Identifying effective mobile workforce management

White paper

Fieldwork productivity: A lack of awareness is holding back progress

The civil service is facing unprecedented budget pressures. As austerity continues to take its toll on Whitehall; departments are being asked to make ever-greater efficiency savings, at the same time as boosting their productivity and improving public services.

As such, the government needs to make the most of its civil servants, wherever they are – but Kirona's research has shown that many departments are not thinking about their fieldworkers.

Nearly all the main ministerial departments say they have fieldworker teams, while many agencies and organisations have staff regularly working out of the office.

Many of these are in the regulatory, judicial, prosecution and counter-fraud services, but organisations as diverse as the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and NHS Blood and Transplant have told Kirona they have mobile fieldwork staff.

However, the research indicates that these teams could be more productive, with poor quality fieldwork processes and a reliance on outdated paper-based systems stymieing productivity.

Government has a real opportunity to make significant cost savings and noticeable improvements in productivity – not to mention improved workforce morale – with the new technologies available.

Using such technologies will help fieldworkers make the best use of their often-limited resources and, most importantly, provide the best possible service to citizens.

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Why focus on fieldwork?

Kirona's research shows that the civil service is not innovative in its approach to managing mobile workers. This means that even a small change could have a big impact on services.

Compared to other areas where government has made big leaps in its use of cutting-edge software, fieldwork has been left behind.

Most respondents to a Kirona's Research survey of 1,018 civil servants said jobs were booked only through a shared calendar (46%) or by email (46%).

Fig 1: **How do you currently schedule staff and allocate jobs to field-based workers? (Fieldworker managers only)**
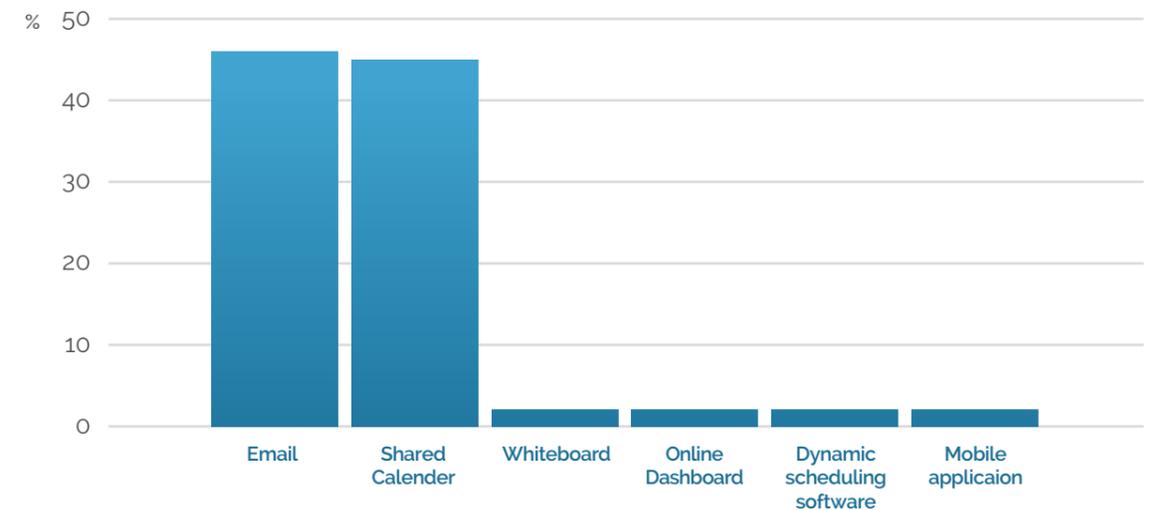
Only one department – HMRC – made any mention of a dynamic scheduling system, while just 2% said they used a mobile application. Many respondents made reference to paper-based systems and 2% said there was a whiteboard involved in the scheduling and allocation of field-based workers' jobs.

71% of the staff we spoke to feel there is an opportunity to do things better. Just 29% said that the system used for booking jobs was very effective, and a further 20% said that it was neither effective nor ineffective.

