

# The office of the future: a vision for stimulating working environments

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents fundamental changes in social, economic and technological environments that will have an impact in shaping working environments. It contains future forecasting done by various organisations and a radically new vision that aims to turn conventional ways of working practices upside down into more creative ones. As well as some recommendations for guiding business into a direction that encourages innovation.

**Keywords:** design strategy, future forecasting, working environments, design management, innovation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tragic events such as terrorist attacks like the one in New York on September 11, 2001 or environmental hazards such as the Tsunami on December 2004 have shown us the vulnerability of life and have changed our aspirations, attitudes beliefs and behavioral patterns.

World events are an increasingly important factor in shaping our expectations of working environments. In order to sustain a motivation around jobs, there is a need to change the way people work and also the work environment location. We want our working environments to be non-corporate and changeable.

“Work is no longer a place, it’s an activity. I work everywhere, all the time and I go to my office to be disturbed not to concentrate. My concentrated effort now takes place in trains and planes and cars and hotel rooms, at home and not in my office.”<sup>1</sup>

Old routines such as the dictates of last century’s 9’ to 5’ regime, no longer attract us, they are simply not relevant to the needs and wants of today’s new fluid society. We seek individual lifestyles rather than uniform working routines. As opposed to settled corporate offices we desire a place to think a place to interact and to create. Business will need to read itself for more adaptable working spaces. It is not just about a new working space it has to do with quality of life. The challenge is to use design to improve the way people live not just the way they work.

Business should adopt a radically new philosophy, turn conventional ways upside down into more creative ones. They should keep their eyes open for all socio-cultural influences to have a real sense of understanding of consumers needs and for choosing a direction that encourages innovation.

## 2. FORECASTING WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

### 2.1. The role of design in the creation of business futures

Carin Wilson the Principal of Studio Pasifika in New Zealand commented on the potential of design for future forecasting “We are way past the point where we can afford to absorb any ongoing failure to read critical signs of shifts in the world marketplace, and the peripheral value of good design skills should be the ability to spot them coming in time to take up strategic positions to meet them”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the potential of design in future forecasting relies on the fact that there are certain tools of design such as forecasting, brainstorming, prototyping just to name a few that can be applied to turn

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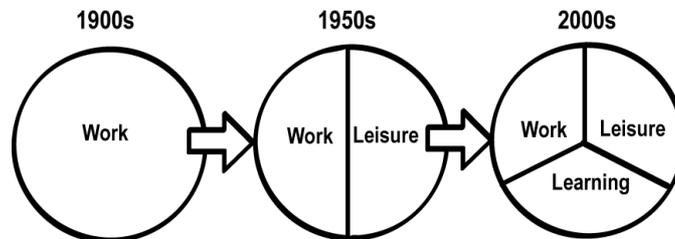
<sup>1</sup> Harrison, Andrew, (1999) *Intelligent Urban Places: Transcript of the RCA Nomadic Working Seminar*. London:

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, Carin (2005) Profile Carin Wilson Available at <http://www.betterbydesign.org.nz/profiles/index.php>. Last accessed: May 20th, 2005

socio-cultural trends into opportunities for redesigning products, environments, communications as well as transportation systems that if tackled properly will eventually lead to a better quality of life.

## 2.2. Past and Present Climate

In order to predict how the working environment of the future is going to work and look like it is important to understand our past and present social climate.

