

Don't ignore the logistics

Office relocation is often viewed as a simple procedure. Don't be fooled. **Alex Blyth**

Medical research tells us that death, divorce and moving house are the most stressful events in a person's life. These personal events find corporate parallels in bankruptcy, redundancy and relocation, but while the first two are universally recognised as difficult events that need careful planning and help from external experts, office relocation is often viewed as a simple procedure.

Many CEOs believe that it involves nothing more complex than popping desks, computers and files into a lorry at one end and then unloading them at the other. It is only when they are knee-deep in files and computer cabling, while trying to placate the chairman who wants to know why the business is still not functioning three days after the move took place, that they begin to wish they had given more thought to the logistics of moving.

Karl Robinson, CEO of internet firm, Mistral, gave careful consideration to the logistics of its recent relocation but found that he still underestimated how stressful it would be: 'We had to move partly because our staff numbers are growing so rapidly and partly because we were getting towards the end of our lease. Having started the process at the end of 2001, a full year before our lease expired, we thought that we had plenty of time, but it still ended up as a mad rush, mainly because we spent far too long negotiating a lease that never came off.'

Start early

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earlier. In the same way, we might not have been so bullish that we could manage the project ourselves. We all pulled together and did a fantastic job in completing the move over last Christmas, with a removals firm as the only external assistance, but this did lead to considerable stress for some members of the management team. Next time, I think I'll bring in an external party to manage the process.'

Pickfords is the largest relocation and storage company in the world, providing planning, storage, on-site moving and IT support services to a vast number of businesses, hospitals and schools. Marketing manager Louise Walker claims that: 'We offer our clients the peace of mind of knowing that their move is being handled by experienced professionals.' Cost is usually the reason why many companies prefer to tackle office moves on their own, but Walker points out that this may prove to be a false economy if the move goes wrong and the business is closed for a significant period.

When you consider the number of different factors

involved in a typical move it is clear why a growing number of companies are choosing to bring in some external assistance. A typical move might involve hiring an architect, finding a space, obtaining planning permission, hiring contractors, selecting an internal team, recruiting departmental coordinators, arranging a new telephony system, installing a new security system, hiring new office caterers, buying new furniture, informing customers, ordering new corporate stationery, labelling all items to be moved, repainting company vehicles, and informing employees. Most executives are too busy with their normal jobs to devote the necessary time and attention to deal effectively with the logistics of an office move.

Meeting deadlines

The Scotsman Publications, publisher of its eponymous daily paper, is one organisation that was grateful it brought in external assistance when it moved from premises it had occupied for over 100 years. 'Meeting deadlines is more crucial in publishing than in any other industry,' explains Walker. 'If we'd not completed the job on time then the paper



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would have lost many thousands of pounds. The task was immensely difficult: the old offices had 12 floors with a small unreliable lift servicing only seven of them, and the main entrance to the building opened directly on to a pedestrian crossing next to a bus stop in a city centre no-loading area! Despite all these problems our staff, procedures and equipment enabled us to complete the move on time and *The Scotsman* went to press on Sunday evening for distribution on Monday morning as usual.'

However, Greg McMaster, managing director of relocation experts Sendero Ltd, warns that while an experienced external project manager can help, it is essential to select the right consultant and to remain committed to the project throughout its duration: 'In many cases insufficient attention is devoted to selecting the right consultant. Clients tend to resort to the cost and three references rule. Since few consultants provide potential clients with bad references, and good consultants tend to charge more, this method tends to result in making the wrong selection. A better approach is to talk to similar businesses who have recently relocated, visit a current or recent job done by the consultant, and look for synergy between your demands and their experience.'

'Other than this, it's crucial that the relocation manager coordinates and communicates throughout the entire process. Moving office is stressful for all involved, from contractors to employees and customers and strong, dedicated leadership is really essential to success.'

Although it almost always takes longer than you initially expect, costs more than you hope, and creates more problems than you could imagine, those who have been through the experience seem to agree that the pain of office relocation can be considerably minimised by starting early, hiring the right advisers, and working closely with them throughout the entire process. On the bright side, once the move is complete and you've settled into your smart new office, your normal job will probably seem easy by comparison.

Case study: Moving the Met Office



The Met Office has been in its Bracknell location since 1961. The head of relocation programme, Graham Cooper, explains the reasons behind the decision to relocate: 'This building housed one of the first ever computers used for weather forecasting, but is badly equipped to cope with the demands of a 21st century IT infrastructure. It was also becoming too costly to maintain, so we decided to take action so that we can offer a more effective service to our customers. Refurbishment and rebuilding were too impracticable and when we factored in how difficult it is to attract staff to this part of the country, we began to realise that relocation was our best option.'

After an extensive process between 1999 and 2001 the organisation decided to move to Exeter, and since then they have been designing and building the new office, as well as making plans for this year's move.

'The relocation will take place in stages between April and November this year,' explains relocation director Alan Douglas. 'We have spent about 18 months developing the master move plan and by now everyone should know when things happen and who is doing what. We've broken it down into around 1,000 separate tasks. For instance, moving every desktop is one task. For each stage we've built in a contingency pocket, but these can be as small as an hour or two. Overruns of those pockets or external events may impact on the schedule, so operational command will keep a close eye on each stage. We've had people in to assess our plans, and we've done dry runs, so we're as confident as we can be that there will be no problems, but it's impossible to be 100% certain.'