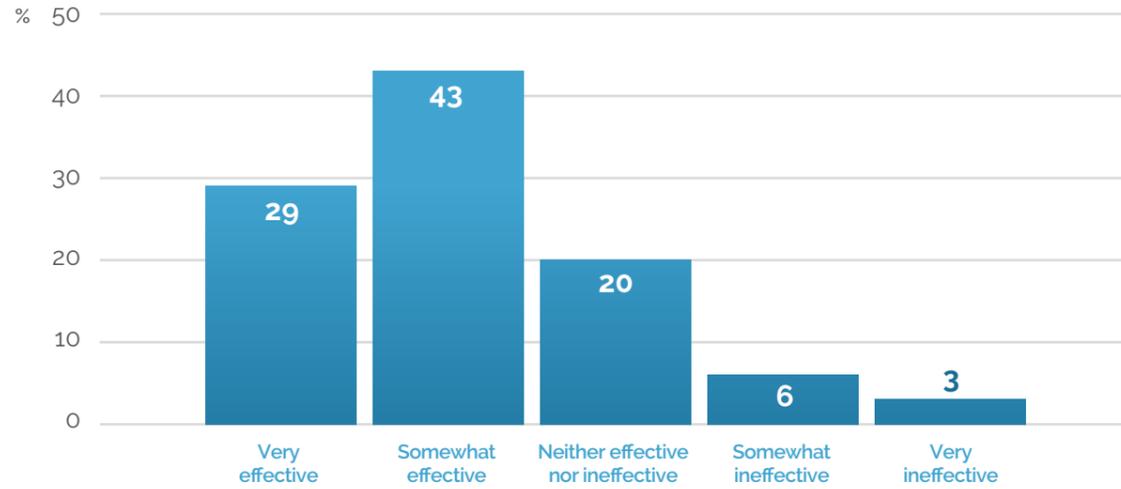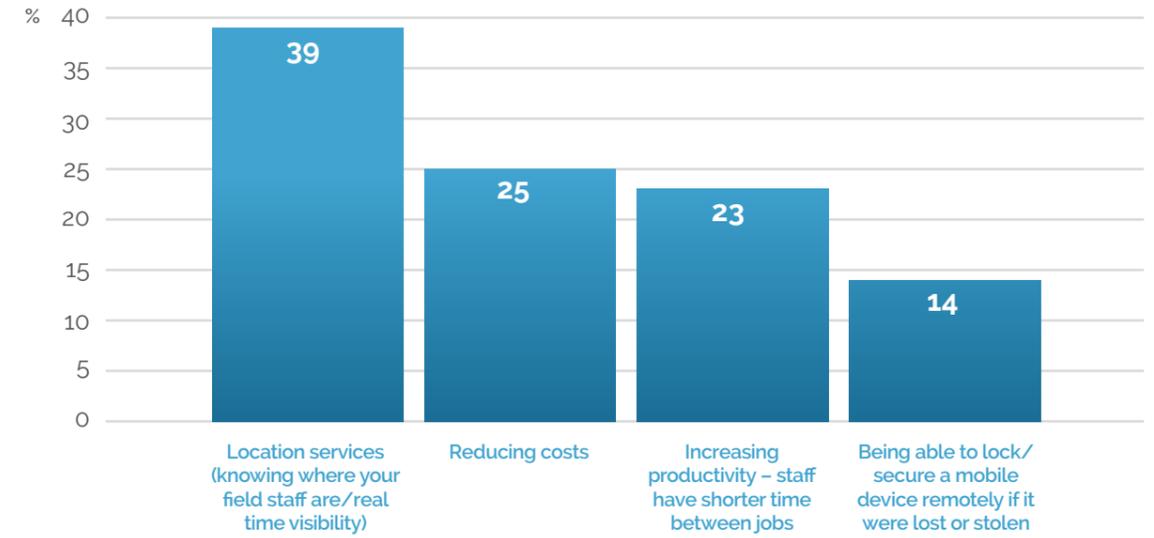Fig 2: **Overall, how is your system to book jobs performing? Please consider productivity in your answer.**

Fig 3: **Which of the following do you think would be useful when managing your mobile workers?**

A smaller proportion defined their booking systems as inefficient – with 6% saying this was somewhat the case and 3% saying it was very much so.

However, these respondents included those working at some of the biggest users of fieldwork staff, including the Home Office, the Drivers and Vehicles Licensing Agency, the Office for National Statistics, the Department for Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions and the Scottish Government.