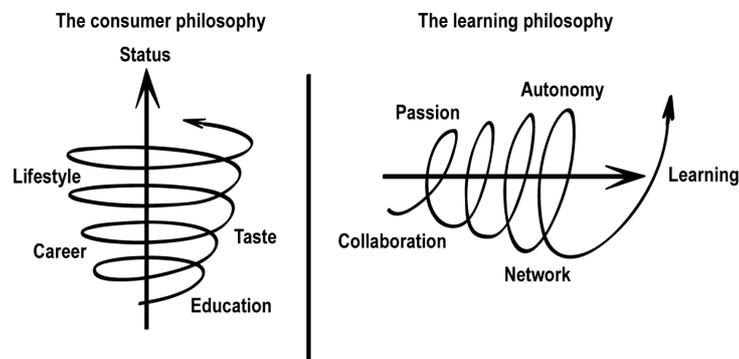


**Figure 1.** The work, leisure and learning mix published in Grant’s *After Image: mind altering marketing* book

From 1900 to 1950 people lived for work 98% engaged in manual work of which mostly was farming. Domesticity and the concept of the house wife were at their splendor however they date back to the Victorian era. Woman’s place was at home in middle classes and in working classes they worked as domestic servants. Work for people of the time was associated with duty. “They did a hard’s day work for an honest day pay”<sup>3</sup>

From 1950-2000 people also had fun. Leisure time became part of every day’s life alongside with work. The consumer society was born. People valued lifestyle, status, glamour, class etc. Surveys show that these decades were when people were most happy.

From 2000 until today the learning factor is the new realm of every day’s life, it is key to individual development and a driver for wealth. People search for a better quality of life a balance in which work, learning and leisure are equally important. However leisure activities are those that develop and sustain us rather than just distress us. The values in society have changed in the past decades and will continue doing so. There is no longer the notion of good citizenship and domestication it is about the quality of the job done rather than the amount of time spent doing it. Businesses should read themselves for these ethic shifts. See figure 1 below. There is an inclination towards people engaging in more skilled jobs rather than manual work. Nowadays 70% jobs are in the service sector, 27% in manufacturing and 3% in agriculture.



**Figure 2.** The consumer ethic v.s the learning ethic published in Grant’s *After Image: mind altering marketing* book

<sup>3</sup> Grant, John, (2003) *After Image: mind altering marketing*. London: Profile Books

### 2.3. What is wrong with the working environments of today?

There is more work for less people, we have to handle increasing amounts of information and the time scales are shorter: The rise of the week that never ends.

Employees are expected to be more flexible about their working hours but employers are not flexible at all.

We rely on others but there is no trust amongst colleagues, employers, employees and certainly no trust in technology.

We are working more on the move than on a fixed office, there are 30 million mobile workers in the United States which 11 million are based partially or wholly at home.

Nomadic people spend most of their time at client's offices in public transport and only 43% of their time in their own office.<sup>4</sup> In 2002, the average British worker lost 5.7 hours a month as a result of traffic congestion and rail delays<sup>5</sup>

## 3 FUTURE FORECAST: WHAT TO EXPECT FOR THE NEXT DECADE?

### 3.1. Socio-cultural trends

Tracking trends effectively is essential for business competitive advantage because they can affect social and emotional consumer habits, priorities and attitudes, inspire design solutions and technology which we use on our everyday lives and shape society's accepted ethics morals and values.

A number of social trends were identified from different sources. They all add to the significance of improving working environments.

Only 17% of workers want that corner office the majority would prefer to work in a home office<sup>6</sup>

#### Future issue

Lumsden design partnership identified future trends and published them in their bulletin "future issue" in order to promote themselves as a forward thinking company. Their view of the office of tomorrow promotes personal comfort and relaxation. Some of the characteristics of their vision are listed below.

1. Non-territorial
2. As human centred, as is technology based.
3. A place in which you are as likely to go and hang out as work.
4. Loyalty to a single employer will not longer exist
5. Business will be made out of Flexexecutives- executives who run their businesses from wherever they happen to be at the moment: on a plane, at home, at a child's little league game.

#### Changing Lives

Changing lives is a research study which started in 1980 and done yearly by Nvision to track behavioral patterns of the UK population providing a picture of the country today. Five trends for the coming decade were identified. Three of them could have an overall impact on future working environments in different ways.

