

the death of the office

(as we know it)

How virtual work is changing the modern workplace

By Georgia Collins, director, DEGW North America

Virtual in the computational sense of the term, generally means “created, simulated, or carried on by means of a computer or computer network.” By this definition, virtual work is nothing new; computers have facilitated our work for many years now. So what is different about virtual work today? The difference is two-fold: First, the computers we use that enable virtual work are no longer tethered to a desk—or even the office building in which the desks sit. Virtual work enables mobility within and outside the office “box.” Second, the rise of computer networks means that computers are no longer just facilitating individual virtual work, they are facilitating virtual collaboration. They are enabling people to meaningfully connect across geographies and time zones in ways that actually enhance individual and group productivity. This of course begs the question: What is the value of physical place when practically everything can be done outside of the office?

What is driving the rise of virtual work?

Globalization and the distribution of teams

Companies are global, and their talent now resides across a network of offices. As a result, it is no longer a given that the individuals working on a particular project are all located in the same physical place. Instead, it is much more likely that they are distributed across multiple places—necessitating virtual collaboration.

Attraction of talent

Competition for talent is only increasing. And while large talent pools in the traditional markets continue to thrive, they are not large enough to satisfy demand. Furthermore, companies are realizing that the talent they want doesn't always—or exclusively—reside in the physical geographies in which they have offices. Remote and flexible work programs enable organizations to hire talent where they find it.

Retention of talent

Seeking—much less achieving—work/life balance is becoming a thing of the past. Instead, individuals are asking for more flexibility in managing and moving fluidly between both. (A Georgetown University law study found that 80 percent of the workforce would work more flexibility if they didn't think it would harm their careers.) This translates to greater flexibility in how people work, where people work, and when they work.

The rise of the independent contractor

By 2019, 40 percent of the U.S. workforce will be independent contractors, up from 26 percent today. And these aren't just the traditional “temporary” workers. These are knowledge workers—experts in their fields—hired to fill unique roles for short periods of time and/or supplement and support full-time high performance teams. Virtual tools enable these individuals to be connected without necessarily being physically present.

The cost of travel

Organizations are significantly decreasing their T&E costs by making virtual collaboration the norm rather than the exception. Cisco estimates that the use of TelePresence helped its employees avoid travel for nearly 17,500 meetings in the first year and half of its deployment, an estimated savings to the company of nearly \$90 million.

Environmental sustainability

Today, individuals and organizations are more aware of their carbon footprint than they ever have been. Virtual work, when managed properly, can significantly decrease an organization's environmental impact.

What technologies are supporting it?

Social Media

Social media is not just for college students. Gartner predicts that by 2014, social networking services will replace e-mail as the primary vehicle for interpersonal communications for 20 percent of business users.

Increased access to, and quality of, video conferencing

Cisco's TelePresence and HP's Halo lead the field in high-definition video conferencing. Their ability to simulate the feeling of a real face-to-face meeting is so convincing that users of it report trying to reach out and shake hands with their colleagues on the "other side of the table" (who are, in fact, on the other side of the world).

Virtual meeting and communication software

Gone are the days of lengthy set-up times and dedicated virtual meeting tech support. Software like WebEx and Live Meeting enable computer-to-computer calling (the desktop phone is a thing of the past), desktop sharing, virtual whiteboarding, and person-to-person video conferencing at the touch of a button.

Virtual worlds

Many large enterprises, including the U.S. Department of Defense, Cisco, IBM, and a number of major universities are investing heavily in virtual worlds as a way to connect people, safely and inexpensively simulate real world situations, and offer long distance training and education.

Cloud Computing

Perhaps nothing compares to the rapid rise of cloud computing. While still in its infancy, many technology experts predict that "the cloud" will completely transform the way we manage, store, and share content. Imagine having access to all of your content from your smart phone, tablet PC, or netbook, no matter where you are or what time of day it is. All you need is an internet connection.

How is it affecting the modern work environment?

Virtual work is already having—and will continue to have—a profound effect on the design of work environments. Herewith, three of the biggest:

1 Real estate portfolios will shrink. Research across industries and across the globe conclusively shows that cubes and offices—the largest portion of most organizations' real estate portfolios—are only occupied 30 to 40 percent of the core working day. That means that the vast majority of office space is only used, on average, three hours a day. The model is neither cost-effective nor environmentally sustainable. In response, many organizations are reevaluating how much space they actually need and rethinking how it should be designed to support what people are actually doing when they are in the office.

2 Environments will be less about the individual and more about the group. Now that work can be done from practically anywhere, people will come to the office primarily to see and interact with the colleagues. This will translate to less individually owned space and more collectively owned space—space that supports community and reinforces company culture, facilitates in-person collaboration (both formal and informal), and enables virtual collaboration that can't be done from elsewhere (such as high definition video conferencing).

3 People will have more choice—about whether they come to the office at all, and about what they do and where they will sit when they get there. (Don't expect them to stay in one place all day long, either.)

What it means for the design community: a (good) challenge

Think of this shift toward more virtual work as the death of the office...as we know it. And isn't that a good thing? How many more cubes and offices does the world really need anyway? The "office" isn't going away; it's just changing.

The design of the "new" office is really the ultimate design challenge: create a place where people really love to be. In doing so, the following are important considerations:

Don't plan for today.

If we design for today, the solution will be on the road to obsolescence by the time people move into it. So while it is important to understand how people work today, it is equally important to think out five to 10 years. Build in flexibility so that as technology changes (which it inevitably will) and work patterns change, the space that supports them can change too.

Remember Jane Jacobs.

Urban metaphors abound in today's modern offices—main hallways are designed as "main streets," teams reside in "neighborhoods," and café break areas are "community centers," but somehow we've lost track of the most important urban lesson there is: density and mixed activities are good. Main streets, neighborhoods, and community centers are only "great" when they have people in them. Design for density and serendipity.

Consider the office "box" as part of a larger network of places where work gets done.

The office need not, and will not, be a place that accommodates all work activities. Instead, the office will be just one in a network of places within a city in which work gets done. Just as offices will need to be designed to support emerging work patterns, so too will retail, community, and public spaces.

Brand is more than a logo or a product.

Apple's iPhone ads don't focus on their phones, they focus on all of the apps available for their phones—showcasing all of the things you can use an iPhone to do. Similarly, Autodesk's gallery space in San Francisco doesn't display software boxes, it displays the myriad products their customers have built by using their products: a 7-ft. LEGO Land dinosaur, Chrysler's award winning Super Bee concept car, and Yves Béhar's One Laptop Per Child computer, among others.

As organizations become more distributed, the importance of the office as a place that reinforces community, embodies shared values, and showcases brand will only increase. Successful and inspired workspaces will be designed with those things in mind, inspiring not just visitors, but the people who work there too, making "the office" a desirable destination once again. ☐