

Open communication and a flexible structure

What does this case study demonstrate?

Several factors identify **BGS** as a leading example of workplace innovation, with lessons for both public and private sector organisations. What really stands out when visiting BGS is not just the impressive new buildings but the ease of interaction, collaboration and communication. Moving from a traditional hierarchy to a matrix structure and now to a structure that includes the best practices of both has transformed workplace practice, creating a culture in which employee-led improvement and innovation are valued at every level.

Workplace innovation elements: multi-disciplinary team-working, communication, flexible organisational structure, learning, reflection and innovation, workplace partnership.

Context

The British Geological Survey (BGS), a public sector organisation which provides geological advice to the UK government, industry, academic institutions and the public, was founded in 1835. Its headquarters, located close to Nottingham, house some 450 staff. BGS also has offices in Edinburgh, Wallingford, London, Cardiff and Belfast. Almost 80% of staff are educated to a degree level.

BGS is currently part of the National Environment Research Council (NERC) responsible for funding, managing research, training and knowledge exchange concerning the environmental sciences.

Culture change in BGS has been underpinned by significant restructuring during the last three years. Its previously “top-heavy” structure was addressed by workforce planning based on “comprehensive skills assessments” for key roles. An opportunity for voluntary exits and the targeted recruitment of younger specialists has created a competency profile more suited to the current needs of the organisation.

Trade unions were closely involved throughout the transition. Denise Langley, Deputy Head of HR, emphasises that openness and transparency were essential in building a common perspective with the unions. This was reinforced by one union representative who agreed that “management involved us as much as possible”, emphasising that “the human resources department here is quite good at putting it in language that’s clear to staff”. From a union perspective the importance of “informal engagement . . . in terms of monthly meetings between management and the unions just to talk off the record about things that might be coming up” was emphasised. Early involvement in sharing a problem is preferred to later consultation once a solution has been defined.

Employee focus groups provided valuable input into the emergence of the new structure and continue to play a role in representing both union and non-union members. The impressive new building design with its emphasis on communal spaces was not initially welcomed by staff but the final result was achieved

through employee consultation and involvement. Open coffee areas and dining rooms have greatly enhanced interaction and networking which is now valued by staff.

Creating a matrix structure

Breaking away from a traditional hierarchy is difficult for public sector organisations but it formed an essential element in the goal of making BGS a more innovative and responsive organisation. However the journey continues to involve a process of learning and refinement as the organisation discovers what works best in delivering its tasks and meeting the needs of its staff.

Looking back, one member of staff remembered that “the groups, as they were called, were very fixed . . . they did an area of science and that was it.” There was little cross-over between different functional divisions and many line managers were defensive about their own areas of science.

The initial matrix structure was designed to reflect the increasingly multi-disciplinary and multi-functional nature of the organisation’s projects, allocating staff to a specialist team leader and a succession of project leaders as well as to a line manager. By enabling staff to “move quite easily between teams [and] going between very different science areas” the matrix system “broke down the silos.”

A further element in the matrix was that of the Skills Leader. In such a fluid structure, the career development of individual staff needs to be taken care of as they move from team to team. Skills Leaders from the same science area take an overview of an individual’s career while at the same time helping the organisation as a whole to meet the competency requirements identified by workforce planning. Initially Skills Leaders were also responsible for appraisals, annual leave and sickness management, often placing significant demands on their time.

In practice the line manager’s role tended to “evaporate” leaving some people, especially younger staff, unsure of where they belonged in the organisation as they moved from project to project. Sometimes staff were confused about lines of accountability. As a result the role of the line manager has recently been strengthened, giving back responsibility for appraisals, annual leave, sickness management and more involvement in an individual’s scientific and project work.

Line managers have been supported in the re-acquisition of their responsibilities by means of a workshop programme, and the appraisal system has been redesigned to place much more emphasis on open discussion rather than “box ticking”. For one employee “As part of the appraisal process they will ask if you’re happy with what jobs you are doing and they will ask which areas you want to grow, and where you want to reduce your effort. They actually care if you are happy in your job”. According to another “I think it is not the process itself, it’s that you have that conversation with your manager”.

With the loss of some of their responsibilities, it is also recognised that the role of the Skills Leaders, seen as a valuable resource for individual and organisational development by many members of staff, needed to be refocused to address concerns that the role was being “watered down”. The redefined role has been communicated to staff and retains the key areas of overseeing career development and supporting line managers.

Who benefits?

The current UK policy climate and an increasingly volatile future for public sector organisations makes their survival dependent on moving from a traditional hierarchical structure towards more innovative and entrepreneurial ways of working. BGS has made remarkable progress in this transition resulting in higher productivity, cost reduction and greater responsiveness to client demand. It has achieved this in ways which heighten job satisfaction and levels of engagement for many staff.

Prognosis

BGS is currently going through a governance exercise to determine whether it will remain part of NERC. There is real concern about the impact a potential change could have on staff. However BGS has created a versatile workplace and an open culture, making its workforce far more resilient to future change and uncertainty. Denise Langley is clear: “there is a genuine desire to not lose those things about our values that really matter to people”.