

OAC PLC (OXFORD ACTUARIES AND CONSULTANTS)

OAC (Oxford Actuaries and Consultants) provides professional actuarial services for the financial services industry, operating as a totally dispersed teleworking business.

OBJECTIVES

OAC's services include consultancy on life insurance, personal and corporate pensions, investments, compliance, and regulatory issues. As well as providing expert assistance for clients across the industry, OAC develops, maintains and supports advanced software tools for its clients to carry out complex calculations, it provides expert witnesses in litigation, and delivers a suite of electronic technical information services. OAC also provides outsourcing services to its clients, assisting with their complaint handling case loads.

In 1994, when OAC was established, its founders recognised that they would have to be able to demonstrate to financial regulators that their teleworking business model was secure and dependable. But teleworking was not well-trusted and OAC wanted to pioneer a solution that was similar to a traditional office environment, but with staff interacting from remote locations.

OAC had to persuade potential customers about the significant competitive advantages enabled by effective teleworking. OAC wanted to create a more efficient, pleasant and flexible working environment for staff, empowering them with cutting-edge collaborative systems and a truly integrated work environment.

The problem was that, at the time, service and technology providing teleworking approaches was limited, and very few companies had developed systems to run such a company.

SOLUTION

OAC decided to develop its own solution in-house, pioneering secure centralised systems through which all internal and external correspondence and communications – including voice calls – would pass.

As OAC is wholly electronic, the working environment relies on eliminating as much paper as possible. Inbound paper correspondence is scanned and added to the central workflow systems. Staff can pass work back to clients electronically which improves security, eases the sharing of necessary information, and ensures staff working at home do not have boxes of paper files filling their homes – which, apart from risking confidentiality, would be at odds with an efficient and controlled infrastructure.

Best practice in:
Teleworking

Sector:
Financial Services

Size of firm:
30 employees

Location: Virtual, with staff across the UK and abroad

Website:
www.oac.co.uk



“OAC operates a strict ‘non-deletion’ policy enforced by carefully managed system permissions and supplemented by ‘new-version’ functionality”

BERNARD GRENVILLE-JONES – GENERAL MANAGER

The Financial Services Authority’s (FSA) requirements for audit merited careful consideration. Using a process called ‘replication’ the system automatically refreshes the central system and the local computer throughout the day. It is never necessary for a staff member to identify all his or her new work during a work session and to dispatch that explicitly because that is done automatically. This means that everything that happens at OAC is recorded and managed centrally providing complete control and audit capabilities.

“OAC operates a strict ‘non-deletion’ policy enforced by carefully managed system permissions and supplemented by ‘new-version’ functionality.” says Bernard Grenville-Jones, General Manager at OAC.

RESULTS

The advantages of teleworking quickly became clear, as OAC began to recruit staff regardless of geographic location. It could offer flexible working hours for parents returning to work, so that they could arrange their working time around their child-care arrangements. It enabled staff to have more time with their families but have the security of being in salaried employment, benefiting in full from their earning power, despite working from home.


“Being able to work hours that suit personal requirements is a popular benefit among those working from home,” says Ed Grundon, Marketing Communications Manager at OAC. “Not having to commute is another. As well as the attendant cost savings, it allows more time to do other things and generally offers more lifestyle options.”

Staff have the latest computers and broadband connections allowing them to share work instantly and productively. For clients there is a high quality service provided at a lower cost than would be the case, because of low overheads. The particular way of working also provides better facilities for quality control.

Bernard estimates that building the company around a teleworking concept brings substantial savings. “We probably avoid more than £1m in costs per year by virtue of our ongoing cycle of innovation.” he says. “In a business of our size, this makes us much more dynamic and able to grow organically.” OAC’s rates can be as low as half that of rivals.

Instead of regular face-to-face meetings, issues are discussed electronically in databases. There are databases for incoming post and faxes, outgoing post, e-mail, the working times of each





staff member, work discussions, social discussions, client information and details of the services that the firm provides.

Teleworking has also meant fewer absentee days and a far higher retention of staff than at office-based companies. "It is important to us to foster a company culture that balances productive efficiency with job satisfaction, as well as promoting the work-life balance." says Bernard.

He adds: "As well as savings on traditional overheads such as building rental and facilities, teleworking creates a much healthier culture with lower management costs." This has helped the company to work with businesses as distant as South Africa, India, Mauritius and Guernsey.

OAC is a regional winner of the teleworking category in the DTI and InterForum awards for e-commerce in 2004.

CHALLENGES

OAC's earliest problems were rooted in being so far ahead of the e-business/teleworking game. For some years, staff only had slow and unreliable dial-up modem connections to the central systems. "We were constantly searching for innovative solutions to prevent the barrier of available technology from retarding the growth of our business," explains Bernard.

In marketing terms, OAC often found potential clients apprehensive of the teleworking approach. "There was much less of an understanding of the basis of our business concept," Ed explains. "Some contracts weren't won for this reason."

OAC hasn't solved all of the challenges of having no public offices but, through innovative management and sound leadership, continues to find new ways of improving the way the business operates.

Top tips:

- Teleworking can bring huge cost savings when compared to operating a traditional office.
- A rigidly centralised approach will produce excellent audit trails and control, meeting the highest regulatory requirements.
- It is easier to recruit better people when you offer the added benefit of working from home. And with much less personal interaction at work it is even more important than ever to encourage and maintain a strong team culture.



THE LAST WORD

Being a leading pioneer in teleworking has kept OAC's costs low. By adopting a rigidly centralised system it has been able to meet financial services regulations, eliminate unnecessary paper from its workflow, and simplify oversight of business processes. The company competes by offering a price that is much lower than the industry norm, because its overheads are smaller, and offers better and happier staff to its clients.

"OAC has no public offices, having pioneered a complete teleworking e-business. Innovative managerial techniques and cutting-edge systems decisions means OAC has established and maintained a strong teleworking culture." says Bernard. "OAC is unique in the way it uses technology to deliver solutions directly to the client workplace. Looking to the future, we want to continually improve understanding of our *modus operandi* and further develop the benefits for our clients."

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