

An overview of our firm: Minter Ellison – Gold Coast

75 people: 40 lawyers—mainly under 30 years old; 75% of lawyers female.
30 support staff including secretarial, accounts, HR, IT, reception.

We have about 25 people using our VPN. The speed is slightly slower than working in the office but in most cases this is not noticeable.

Approximately 3 to 4 years ago we started developing our VPN. Prior to this we had a small number of people using dial up.

The initial drive to develop our own VPN originated from the observation that many of our young people were working extraordinary hours to achieve their goals. They were self driven but this was not sustainable. Management persuasion was ineffective in getting people to live more balanced lives. We recognised that the hours being contributed were not sustainable and if we didn't manage the problem better we would have problems in the future.

Young mainly married or co-habiting people were at risk in their relationships because of the hours they were working. A broken relationship or bad health through overwork leads to burnout.

The thought was that if we could enable them to work at home they would go home at a reasonable time, spend time with their family and then if necessary they could still work at home and feel satisfied that they have prepared their matters well. It was driven to establish a sustainable working environment.

When started our development work there was no such service except dial up provided on the Gold Coast so we had to develop our own from scratch. We teamed with an ISP and spend the money necessary to develop the system in conjunction with the ISP.

Our VPN needed to be of the same standard as working in our office. This caused many problems as we run a sophisticated management system an important element of which is the time recording system. To get this to run over the VPN was problematic but we persisted.

A number of things had to be developed, purchased or overcome

1. We had to provide notebook computers for our staff who were to go on the VPN. A notebook can be used in both the office and the home. It keeps "foreign" computers off our VPN. If there is a problem our IT team does not have to visit the home to fix it. It is done in the office. We are now set up to fix most problems remotely so home visits are almost nil.
2. Quality equipment and quality encryption hardware at both ends so that security is ensured. We almost never have any downtime problems. We have never had a virus or unauthorised access problem. We have had a few unsuccessful attempts.
3. There was no digital dictation technology on the market so we had to develop our own using shareware and adapted hardware based on the old analogue system. High usage of dictation by our lawyers made it essential to be able to send voice files by email. We have tried to market our product but have not been successful.
4. The greatest hurdle was the quality or availability of ADSL. Even when Telstra said that the exchange was broadband available this was often not the case. We have had our contractors and our own staff visit locations multiple times before we could get broadband. The problems included leakage which occurs when the house is a distance from the exchange and simple unavailability. Telstra would not and still does not acknowledge a problem. We have had to use cable in some cases and wireless in others. We have done what ever was necessary to make the system work.

As we developed and started using our VPN a few positive things became apparent.

1. Our people appreciate the efforts we make for them. It is an effective way to help them lead a more balanced life (if they wish to).
2. The provision of notebook computers to our staff was seen as prestigious and caring. It also meant that our people did not have to invest in their own home computers.

3. We are seen as leading edge in our attitude to technology and this is a selling point when it comes to recruitment.
4. It is also a competitive edge in recruitment in our field where some many of the best candidates are women. They see that the provision of the VPN will help them in their goals of having a career as well as a family.
5. Difficult matters that require great concentration can be done from home with no interruptions. Productivity increases.
6. It showed that we trusted our people to do the right thing. With a time based costing system this is a bit illusionary as we have a very good method of measuring their productivity anyway.
7. It is possible that our staff turnover is as low as it is (between 1/2 and 1/3 of industry average) because the VPN along with notebooks is a competitive advantage in staff recruitment and retention. There are other reasons of course.

The negative things are:

1. After an initial surge in people leaving work at a reasonable hour we are back with people spending excessive time working late into the night.
2. Cost - the ongoing cost of the VPN system is high
3. Remote working is not good for team work. We have a strong team work environment and someone working outside the team soon feels isolated.
4. The Australian Tax Office now wants to claim FBT on the private usage on the VPN as we pay for the installation and we pay the monthly fee broadband connection fee for our staff.

Our VPN has a limited area in which it is effective.

1. Whilst we have tried it with secretarial or support staff working from home it has not proved to be effective. Service quality in the whole team dropped and turnaround time went up. This may be because our support staff are expected to do a wide range of duties and many of these duties need to be done in the office (photocopying, filing, etc). We have broken our staffing down into small teams who share a range of duties and having specialist WP operators does not work for us. If we had specialists WP operators it may work in having someone who can work from home. As it was it caused resentment in those support staff who had to carry the "office load".
2. It does not work when a senior lawyer spends too much time working from home. They are needed for mentoring, direction etc and their prolonged absence causes frustrations in their teams. They need to lead and can't lead from home. This is just a management thing and we now manage it pretty well.
3. The system is used mostly before or after normal working hours. People often start on Sunday night to get an early start for the week.
4. People still prefer to work from our office but having the system helps expand everyone's flexibility and productivity.

Summary

Many benefits. A few negatives but they can be managed.

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