is the facilitator of success. You need a clear understanding of resource management – who's doing what, and when – to make effective decisions. Technology is available to help understand capacity. But management needs to take the lead, showing support for the change. If management shies away, the team will too.

Risk review

Adoption of agile working can also lead to a reduction in hardware technology costs. Could the workforce use its own personal technology to do their work? If the technical infrastructure supports this, employees would no longer be dependent on internal constraints over choice of laptop or mobile. The flexibility of using our own devices, in any way necessary, to get the job done, will become increasingly important. We see this already with 'bring your own device'. Security is in place to ensure the firm's data will always be safe – but within that, people can work however suits them.

Policy and procedure, of course, need to be updated, both to demonstrate what's acceptable and to protect employees from inadvertent malpractice. A risk assessment will need to consider the impact of agile working to make the right decisions – and effective training programmes are also important.

Understanding which processes need to be changed will provide a smooth transition and proactively manage risks that arise. Something as simple as printing out a client's agreement could have huge implications, for example, if sensitive documents were viewed in an inappropriate location. It's important to understand both the risks in operating outside the office and the processes for mitigating these. Sensitive documentation can't be disposed of in an insecure manner. In some cases, even confidential conversations shouldn't take place in public. Such considerations need to be examined, with resulting expectations clearly communicated to teams.

> *"Understanding which processes need to be changed will provide a smooth transition and proactively manage risks."*
>
> Gillian Walton, managing director, Purple Skies Consulting

And implementation can fail if you don't fully understand the overall purpose and specific goals of the firm's agile working. Assessing technology adoption and the risks of a change are crucial. Review your process, policies and procedures to ensure the firm's reputation and practice aren't put at serious risk. But, equally, bring an open and impartial mind, leaving preconception and prejudice at the office door.

Photography: Jonathan Goldberg

Briefing Industry Interview

Brain gains

Firms need the right data insight for clear visibility into talent pools, says Karen Minicozzi at Workday

As organisations expand quickly, it's all too easy for talent's potential to fade rather than flourish.

The wheels of bigger business can unceremoniously – if possibly inadvertently – squash qualities and confidence alike. So companies need to build a compelling case for employee engagement around the bigger strategic picture. But the largest professional workforces are also in constant flux – joining, moving projects, progressing and training – and management may struggle to keep track of their biggest assets.

"All the transactions over an employee lifecycle offer an extremely rich data set for decision-making," says Karen Minicozzi, vice-president of human capital management product strategy EMEA at Workday. "You can analyse what sort of a worker someone is, and how that changes over time, alongside the skills they gain.

This sort of information adds value."

In the past, she says, enterprise resource planning systems have tended to focus on single, siloed talent management tasks – transfers or pay rises, for example. But that hinders the collaboration needed for a dispersed, international or otherwise complex organisation to come up both with the best possible individual decisions and a pipeline of high-potential HR activity for the longer term.

She continues: "It really wasn't unknown for someone to walk a piece of paper around offices to get necessary signatures – before HR would key in all the new details. That's inefficient – and it's failing to leverage what HR can bring. These systems didn't have the workflow capability to enable collaboration on a process."

Human capital management (HCM), by contrast, she says, can offer hundreds of more efficiently automated business processes – but processes that can easily be modified by different parts of the network to reflect local priorities, regulations or new demands.

"There are processes that are standard across the globe – but there are also local requirements and differences depending on job role. Hiring a lawyer, for example, triggers a different set of reviews and approvals to hiring administrative support."

Rise of the machine

The real trick, however, is to make complex, tailored and multi-party processes a simpler experience – particularly when the workforce and HR alike are much more mobile and juggling multiple priorities.

Minicozzi explains: "Now, a manager can initiate the transaction for a transfer simply because they're the person closest to follow up at the time. They may not know all the minutiae of the change – but a process can be set up to route others with knowledge of key details in at a later date." Everyone's participating, but you aren't waiting for each person to play their part.

At the same time, people aren't bothered with details that they don't really need. "You aren't confronted with a screen full of fields that aren't relevant," explains Minicozzi. "Only information needed for a task is displayed, which leads to quicker completion."

In addition to faster transactions, a more mobile system of managing change means choices can be based on the most up-to-date organisational picture possible.

"You make better decisions when you've accurate data to hand as you're making them," she says. "For example, a firm can search the workforce remotely for people with the right skills or case experience for a project or pitch. You can quickly narrow a search down until you reach the near-as-perfect fit – with visibility of everyone's official availability and likely last-minute bandwidth."

More data also makes for better international oversight. "It's useful, for example, first to tie variations in pay and progression to a common job profile, and only then to account for factors such as local currency or cost structures. It's important for a global business to probe further if it's paying significantly larger sums for similar work in different countries – or to explore where a diversity imbalance appears to need the most urgent action."

But the most critical information could be that which stops you making the same mistakes again – losing talent you haven't even fully appreciated. HR systems can use "machine learning", says Minicozzi, to capture trends that may be costing the business dear in retention.

"Once you have someone securely on board you really want to keep them there – which means you need to understand what would motivate them to leave. Machine learning uses data to surface a set of people most at risk of moving on."

You might make more sensible resourcing decisions in the knowledge a high-value loss is on the cards. But ultimately the intention is prevention rather than cure. Not only can HR predict the people who'll leave – and leave behind a dangerous business gap. They can recommend actions to prevent the departure.

From faster turnaround times on the move, to greater insight into talent's strengths and weaknesses, HCM is about building a talent base that's both fit for purpose now and fully onboard for the future.