BARGAINING ON HOT-DESKING POLICIES

How can this guide help me?

Hot-desking is the term commonly used to refer to the office workplace practice that abandons the traditional allocation of a fixed desk to each worker in favour of arrangements that require staff to work at whatever desk is available on any given day or book time at a desk in advance.

Such practices are normally driven by calculations of cost savings in terms of office space and equipment, so can prove particularly popular where office space is expensive, such as within the central zones of major cities.

However, they can also carry major drawbacks for the working life of staff that are less easily quantifiable but may outweigh the claimed benefits.

This guide is intended to provide branches with arguments that help them make the case for resisting the introduction of hot-desking or abandoning hot-desking where opposition among staff is strong.

However, where it is an established and accepted practice, the guide also seeks to offer recommendations that the employer should be pressed to implement for minimising the most damaging consequences of hot-desking.

The guide is structured as follows

Arguments for opposing hot-desking

The case for hot-desking is usually made in the following terms:

- First and foremost, it reduces the costs of buying or renting physical building space, together with the hardware costs of desks and associated IT equipment;

- Usually as a supporting claim, it is asserted that by requiring staff to work in different areas, alongside different colleagues, hot-desking serves to break down the "silo" mentality that can develop when staff work in a fixed position among a fixed set of colleagues. In that way, it helps staff to understand how other parts of the organisation function and co-ordinate their work more effectively with them.

Frequently, hot-desking is proposed on the back of flexible working policies that can be advantageous to staff. For instance, a much wider adoption of home-working arrangements can understandably lead to a questioning of whether the same office space is necessary. This reflects the tendency of hot-desking to form an element in a drive toward "agile working," which claims to increase efficiency by utilising technology to change working practices in a more "flexible" way.

However, a multitude of arguments can be set against the claimed benefits of hot-desking, which are set out below.

The hidden costs

Employers may see the lower costs of reduced office space and equipment without appreciating that hot-desking can carry some important additional costs.

- The desk space and IT equipment that is available will often require upgrading as all hardware will need to offer maximum adaptability for all the different workers who may utilise it. For instance, desks, chairs and monitors with adjustable height control become a necessity.

- The daily cost of wasted working time as staff search for available desk space, go through the process of unpacking and connecting equipment, adjusting hardware to their needs, clearing desks at the end of the day and disconnecting / repacking equipment.

- The desk space made available is usually pegged to calculations of average attendance in the office, but inevitably there will be days when attendance is far above the average or all staff may be required to be in. On those occasions where there are simply more staff than desks, productivity will take an obvious hit.

- The scope for reducing costs will be limited by the fact that disabled staff who have a right to reasonable adjustments will need to be able to access these adjustments at whatever desk they use. Adjustments can include suitably adapted desks, chairs, IT and other equipment which may need to be provided for all work stations, thus increasing costs. Where required equipment can be installed at the start and of each day, storage facilities will have to be expanded to accommodate it.

- The employer will have to go through the process of risk assessing the consequences of moving toward hot-desking, since requiring staff to carry equipment around so extensively is likely to raise the chances of musculoskeletal injuries and the extra stresses raised by hot-desking can be a detonator of mental health problems.

Staff morale

Though the cost-based arguments are important, probably the most significant negative consequences of hot-desking lie in how taking people away from their own desk impacts on relationships between staff, the level of morale and their commitment to the organisation. The psychology of placing staff with a different set of colleagues with such regularity and operating in a strange environment away from their formal team has been much studied and has mostly delivered a negative verdict on the outcome.

A UNISON survey conducted on hot desking among social workers in 2012 found that:

- 90% reported a negative effect on morale;

- 90% said that it increased stress levels;

- 80% said that their access to peer support had deteriorated;

- Just 15% felt that flexibility and efficiency increased.

Analysis by US office design firm Gensler concludes that the most important factor in the productivity of office staff lies in their ability to achieve "focus" – defined in terms of their ability to concentrate and achieve attention to a particular task. A 2013 study by Diane Hoskins for the company, covering 90,000 workers, found that hot-desking made it harder for staff to achieve precisely this crucial component of working effectively.

