



Richard Burge

6 We are not convinced people are working unless we get them into an office

The live/work demographic trend has long been heralded, but how much of a reality is it yet? Sure, there has been some experimentation: we see old breweries or warehouses converted into bijou apartments for jewellery designers, or big-name architects living and working above their well-lit design spaces. But this has so far been symptomatic of the live/work concept in practice: in the main, apart from a few grand professionals, it has been only our elite who have had the privilege of lying in bed for an extra hour and still being at their throne, or Speaker's Chair, before the rest of us.

Even the notion of displaced work – large organisations working in small hubs close to the communities where employees lived – has never really taken off. The mass relocation of government agencies such as the National Insurance system or the DLVC simply swapped one massive office in London for another in Newcastle or Swansea – with a different, slightly shorter commute. And top management in the private sector have also failed to see the light. I have a favourite café from which I can see the chauffeur-driven cars ferrying the business elite across London, their passengers thumbing Blackberries to try to save two hours otherwise wasted travelling time. Why?

Outdated attitudes

One reason lies in our country's antediluvian working methods – or, more specifically, work supervision attitudes. For some reason, we are not convinced that people are working unless we get them into an office and see their heads down over a desk. Of course, if you are manufacturing, you do need people to come into the factory. Yet, in



Business management 'needs to be more enlightened about work places'

a world where virtually all office work is now carried out on a computer, most managers can tell when someone is producing because they can see the output on their own computer screens. So school roll-call methods are no longer meaningful checks on productivity (if they ever were).

The other reason for the inertia may be that it not only takes real financial pressure to trigger change in but that the technology to facilitate that change must also come along at the right time. During the last recession in the early 1990s, there simply was not the communications infrastructure to enable home or offsite working. Now, with fibre optic cables and laptops, it can. Moreover, the use of data centres and "cloud" computing systems, based in countries with plenty of renewable power (and where you simply open the door to cool down the computers), have improved not only accessibility but also data security.

So is the near future to be one of deserted railway platforms at 08.30, with people working isolated in their converted spare bedroom with the occasional video conference-call with the boss, who is, in turn, sitting in his new city apartment converted from the trading floor in Docklands? Well, no. That might do wonders for a company's carbon budget but it would drive their staff mad. This is

where I think we have to be radical and intelligent. Work is, crucially, as much a social as an economic activity. Staff do like to interact, and they do like to meet. We must not kid ourselves that the discussions over a coffee are always about work. But nor should we demean the business need for, and value of, informal or formal face-to-face meetings. However, although companies will always need to bring their staff together regularly for meetings, they could more imaginatively and clearly classify the way in which they organise and allocate their time. Staff could come into HQ for, say, one day a week of meetings and discussion.

Hub working

Does all this mean that for the rest of the time everyone would be home-based? Not if the next big step is – as I believe it should be – towards hub working, viz the conversion of all those empty floors above banks and building societies in town centres, where people from the same company or even different businesses can come into work a short distance and have the benefit and convenience of an office but not have to spend huge chunks of their lives – and a considerable part of their personal carbon budget – trailing into cities each day. Why should the benefits of a single desk in a multi-purpose office space be restricted to the start-up company?

There are a number of implications for businesses and governments. Firstly, business managements need to be more progressive and enlightened about defining and assessing work places and practices.

Secondly, property developers and their occupier clients need to design and build in greater shell

and core development flexibility to building so that, during its life, its space can be switched between commercial and residential use or simultaneous mixed use. All of this will also reduce the environmental impacts of the building.

Urban planning

As for urban planning, many of those commercial urban areas which hitherto have resembled paved deserts after working hours could be housing a significant semi-residential community. Transport systems will need to anticipate the development of flexible working location clusters.

Most challenging of all, a complete change in the ethos of health and safety legislation and regulation would be called for.

And the prize? If we get all this right, at the macro level we could greatly lessen the pressures on our urban infrastructure and our creaking, commuting-dominated transport systems – with all the environmental sustainability benefits this would accrue. In the longer run, we could even significantly reduce the UK's unhealthy South-east-centric agglomeration of business and wealth. And, at the personal level, for so many workers it could reduce the daily stress of their working lifestyles.

Indeed it could even turn a (once-a-week) commute to London into a positive pleasure: that latte could be savoured from a china mug (with notebook open) rather than spilled from your paper cup down your suit, as you wedge yourself into the Northern line for yet another ever-lengthening working day in your ever-lengthening (courtesy of the pensions crisis) working life.

Richard Burge is sustainability director at PMG