

Tomorrow's Workforce Award Entrant: The Ministry of Justice

All of The Ministry of Justice's previously court-house based Collections Registry Officers will work from home in the future, following a successful three-year pilot that showed that staff who work this way reduce their costs, achieve more and lift engagement in their work.

Feedback from the pilot called "Home Agent" showed that team members working at home had almost double the level of engagement in their work compared to their Collections counterparts based at Ministry sites.

Engagement surveys measure the level to which an organisation's employees are actually engaged in what they are doing in their roles.

All Collections Registry Officers staff will enjoy the work-life balance benefits of being a salaried employee fully connected to the organisation, but never having to leave home to go to work. Some in major centres will save money by not having to travel to work, and others could enjoy better health. (The pilot showed sick leave dropped when staff were home-based.)

The changes began in 2011, when the Collections part of the Ministry removed the traditional "regional silos" that existed. With a flatter management structure, an investment in developing people leaders, some new technology and real time business activity monitoring, the Collections operation began its transformation.

After three years The Ministry of Justice learned that for its Collections operation, geographic location of people was largely irrelevant and piloted 23 staff to work from home to understand what it would really take to work remotely and how to make it happen.

Home workers were supplied with a desktop and ergonomic chair, a phone and headset, a desktop camera for video meetings with their manager and peers, a communicating app a bit like Facebook and secure wiring to the Ministry of Justice's servers. A health and safety plan was devised, an ergonomic work area assessment undertaken and they were sent home.

Home workers enjoyed flexible hours. As long as they deliver their 40 hours a week, they can work any time between 7am and 9pm Monday to Friday, and 9am till 5pm Saturdays.

Interestingly, the pilot soon showed improvement in staff well-being, but also saved costs. Reporting data showed that by being more productive, fewer home based staff were needed compared to site-based staff.

A successful funding bid, followed by a full business case being presented, resulted in changes being implemented permanently.

One staff member, who took part in an independent evaluation, explains how her life has changed. "Before the Home Agents pilot I was in a rut at work and I was isolating myself from my family. I was not able to concentrate with all the office noise and felt I was not doing as well. Now I am seeking different avenues and choosing other options. I am able to concentrate more on my well-being, health, and friends and family. My hours are flexible and we have an abundance of advice available to us. Our manager listens and takes in what I have to say and assists one on one when I seek advice."

The "Home Agents" strategy also means the Ministry gets access to people who might otherwise not be able to work for them and that has got to be good for attracting diversity as well as people who have grown up with technology and welcome the benefits of working at home.

Another staff member had this feedback: "Because there are no distractions, the quality and quantity of work achieved is phenomenal. The whole team has bonded and our work/life balances have improved. I can see no negatives whatsoever, only positives from this experience so far."

The feedback is extremely rewarding for Collections General Manager Bryre Patchell, who led a bid to the Ministry's Leadership Team to get the pilot up and running, and is accountable for the project's success. Implementation is now well underway.