

First Published Ambassador British Airways Waterside and Cranebank

by Barry Tuckwood

Jan Dunn describes with infectious enthusiasm the successes resulting from BA's move to Waterside just two years ago. There has been much media coverage originally because of the building but now increasingly in the changes in people's ways of working. Jan, an HR professional in Facilities Management, has a pivotal role in helping with new ways of working especially when departments move offices. The day I visited she had already been talking with a team from Channel 5 TV.

Waterside, BA's new glass-walled offices adjacent to Heathrow, were designed around a street which provides a more open environment for all residents - staff, visitors, consultants and contractors - than in typical corporate offices elsewhere. The view from the end of the street is across a lake towards a small village providing a link to another small community. Along the street are shops and cafes. A common question prior to the move was, "What will my boss think if they see me chatting over a coffee?". "Your boss should do the same." There is ample evidence that this is working: the coffee shops are buzzing with meetings, saving on formal meeting rooms and their attendant technology, booking systems, and associated burdens. Another benefit is more visibility of all staff so there is more mixing. Work has become less hierarchical, informality is becoming the norm, bureaucracy is reducing.

Not Just an Office Move, Relocation as an Agent of Change

Visitors can be met in the reception area, in the street at a café - in much the same way that countless meetings take place in hotels, bars, and coffee shops - or in the offices. For privacy there are meeting rooms. In the offices the overriding impression is of airy open-plan rather than congested partitioned rabbit hutches. There are private areas where people can work undisturbed, centralised and dense shelving, and lockers for personal items.

BA's intentions when they built Waterside were to achieve benefits in managing time, space and information more effectively. The move, and all subsequent moves, have been used as catalysts for change. Earlier this year Ian Murray, Delivery Manager for Speedwing, project managed the move of a business unit of 90 staff, himself included, which achieved space savings alone of some 50%.

Waterside houses over 3,000 people from 20 separate parts of BA under one roof, and, because of the street, all better able to interact than before. Conventional offices have disappeared, careful consideration of real requirements reducing the number of desks to as low as one per 1.7 staff. "Typically", Jan says, "An audit of people's work showed they were at their desk a maximum of 50 or 60% of the time. The more senior, the less likely they are to need a fixed desk. Some staff need



permanent desks because they are there nearly all the time, but they are in the minority".

This has affected the ways of working, encouraged through education to make sure that everyone understands and works towards the overall objectives. Introducing change on this scale inevitably meets resistance, especially on things like personal space and paperwork.

Demonstrating that the majority of paper was surplus to requirements because it was available elsewhere - off site archives, local dense storage, electronically - persuaded people that they could let go of it. Now there is only about one metre of personal shelving per person: the protective wall of paper that surrounded people has disappeared. Only material that had to be kept for legal and logistical reasons was retained. The result is a tidier office environment, an enhanced ability to work literally from anywhere, and greater freedom to meet colleagues.

Communication was a major issue: with no permanent desk how would the telephone system work? People have to log in to the phone wherever they work, an irritation in the beginning, but it works well now. There is a problem of call-forwarding to a mobile phone, increasing the cost of phone calls, which is

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being tackled, Ian says, by testing alternative 'mobile' systems.

Why has it been successful at Waterside, and what do they need to do to implement these changes elsewhere? Jan puts the major reason for success down to the project's solid foundation: confidence and commitment, with a carefully thought out approach, champions brought forward from each department, and involvement encouraged. The space, time, and information improvements have to be developed before moving so that everyone is ready when they start at their new location.

Preparation does take time, firstly to introduce the concepts and find out what people's main concerns are, and secondly for the move itself. Groups need some freedom of choice, so that their department's requirements can be taken into account with the design of floor layouts, and furniture selection, but the key constraints at BA were predetermined. Total space and shelf space were fixed, as was the need to hot desk.

Preparing for the changes requires constant communication, the last presentation taking place just before the move. Training and education, led from the top to try to reduce people's normal resistance to learning new things, is essential. Each department developed its own local guidelines for their own specific needs. The final presentation and discussion the

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day before relocating is called, "Not just an office move". It concentrates on four themes: success depends entirely on the residents, hot desking best practice, the new physical environment, and the process of reviews followed by adjustment and adaptation. Pre and post move surveys revealed that the initial issues were about noise and distractions from the glass walls, but people became used to them, helped by the presence of quiet areas, and the freedom to work literally anywhere.

The lessons learned have provided a framework for subsequent relocations. Ian Murray's move of only 90 people took only 6 months from concept to completion with "some corner-cutting to make it happen". Teething troubles are to be expected, but for most people the new arrangement seems to be working, and review and adaptation are crucial parts of the process. For BA and their staff it is far more than an office move.

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