This was backed up by a study of 1,000 Australian workers in 2016 which found that distractions, uncooperative behaviours, distrust, and negative relationships intensified as a result of hot-desking, along with perceptions of supervisory support falling.[1]

A psychological study[2] conducted in 2007 showed that the impact of desk assignment is to increase an individual's identification with their team, whereas workers who are not assigned desks show a shift toward identifying with the organisation more than their team. [It is easy to see that the loosening of team bonds may have a similarly detrimental impact on the sense of solidarity with colleagues that underpins much trade union organisation]

University of Wolverhampton research in 2011 pointed to the way hot-desking creates environments characterised by unwanted noise and competition for space. Consequently, hot-desking staff were found to feel less valued, leading some staff to experience greater difficulties in dealing with workplace stress. The research further suggested that around 25% of all organisations that introduce hot-desking suffer a fall in morale

[1] Applied Ergonomics, The demands and resources arising from shared office spaces, R Morrison & K Macky

[2] Organisation Science, Putting Employees in Their Place: The Impact of Hot Desking on Organisational and Team identification, L Millward, S Haslam, T Postmas, 2007

Another UK analysis of hot-desking conducted in 2011 found that loss of everyday ownership of the workspace served to create a sense of marginalisation among affected workers.[3] The author of the report has also gone on to explain how hot-desking often works in practice, with certain staff arriving first to choose their preferred desk and, by repeating their choice over time, establishing this desk as "their" space.

This study asserts that, contrary to popular belief, allocation of a fixed desk to staff "enables creativity because it enables us to put mundane matters (like finding a seat near to people we know) into the background and direct our attention onto problem-solving and innovation."

The way hot-desking can have a particularly negative effect on certain staff, particularly women, is also noted as "employees who for various reasons (such as childcare responsibilities or part-time status) arrive later in the day don't have a similar choice of desk space."

The conclusion of the analysis is that while hot-desking is supposed to break down barriers it actually serves to isolate staff because it hinders the building of relationships with colleagues.

One further negative consequence alluded to by a number of studies is that hot-desking is often implemented in a way that specifically excludes senior management staff from the practice. This can build understandable resentment among the lower graded staff who are expected to trawl through the office looking for an empty desk, especially as lower-graded staff are often likely to spend more time at their desks and less time at meetings or out of the office.

Checklist 1

If you are seeking to resist the proposed introduction of hot-desking or push an employer to abandon hot-desking, consider the following steps:

➢ Set out arguments to the employer, built around the points above, which draw attention to the extra costs that the employer may not have factored into their calculation of cost savings, as well as the widespread body of research that has found negative impacts on morale, health, motivation and productivity.

➢ Build on these general arguments by gathering evidence from staff about their attitude to hot-desking that may show to an employer the issues among their own workforce. An amendable model survey provided in the appendix to this guide may be a useful means for gathering this evidence. Branches may seek to persuade the employer to conduct the survey jointly among staff or act independently with other unions in distributing the survey among members.

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[3] Journal of Organizational Change Management, Settlers, vagrants and mutual indifference: unintended consequences of hot-desking, Alison Hirst

Steps for mitigating negative impacts of hot-desking

Even where hot-desking is an accepted arrangement, certain key steps should always be taken to ensure that it is implemented in the fairest way possible and the worst impacts of hot-desking are at least blunted. The following section runs through the steps that should be observed.

Ensure steps are taken to address health and safety risks

Employers must risk assess hazards and risks associated with hot-desking as they would any other hazard.

Under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 and Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, the employer has to identify potential hazards and who might be affected, estimate the level of risk, examine measures to eliminate or minimise the risk and work out additional measures.

Under the Safety Representatives & Safety Committee Regulations 1977 and Safety Representatives & Safety Committee Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1979, individuals appointed to conduct such an assessment must be competent and the employer needs to consult with recognised unions over the way in which they are appointed.

It is also an employer's duty under the regulations to consult with safety reps in good time on any matter with substantial implications for health and safety or the welfare of employees, and the operation of hot-desking policies would certainly fall under this requirement.

Of particular relevance to hot-desking, the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 and Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 place specific obligations on employers to minimise the risks of utilising IT at a workstation.

UNISON's general guidance on risk assessment, the safety regulations and the display screen equipment regulations are available through UNISON's online catalogue and can be accessed on these links:

Risk Assessment: A Guide for Union Safety Reps (stock number 1351)

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees (stock number 1819)

Are You Sitting Comfortably: UNISON's Display Screen Equipment Guide for Members and Staff (stock number 2692)

A neat summary of many of the physical issues encountered in hot-desking is also set out in this guide covering manual handling and display screen equipment

Aches, Pains and Strains (stock number 3827)

The hazards commonly associated with hot-desking are:

Musculoskeletal disorder – Hot-desking often requires staff to carry equipment around more than would be common among staff with fixed desks as well as sitting at a different desk on a regular basis. Therefore, a risk assessment should flag the need for carrying equipment, additional storage facilities, adaptable desks, chairs and IT equipment, to minimise the physical strains this pattern of work places on staff. In extreme cases, hot-desking can also lead to staff working in entirely inappropriate conditions, such as in a canteen or designated recreational area.

