

Case study



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DTI embraces the new office

In Government, a degree of formality has been central to the ethos, with its often standardised iterative processes, its hierarchies, structured relationships, security obsessions, and political nervousness. How have things moved on under New Labour? We learn, with a weary sense of déjà vu, that Tony Blair is impatient with the speed of change in the Civil Service and is about to appoint a supremo to a new Cabinet Office Reform Strategy Group to shake it all up. But wasn't Margaret Thatcher frustrated with bureaucrats? Didn't she call in Rayner, create the Next Steps Agencies, and set up the Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit? Weren't there armies of management consultants crawling all over the Civil Service throughout the 1980s and 1990s?



How have things moved on under New Labour?

A Sixties block once filled with parallel rabbit-hutch offices divided by long, gloomy, closed-door corridors has been opened-out in a remarkable way

The truth is that as in any large organisation, the inertia in the system is immense. Moreover, senior civil servants have particularly sophisticated defence mechanisms to throw in the paths of reformers. Today, Government offices display the same patchwork that they presented when a detailed study was carried out in the mid-1990s (The Changing Government Workplace - De Montfort University 1997). There are still shabby offices and sluggish

bureaucracy, but also some of the sleekest new office design, most sophisticated technology, and best management practice.

Tony Blair should look no further than the DTI Secretary of State Patricia Hewitt. Her DTI Review launched a thorough-going modernisation of offices and management practice, leaning heavily towards a project-based, team-based style of work. They welcome diversity and contribution from all levels (and the best sort of

team-working makes people less grade conscious anyway). Their "Reach out, value people, and be courageous" is snappy and to the point.

A few years ago DTI had some of the most sardine-crammed, dismal and dispiriting open-plan offices ever seen (with predictably poor morale); but a quick glance around new DTI offices in Elizabeth House shows how things have changed. A Sixties block once filled with parallel rabbit-hutch offices divided by long, gloomy, closed-door corridors has been opened-out in a remarkable way.

From fads to practicalities

Roy Crouch and his staff have picked over the fads of 1990s and used the best to produce a generic office design which is practical, flexible, congenial, and gives every appearance of supporting a very positive work ethic and happy staff.

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The style has already been applied to 30% of the DTI estate, providing much more comfortable conditions on a smaller footprint, helping to shrink the estate and contain costs amidst rising rents.

Arenson Group: the driving force

The Arenson Group workstations remained admirably uncluttered so their colours contribute pleasantly to an agreeable overall soft colour



see how a well-designed, flexible office can support such a new way of working

Lap top roll out

Technology has been a key feature, with a widespread roll-out of lap-tops that can plug into DTI's sophisticated corporate systems. There are flat-screens to give plenty of work space on neat and medium-sized Arenson Group desks. Apart from a few specialists (eg designers at CAD workstations), staff use different desks each day, grouping themselves according to the immediate requirements of the team, or sitting alone when necessary. 75 staff in one large room can share two combined photocopier/printers, because hard-copy storage is kept to a minimum, and most communication is face to face or by emails which are stored electronically. Indeed they are moving towards all on-line dealings with external contractors and clients. Manuals are mostly stored electronically, or not more than one hard copy is kept for the use of a large group of staff. Specialist systems required for only occasional use are grouped on their own to keep the main workstations free of rarely used equipment.

scheme (enlivened with flashes of bright colour on a few structural pillars of the building). Centrally grouped Arenson Group lateral storage systems, up to chest height only, leave plenty of light and a clear view across the large office. Workers each have a capacious personal drawer and an incoming pigeon-hole in a central system. The standard furniture is being rolled-out in open-plan areas throughout DTI, even up to the open-plan suites of some of the Directors-General. The Arenson Group furniture, incidentally, was all drawn off the standard Government contracts of Buying Solutions.

Amongst the desks are occasional informal seating areas for comfortable chats, and at the end of the room an attractive mixture of enclosed meeting rooms and less formal touch-down areas. A snack area (with systems access points) provides another informal working/meeting facility.

Courage to go further

DTI is one of many Government departments that still has between 8 and 10 levels of management (though not necessarily replicated throughout each branch of the tree), from the Permanent Secretary down to the first line manager. This is far too deep a hierarchy for any organisation today, and an impediment to quick self-confident decisions, a freer exchange of views, and a greater contribution from talented junior staff. They now have the physical environment to support a much flatter structure: they just need a bit more of that 'courage' from their motto!

One has seen some of these ideas before in government, but not very often. Yet it is hard to see how this approach could not be applied with minor variations across many large offices in both the public and private sector. Certainly, office design should not become a fetish, as perhaps it did



for some of those Nineties media people. But to see how a well-designed, flexible office (in a frankly uninspiring older building) can support such a new way of working, gladdens the heart. Senior managers (including the new head of the Cabinet Office's Reform Strategy Group) should be beating a path to the doors of DTI York Road at Waterloo!

Interested in improving your productivity?

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