**1. Desperately seeking differentiation-** Individual lifestyle V.S working routines. Work for people nowadays is about individual choice and individual responsibility. The idea that the defining zeitgeist of the times is individualization and need to be, and be seen to be, different from others.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Myerson, Jeremy, (1999) *Transcript of the RCA Nomadic Working Seminar*. London: Helen Hamlyn Research Centre

<sup>5</sup> Butters, Hazel (2003) "I'm a commuter – get me out of here: The future of teleworking" Available: <http://www.receiver.vodafone.com>. Last accessed 30 April 2005

<sup>6</sup> Lumsden design partnership (2003)"Future issue" Available: <http://www.futureissue.com> Last accessed 20 May 2005

**2. The new meaning of convenience-** Perceptions of time pressure as we try to cram more and more into our lives (leisure, ‘experiences’, being great parents, having successful careers) the desire for convenience remains strong. But now it is more than just time saving, it is also about enhancing and improving life: from ‘don’t have the time to do all my chores to I want to make more time for me; from ‘short cut, second best’ to ‘added value, better, the best’; from ‘joyless, routine, habitual’ to exciting, experiential’

**3. Creating new equilibrium-** As our inspirations rise so too do the pressures on our time and our desire to have it all. How do we balance work with family and friends? Concerns over health with the desire to indulge?

**Work at home**

A think-tank of the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre addressed the design implications of one of the key social trends of our time: the rise of working from home. We live in an era where the division of work and home is blurring. There is a significant home working universe in the UK. According to the Helen Hamlyn Research Study 30% of workforce do some work from home, 46% have an office or work area in their home, a third expect to do more work from home over the next few years, 9% of workforce work from home all the time, 1% of home workers operate under a formal teleworking system

There is an approximate of 1.2 million professional teleworkers in the UK——around 4.5% of the working population——who work via computer and telephone and a ‘hidden’ workforce up to 800,000 home workers mainly doing clerical, assembly and manual work on piecework rates.<sup>8</sup>

Although working at home produces some gains, there are as well some negative effects from home working. The results of the Hamlyn research Centre survey on home working reflect this.

Top 5 positive effects from working at home	Top 5 negative effects from working at home
Flexibility, particularly of time	Isolation/ miss social contact
Caring for children while working	No separation work/private life,
Utilising quiet of the home for concentrated work	Need for strong self-motivation/discipline
Available space and equipment	Can’t escape the household chores
Control of environment/	Need for time management

**Table 1.** Positive and negative effects form working at home according to the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre’s think-tank.

The research team from the Royal College of Art identified some of the most powerful images associated with the concepts of home and work. The results of the survey on home working reflect some interesting associations worth analysing.

<sup>7</sup> Nvision (2004) “Changing lives conference” Available: <http://www.nvisiononline.co.uk> Last accessed May 20<sup>th</sup> 2005

<sup>8</sup> *Work at home: a think-tank on home-working* (1999). London: Royal College of Art

### Top 10 most powerful images of home

- 1-comfortable
- 2-my room/belongings
- 3-love/family
- 4-peace/quiet/private
- 5-relaxed
- 6-safe
- 7-warmth
- 8-enjoyment/stress-free
- 9-food
- 10-bed/sleep

### Top 10 most powerful images of work

- 1-pressure
- 2-stress/busy/fast/pace
- 3-creative
- 4-social environment/people
- 5-telephone
- 6-technological systems
- 7-efficiency/decisions/juggling
- 8-team/consultation/meetings
- 9-information overload
- 10-office politics

### 3.2. Technological trends

Just as there has been a significant change in society there has been in technology. Socio-cultural trends primarily affect the design solutions and technological innovations. We have perceived the media shift from passive single media to interactive mixes of media, the shift of TV to internet for instance, but it has not ceased there, we are already experimenting the shift from anything to anything. Sony described it as moving from broadcast to any cast.