Stress – As reflected in the studies set out above, hot-desking can frequently create stress as a result of the regular need to search for a desk, get equipment working and operate in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar colleagues. It can also increase feelings of alienation from other members of a team and encourage disruptive, competitive behaviour. These stresses can trigger or exacerbate mental health problems among staff.

UNISON's general advice on minimising stress and mental health problems is available on these links:

Guarding Against Stress (stock number 3826)

Bargaining on Mental Health Policies (stock number 3927)

However, a risk assessment of hot-desking may consider the following steps:

- Avoiding low ratios of staff to desks, for example eight or nine desks for every 10 members of staff;

- Establishing a booking system to reduce the regular stress of looking for an desk in the office;

- Only applying the policy to staff who are rarely in the office, such as where they average two days or less in the office each week;

- Ensuring hot-desks are available within each department to guarantee that staff are working in a relatively familiar environment where they can build relationship with colleagues;

- Establishing personal lockers or another form of expanded storage space to reduce the strains of persistently carrying excessive materials and equipment around.

- Reviewing the amount of meeting space and noise protocols to address the possible escalation of stress caused by hot-desking during daily set-up and clearing away, along with more intensive communication of hot-deskers with their with team by phone.

- Expanding the range of flexible working options to reduce pressure on desk space. This can be a circular argument, as hot-desking can often be a product of flexible working options such as homeworking. However, where such changes aren't the driver for hot-desking, it can be used as the basis for arguing that with less desk space in the workplace, the employer should open up a review of all its flexible working options to take pressure off staff.

Anything involving less days in the office, such as part-time working, compressed hours, but most of all homeworking, can assist in reducing stress.

UNISON's full guide on flexible working is available on this link

Flexible Working: Making it Work (stock number 0303)

UNISON's guide specifically on implementing homeworking is available on this link

Homeworking Guide

This guide acknowledges that home-working can be popular with workers, but seeks to ensure that employers implement it in a way that is properly risk assessed.

Ensure steps are taken to prevent discrimination

Under the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and the various elements of anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland, employers must ensure that their employment practices are not discriminatory.

Though not required by the Public Sector Equality Duties or Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, the case should be made to the employer that an equality impact assessment is the only thorough way of testing whether hot-desking has any discriminatory effects.

Where a staff member is disabled and there is a duty on the employer to provide reasonable adjustments, these adjustments plainly must always be available under hot-desking arrangements.

This may be achieved through adaptable equipment that can be adjusted or installed each day. However, there can also be cases where certain adjustments are too substantial for daily changes to be made, so such a disabled worker must be excluded from hot-desking arrangements and have a fixed adapted desk permanently available. As a further example, deaf workers who need to be in sight of a visible fire alarm should also be exempted from hot-desking arrangements.

However disabilities can be both physical and mental, including mental health problems and neurological conditions. For affected staff the employer is under an equal obligation to make reasonable adjustments. For example, the Code of Practice which accompanies the Equality Act explicitly states that excluding workers with a social anxiety disorder from hot-desking arrangements is a reasonable adjustment. The duty to make reasonable adjustments may also mean allocating a fixed desk or taking steps such as reducing the stresses on a worker.

Though disabled workers are the most obvious group that need protection under hot-desking arrangements, other discriminatory impacts can creep in. As noted above, indirect discrimination can arise against staff with caring responsibilities (where women will almost certainly be disproportionately represented) because they are unable to get into work early, leaving them with the most arduous task in finding desks and the most likely staff to find themselves working in the most unfamiliar environments. An obvious solution may lie in establishing a booking system that reduces the disadvantage facing such staff.

Further consideration should be given to the impact on women experiencing the menopause and women during pregnancy. Adjustments for women experiencing the menopause may include ensuring their desk arrangements take account of access to toilet facilities and placement in a suitably temperature controlled environment. Adjustments for women during pregnancy should be led by the employer's obligation to conduct a specific risk assessment for pregnant women under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations.

Checklist 2

- ➢ Demand risk assessment of hot-desking arrangements that develops solutions for:
  - o Risks to physical health - such as provision of adequate carrying equipment, additional storage facilities, adaptable desks, chairs and IT equipment;
  - o Risks to mental health – such as adapting staff to desk ratios, establishing a booking system, limiting range of workers affected, limiting use of hot-desks outside a worker's department and expanding the range of flexible working options on offer to workers.

- ➢ Demand equality impact assessment of hot-desking that:
  - o Ensures reasonable adjustments are made for disabled workers in terms of both physical and mental health;
  - o Draws out solutions for any other groups negatively affected, placing particular emphasis on women with caring responsibilities.

