



## Agile audit: Progress Housing Group case study

Gemma Smith, head of internal audit and risk assurance at Progress Housing Group, has just one internal auditor and an insurance officer in her team, plus support from a co-sourced internal audit provider, however, she believes that introducing more agile ways of working has made the whole organisation more efficient and has aided communications, risk assurance and security.

“We began by identifying three types of employees – those who, at present, need to work in a fixed location, such as our customer services team; those who have always been mobile workers, for example, repairs operatives and the housing management team; and those who could do their jobs from any desk in any office, or at home, given the right technology and connections,” she explains. Internal auditors fall into this last category.

Progress Housing has four main offices, three in one town and one 30 minutes’ drive away. Staff who are categorised as “agile” can book a desk and a PC, or a meeting room, in any of the offices. They carry iPads and use the Microsoft Lync app to identify where other people in the organisation’s directory are and to check whether they are available or busy. The app shows which office they are in and, if the person is marked as green, they can send them an instant message. The app synchs with their calendar, so marks people as red if they are in a meeting, or as orange if they are not using a computer. Individuals can label themselves as red if they don’t want to be disturbed.

To keep the system feeling human and help agile workers to create and maintain relationships, everyone in the directory has a photo which appears when messages are sent internally. “This means you know what people look like and who you are talking to and helps you to recognise them when you visit them,” Smith explains. “It helps to personalise it and locates you as a real person in a physical office.”

In addition to Lync, Progress Housing also improved its intranet to encourage people to post messages and contact each other. Users can update personal details such as hobbies, if they wish like-minded colleagues to get in touch.

None of these changes directly affect the way Smith and her team conduct audits, but it has nonetheless significantly affected risk and assurance across the group. Enabling people to move between locations and eliminating personal office space has not only prompted the organisation to work harder at team-building and creating an organisational community, but has also made it automate inefficient paper-based processes – for example, it no longer uses spreadsheets and information is entered on centralised systems in consistent, comparable formats.

“We invested in technology to centralise all our systems. We can now ensure that only authorised people access data and we can control data risks better,” Smith explains. “This must go with training – all the right controls won’t help if someone leaves an unprotected iPad on a train.”

Staff who wish to work from home complete an “agile homeworking request form” that must be approved by management and has a built-in risk-assessment section to address issues such as data protection training and health and safety issues.

As different areas of the organisation take up agile forms of working, new efficiencies and ways to improve assurance and control systems emerge. “I worked with our Treasury team last year to review our daily banking procedures because they wanted to introduce more agile working,” Smith says. “We started by looking at the risks, but ended up finding lots of efficiencies, eliminating paperwork and improving systems all round.”

Other side benefits have included less clutter. Individuals have lockers for personal items, but without personal desks they tend to print less and dispose of paperwork securely. They recently had a “clear-up Friday” when everyone downed tools and helped declutter the offices. “Apart from reducing data risks, this makes the environment nicer for everyone,” Smith says.

The process is ongoing and the organisation is now looking using more video conferencing and Facetime, but Smith emphasises that such changes must be accompanied by work to maintain relationships and corporate culture. “We haven’t changed our audit methodology at all, but improving our core systems means we’ve reduced risks, tightened controls and become more efficient,” she explains.

## Top tips

1. It’s important to maintain contact with people when you’re working in different locations. I contact my team every morning and let them know when I’m available. You don’t want people to feel isolated.
2. Eliminate unnecessary paperwork – this got us off spreadsheet programmes and moved us on to core systems, which was a major plus.
3. Install a good online system to book desks and meeting rooms.