

THE RISE OF THE VIRTUAL WORKSPACE

DO WE NEED TO GO INTO THE OFFICE AT ALL ANY MORE?

By Ruby Warrington | 18 Oct 2009 | www.timesonline.co.uk

Working nine to five, what an archaic way to make a living. Recent research by Microsoft shows that 78% of people believe that traditional office hours no longer exist — and some forward-thinking companies are even dispensing with the office itself. Enter the virtual, “post-office” world, where water-cooler moments and long commutes are a thing of the past, weekends and evenings are fair game for e-mails and conference calls, and even Friday-night drinks take place over Skype.

In this new ‘flexistential’ world, some bosses only see their employees in the flesh once a year. Meanwhile, face-to-face meetings are held in office “hubs”, **your PA becomes your VA** (that’s virtual assistant — probably working from home and saving a fortune on childcare), and netbooks, the new super-lightweight laptops with extended battery lives, become your office-in-a-(Marc Jacobs) bag. Actual work, meanwhile, is done on trains in between meetings, at kitchen tables and, if you feel like it, in your pyjamas. Beware, however: in this “always-on” culture, your boss might just Skype you in the middle of the night. Anti-office outfits must therefore be hybrid, and your PJs presentable.

Members’ clubs, traditionally good spots for networking, are increasingly becoming places in which to clock up anti-office hours. “[London member’s club] the Hospital is buzzing at the moment,” says Chris Sanderson of the think-tank The Future Laboratory, which has done extensive research into the concept of ‘bleisure’, where business and leisure time merge into one. “You go there for breakfast and there are people with their laptops out on every surface.”

The virtual PR firm The PR Network employs consultants all over the world, but lists the WC2 address of the Adam Street members’ club on its website, while Shoreditch House and the Book Club in east London are Meccas for the young guns spearheading the anti-office movement.

According to Sanderson, the predicted rise in oil prices by 2011 means “the cost of travel will rise exponentially, so nobody will be able to afford to commute”. He sees a future where “people will work from office hubs within walking distance of their homes. People doing anything keyboard-based will no longer be forced to work in monolithic data sweatshops and information factories”. Perhaps this vision is closer than we think. In April this year, the government passed legislation giving an extra 4.5m people the right to request flexible working.

Those already making up the virtual workforce cite as benefits higher productivity levels and more respect for their employers. Gary Reid of the creative design agency Nude says he attracts better people by running a “fluid, virtual office”. “When he became a father, my creative director, John, left a high-profile job at [the ad agency] DDB to work with us, because the 24/7 office culture there no longer worked for him. And having people like him on the team attracts bigger clients,” he explains. Moving against a wasteful culture of ‘presenteeism’ in the UK, Reid says he judges his employees’ performance by their output as opposed to the hours they clock up.

Sanderson believes virtual business could add £9 billion to the UK economy, saying that “people are more likely to be productive in what would traditionally be considered downtime”. It’s not all roses, however: “Silo-working can get very lonely,” says Reid. Which is when those members’ clubs revert to type. The laptops are stashed away and the notion of ‘bleisure’ really comes into its own.

Contd:

JOIN THE HUB

THE PROS

- Off-peak gym membership
- No more Saturdays in the bank/doctor's surgery
- Relocating to the country
- The end of the armpit commute
- Being there for your kids
- No more physical spam (constant colleague interruptions)

THE CONS

- The omnipresent desk
- No water-cooler gossip
- The self-discipline needed
- Office workers presume you are a slacker
- BlackBerry holidays Great tan, but no mates

THE HANG-OUTS

- London members' clubs The Hospital, Shoreditch House, Adam Street, One Alfred Place
- Pret a Manger
- An OfficePOD
- The garden shed

THE GADGETS

- Skype For digital face time and virtual Friday-night beers
- Microsoft Windows Phone Latest assault on the iPhone/BlackBerry duopoly
- Mac MobileMe Keeps your phone and laptop in perfect sync
- Sony VAIO X The thinnest and lightest laptop around
- The Microsoft Courier "Digital paper" tablet PC set to transform the post-office world

THE LINGO

- Flexistentialism The new work/life balance
- Life-splicing When work and life are intertwined
- The hub The centre of your flexistential world
- Downtime productivity Increased results in your comfort zone
- VA Your virtual assistant, who picks up calls, checks e-mails and irons out contracts from home
- Digital bohemian Unshackled by digital technology, these future workers roam free
- Face time Archaic public engagement without a webcam

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