Appendix 1 – Model survey for adaptation

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HOT-DESKING SURVEY

UNISON **[branch name]** is seeking to gather your views on the impact of hot-desking arrangements on your working life to shape the arguments we put to **[employer's name]** management about their hot-desking policies

Therefore, we would greatly appreciate it if you could spare the time to complete this survey. It covers just 14 questions and would normally take less than seven minutes to complete. All responses to this questionnaire are anonymous and will be treated as confidential. It will not be possible to identify any individual from information used for the claim.

1. Do you participate in hot-desking arrangements that require you to find a vacant desk before you can commence work?	
Yes	
No	

2. How many days a week on average do you have to participate in hot-desking arrangements?	
1 day	
2 days	
3 days	
4 days	
5 days	

3. How would you describe the overall impact of hot-desking on the quality of your working life?	
No or little impact	
Very positive impact	
Positive impact	
Negative impact	
Very negative impact	

4. How would you say hot-desking has affected the following aspects of your experiences at work?

	Improved	No change	Worsened
Relationships with colleagues			
Productivity			
Stress			
Motivation			
Physical health			
Mental health			

5. If you have any other comments to make on the impact of hot-desking on your working life, please state here:

6. How could hot-desking arrangements be improved?

Improved adaptability of desks, chairs and / or IT equipment	
More storage facilities for equipment	
Introduction of a booking system for hot-desks	
Additional hot-desks	
Limiting the range of staff required to engage in hot-desking to those rarely in the office	
Ensuring staff do not have to work outside their immediate team when hot-desking	
Expanding the range of flexible working options that enable staff to work outside the office	

7. If you have any other comments to make on how hot-desking arrangements could be improved, please state here:

8. When hot-desking, on average how much time do you spend over a day in searching for a desk, setting up equipment and clearing your desk?

Almost no time	
Less than 15 minutes	
Between 15 and 30 minutes	
Between half an hour and an hour	
Over an hour	

9. When hot-desking, are you always able to adapt your desk to your requirements?

Yes	
No	

10. When hot-desking, have you ever been unable to find an empty desk?

Yes	
No	

11. When hot-desking, how frequently is the desk you find among the colleagues that form your immediate team?

Always	
Frequently	
Rarely	
Never	

12. How would you describe your gender?

Male	
Female	
In another way	

13. Would you describe yourself as a disabled person?	
	Yes	
	No	

14. If you have answered yes to question 13, have adequate "reasonable adjustments" been made for you as part of hot-desking arrangements?	
	Yes	
	No	

15. Do you have regular caring responsibilities to balance with work?	
	Yes	
	No	

Note on conducting surveys

When conducting a survey, branches should note the following points in relation to data protection.

- Always make sure that the data you submit to the employer protects your members' identities.

- The best method for protecting confidentiality and for reducing the time necessary to analyse results is to conduct an online survey. The recommended online survey service is set out below. However, if the survey is sent out to email addresses, care has to be taken that this is compliant with the General Data Protection Regulations. Distribution should take place through UNISON's WARMS system (Web Access RMS), to ensure that the emails used for members are those that that they have provided for such purposes to the union.

- Consider alternative ways to gain the benefits of an online survey without the restrictions of email distribution. For instance, you could place the survey link on social media if you are confident that it would be accessed by sufficient staff without notifying emails. Alternatively, you could seek to develop a joint survey with the employer (if that did not mean too many compromises on questions asked), which the employer could then distribute to staff.

- If you decide on manually distributing a hard copy survey, ensure that the survey can be returned as confidentially as possible. Like the examples above which do not rely on union email distribution lists, the advantage to this method is that it can go wider than UNISON membership if agreed with any other unions representing staff. In this way, it may both gather a wider section of staff views that carries more weight with the employer and assist in recruiting members by highlighting the role of the union in advancing staff terms and conditions.

Online survey providers

SurveyMonkey is one of the most widely used online survey services but UNISON now recommends SurveyGizmo as it has EU servers and therefore complies with EU data protection law, whereas SurveyMonkey servers are US based.

SurveyGizmo offer various different packages, but UNISON recommends the standard version of SurveyGizmo, as it fulfils the required data protection and anonymity features.

Branches must set up their own online surveys and cannot use regional SurveyGizmo accounts. We realise that at around £700 for the year SurveyGizmo may seem expensive, but branches can use it for unlimited surveys including branch mapping surveys, consultations and member questionnaires throughout the year.

It is possible to sign up for SurveyGizmo here: https://www.surveygizmo.eu

[Please make sure that you use the .eu address and not the .com address so that it is EU based]

SurveyGizmo's instructions on sending out survey invitations to email addresses are here:

https://help.surveygizmo.com/help/share-survey-via-email

Its instructions on how to make voting anonymous are here:
https://help.surveygizmo.com/help/anonymous-surveys

For every SurveyGizmo account that contains UNISON member data, a branch elected official should notify their Regional Head.