Managers and fieldwork staff do recognise the problem. Just over three-quarters of managers (76%) said that the productivity of their fieldwork teams could be improved.

Some 39% said that the ability to know where field workers are in real time – such as through better use of location services – would be useful, while 23% said they would like to ensure staff had less unused time between jobs.

Others called for reductions in the cost of managing staff (25%) and the ability to lock or secure a device if it were lost or stolen (14%).

76%

of managers believe productivity of their fieldwork teams could be improved

What are the problems?

For staff in the field, the main issues relate to the quality of devices when logging on to update systems, as well as poor connectivity and a lack of secure connections.

This is not just an inconvenience: some interviews showed that it is actually preventing staff from doing their job properly, which will impact not just on the department's productivity but also on the citizens who rely on the service.

For instance, one worker from the Home Office said: "The system to book in work is very slow to access remotely so people tend not to update it.

Poor mobile signal also means that workers cannot check in, which could leave cause for concern when departments are trying to ensure the safety of their staff outside the office.

One respondent from the DWP said that if they needed to discuss a case they often had to call around until they reached someone, because there was no way of knowing who was available. This demonstrates a poor use of staff's valuable time.

A number of respondents said they wanted to have a system that did not rely on static systems, such as spreadsheets. "A live database system not a historic non-updated one would make scheduling easier," said one respondent who worked at the Home Office.

However, the research also showed that staff using shared email calendars seemed fairly happy with this option. This suggests that they are not aware of new software, such as dynamic scheduling platforms, that could address their problems.

Managers listed a number of the same issues – poor devices and connectivity being major causes of concern – but also noted an inability to communicate about delays affecting progress.

Some said they wanted a system that would allow staff to say whether clients had caused a delay, or a system that could log that there would be a delay because of traffic – an issue that one manager said was often underestimated by senior management and overestimated by staff.

They also called for one platform for all, rather than multiple platforms per team. "Updating changes across multiple officers with paper-based and spreadsheet records leads to inconsistencies, incorrect information and scheduling issues," said one Home Office respondent based in Yorkshire.

...poor devices and connectivity are major causes of concern – but also noted an inability to communicate about delays affecting progress.

A dynamic solution

The survey results indicate a lack of understanding or knowledge of the options available to government departments when it comes to managing fieldwork.

It shows that, although respondents who are simply using a shared email calendar system say they are fairly happy with the process, they are also struggling with a number of problems inherent with the technology they are using.

This includes being unable to update their calendars while on the move and that managers aren't aware of where employees are when they are out of the office.

It is preventing real-time updates and can make it hard for staff to change their schedules if necessary; it also means staff may not be making the most of their work days or planning appointment routes in the most time- and cost-effective way.

The fact staff are facing these problems but aren't moving away from their current working systems could suggest that they are unaware of the dynamic scheduling platforms that would tackle them.

Such platforms allow proper management of the end-to-end service processes, and seamlessly link field-based workers with central functions. They allow managers to track individuals' workloads and help managers deploy staff in the most effective way possible.

In addition, government departments need to choose a system that offers off-line capabilities for situations when reception is poor or non-existent: that way staff can always update reports and it will feed back to the central offices as soon as possible.

When choosing a platform, departments need to opt for something that is intuitive, so everyone in the team can use it – whether they are on a mobile in the field or on a desktop in the office. Moreover, they must be secure and reliable.

Procurement decision-makers in government will want to be able to choose cloud-based services that fit their security needs, allowing them to meet Whitehall's cloud-first rules.

Kirona's mobile workforce application also overcomes the issue of a field based worker being in an area with no signal by providing full off-line working capabilities, ensuring jobs are available to field based workers on the device even if they are allocated work in remote locations.

The research on G-Cloud shows that these decision-makers want transparent pricing, flexibility and clarity on the services provided, putting the onus on suppliers to improve the way they communicate their services.

These decision-makers also put great value in recommendations from other departments, as well as past experience.

Kirona's research shows that field workers are currently managing their time and appointments in an ineffective way, and that – although the problem is acknowledged – there is little awareness of how it can be addressed.

Government departments need to know that there is a **better way of managing their field-based staff's time, which will ultimately lead to cost-savings, efficiency gains and a better service to the public.** Currently some organisations are able to increase their productivity by an average of 20% with effective mobile workforce management.

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