The direction is already taken forward by Vodafone, its research and development team constantly monitors developments and maps trends in areas such as technology and social change. The foresight research they do may never become real products; however it portrays them as forward thinking innovators.

I believe that the future relies on communications. Future forecasting of a global communications company such as Vodafone should definitely be taken into consideration when thinking about how emerging technologies could be used to meet people's needs now and in the future.

“In the future, mobile systems will connect people to a wide range of business services, enabling them to work effectively whether you are on the move, at home or at work”<sup>9</sup>

Vodafone’s emerging technologies include real-time video, audio-feeds and complex data sources. Mobile systems will let us collaborate in real time with distant colleagues, enabling us to work more effectively.

Mobile access interfaces will understand and adapt to how humans interact. By taking clues from the human body and understanding the situation and emotional state of a user, the computer interaction will be proactive, easy and efficient.

Using human controls-such as speech, gestures and body postures-allows for a more natural and intuitive interaction than traditional access devices such as keyboard or a mouse. A motion sensing system tracks the user’s motion and the system applies artificial intelligence to translate voice commands and finger, hand, eye movements into electronic instructions. Future computer interfaces will understand and adapt to how humans interact and not the opposite, as is the case today.

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<sup>9</sup> “Vodafone future vision site: working” Available at: <http://demo.northkingdom.com/vodafonefuturevision/> Last accessed May 20<sup>th</sup> 2005

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1. Striving for the perfect balance

There is an enormous challenge for businesses, which is to find new ways to bring personal life into work as much as other way round. One way to achieve this cultural shift is to end uniformity in office design, allow more scope for personality in the workplace. Offices should turn into centres of creativity such as schools and universities.

**1. Autonomy of choice:** Give people the choice of where and when to work. Business should adopt a perspective like the one that Universities have towards Masters Students they tell them what they expect from them but don't tell them how to get there.

**2. Infrastructure on demand:** Give them necessary infrastructure to work effectively without assigning it to anyone in particular to break out hierarchical spaces. This new culture promotes individual freedom but also a sense of responsibility. There is a shift from the notion of "I own it" to "It is available". Similar to that of car rental agencies which deal with infrastructure on demand, when there is a demand for a car they have it available and try to put it in the best convenient place for the customer.

**3. Personal Oasis:** Give them the freedom to design own workplace in which they can bring their personal life and feel at home. "It is the lack of comfort, lack of familiarity that causes the stress and not the process itself"<sup>10</sup>

**4. Space for relaxation:** Effective working is partly achieved by effective relaxation and recreation. Enable people with a spatial setting where they can spend time alone practicing yoga, or together, playing golf or pool so that they can get to know each other outside from the working environment.

**5. Encourage Projects rather than processes:** Projects have a life, they are not permanent when a company undertakes same kind of work for a number of years it becomes almost as a routine, and people don't question it enough.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Future working environments would be a mix of working on the move or at home with the infrastructure and technology in place and having the option of working partially at an office base were there is the possibility to commute with the rest of the organisation and develop personal relationships and why not have fun? A place we look forward to...

Although technology has a key role to play in enabling flexible working environments it takes people to manage successfully the necessary changes to implement a flexible working strategy successfully. Implementing a business culture in a geographically dispersed team is very difficult; training, motivation and managerial support need to be dealt with consistently. A non-hierarchical culture should be shaped; with individuals and teams rather than workers and bosses.

What will eventually bring people together and serve as corporate glue will not be the workspace but the company's values. The company's vision, the culture that is intended should be communicated throughout the organisation so that everyone involved know where the boat is heading to and exactly what is it trying to achieve. The workspace however should express these values; it should be a living symbol of what the company is.

The beneficial effect of creating more adaptable working spaces is a closer cooperation between company departments and a powerful motivational experience for employees generally.

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<sup>10</sup> Summers, Andrew, (1999): *Transcript of the RCA Nomadic Working Seminar*. London: Helen Hamlyn Research Centre

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