

## BELLWETHER ENTERPRISES LTD

Bellwether Enterprises is a specialist railway engineering and technical consultancy, which uses teleworking to the limits: the company has no premises, and its consultants work flexibly from home, on the road or at clients' premises.

### OBJECTIVES

As technical consultants in the rail industry, the company's work principally involves the production of detailed technical documents such as systems engineering designs or safety cases. These are developed through collaboration and consultation, and formally reviewed and approved.

Bellwether was set up with the intention of avoiding having a central office, so staff would spend less time travelling to a single location and could instead be more productive at home, on the road or at clients' premises.

That in turn demanded IT systems for the staff that would offer the maximum connectivity, while providing a secure network for the company. Keeping paperwork as far as possible in electronic form would lower costs and speed up its transmission within the company.

### SOLUTION

Each consultant has a mobile phone and high-end laptop computer. At home they have broadband connections, while on the move they can log on to BT's OpenZone wireless broadband service in public 'hotspots'.

The collaborative core of the Bellwether system uses Microsoft Exchange and the Outlook mail, calendar and document storage client. Yahoo mail serves as a backup, and instant messaging and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) adds direct communication with other members of staff. VoIP allows voice connections between computers over the internet and removes call-charges other than the cost of the internet connection.

"Rather than trying to think up all our requirements up front, we have developed our systems to meet the needs of each new project, and as we have better understood what the technology can deliver for us," says Sue Schreiber, Marketing Manager at Bellwether Enterprises Ltd.

A recent addition is the use of Adobe Acrobat to authorise reports using electronic signatures, which are then delivered by e-mail to the clients. That increases productivity while keeping costs down.

**Best practice in:**  
teleworking

**Sector:**  
Transport/freight

**Size of firm:**  
12 employees

**Location:**  
Long Buckby, Northamptonshire

**Website:**  
[www.bellwether.co.uk](http://www.bellwether.co.uk)



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SUE SCHREIBER – MARKETING MANAGER

“As a small business with no IT specialists, we feel we have pieced together a sound, affordable, supportable solution that is configured to our specific business needs and culture,” says Sue. “We are using the best of current technology – though not leading-edge, untried technology. For a small organisation like ours, the risks of doing that would be too great.”

### **RESULTS**

Not having an office saves the company an estimated £50,000 annually, which can be used to push down rates charged to clients. Using a standard computing configuration also helps control costs. Consultants can work more billable hours, because they do not have expensive or lengthy commutes to a central office. Yet the company can attract a higher calibre of consultant who may be looking for a change of lifestyle: for example, those with young children may prefer to keep the afternoon free for the school run, and shift their work to the evenings.

Because remote collaboration is the company’s way of working, it doesn’t matter whether those collaborating are ten or thousand miles apart. “For one recent, large and complex project, our client was based in the US,” explains Sue. “The fact that we had no office made absolutely no difference to them – in fact it was an advantage, as we were easily able to shift our working hours to meet their needs.”

### **CHALLENGES**

“Deciding how to implement the teleworking solution as a small business was a challenging process,” says Sue. “As a small business, piecing together a good IT solution can be hard. You may be too small to be a viable customer for many of the large IT suppliers, while going with an untrained small supplier may carry too large a risk.”

The company’s main investment in IT is to maintain the infrastructure to support the office-less company. Yet Sue notes that evaluating the return on that investment can be tricky. “Many of the costs associated with IT are higher than we would have originally expected, but we believe this is not a function of our particular implementation,” she says. “The costs are still significantly outweighed by the benefits we realise.”

The company is a Regional winner of the teleworking category in the DTI and InterForum Awards for E-commerce 2004.





### Top tips:

- Not having a head office can mean significant cost savings and remote collaboration allows staff to work together on projects even when thousands of miles apart.
- Working online minimises paperwork, with attendant cost and time benefits.
- Remote working allows flexibility in timekeeping which can appeal to both staff and clients alike.

### THE LAST WORD

Creating a teleworking environment for its staff has made Bellwether much more flexible than if it were based around a central office. Improving technologies have also made collaboration increasingly easy from almost any location. "We are barely skimming the surface of our current investments in technology," says Sue. "We are always watching out for the opportunity to upgrade any of our technology components if something better comes along."

"Our company started without a physical office, and so we have always used the internet extensively," concludes Sue. "As we are still office-less and have expanded ten-fold since our beginnings, we have achieved our objectives in being online."

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