

On the Move

How Mobile Employees Are Changing the Workplace



EMPLOYEE
OF THE MONTH

The *New Yorker* published a cartoon about the changing workplace nearly 20 years ago that was not only funny but also visionary. An incoming employee, briefcase in hand, is being given a heads-up about his new office environment by a worker wearing a pair of pants covered with pockets. "You don't get an office," the new employee is told. "You get cargo pants."

At the time the cartoon came out, people were still making predictions about "telecommuters," a workplace population made up of mainly clerical workers who were set up in offices at home. Would we all end up working out of cubbyholes next to our laundry rooms? Would corporate headquarters disappear, to be replaced by a network of telephone-connected workers, a few administrative assistants, and a sales staff...all wearing cargo pants?

The Shape of Things to Come

Like most early trend predictions, these went both too far and not far enough. Over the past 10 years, the workforce has in fact been shifting steadily toward a new model, one borne out of collaborative work, the need for multiple venues, and most of all, the demand for mobility.¹ Among the naysayers and cartoonists, there were some people who seemed to have a clear picture early on of how this trend might really change the nature of work around us. John Challenger's Y2K predictions, for example, included one that described people conducting business "day or night, with a company that might be 10 time zones away," employing wireless Internet and hand-

held devices to stay connected as they moved from one venue to the next.²

By the end of the year 2000, an estimated 4.2 million employees in the United States were working from home at least part of each week.³ And that population has grown every year since. Current estimates predict that the U.S. mobile workforce could hit 103 million by 2008.⁴ The worldwide mobile workforce is growing, too, although not quite as fast: From 676 million in 2004, it's expected to reach 878.2 million by 2009.⁵

What's allowing such a sea change to occur? Primarily, the buy-in of some major corporations. Whole employee groups or departments have been transformed from on-site to mobile workers. For example, few Hewlett-Packard sales staffers have traditional offices any longer, and over 11,000 HP employees work solely from home offices. At Accenture, many administrative functions are performed by workers who spend as many as four days a week at home. A full 42 percent of IBM employees are mobile workers, working out of multiple locations. And 820 reservation sales agents at JetBlue were moved from a central call center to offices in their own homes.⁶ But work from a home office is only part of the picture.

Defining the Mobile Worker

Is there a broad and simple way to define this emerging "mobile worker"? Experts are still hammering out the parameters that will help the rest of us identify and quantify this new class of employee. Author Erica Driver offers a definition of a mobile worker as anyone who spends at least 10 hours per week away from his or her main workplace.⁷ And the IDC categorizes these workers into three identifiable subgroups:

- 1 Office-based mobile worker: Someone who spends most of his or her time in a company-provided office, but who also sometimes works at home or in a third place.
- 2 Non-office-based mobile worker: This worker is in the field, such as a salesperson, or working between buildings on a corporate campus, such as an IT professional. They are more often at someone else's office than their own.
- 3 Home-based mobile worker: The former "telecommuter," this employee spends most of the work week in a home office, but comes into

the corporate workplace for meetings or collaborative work sessions.⁸

No Holds Barred

Because of a shifting attitude about how and where work can be accomplished, millions of American employees today find themselves "untethered" and falling within the definition of mobile worker. With work in hand, they are spreading out across an average of 3.4 different places where they go to get their work done.⁹ Where are they headed? They're driving

from a meeting at corporate headquarters back to their home office. Or they're on their way to a client's company to work for a week on site there. Or they are headed to another venue

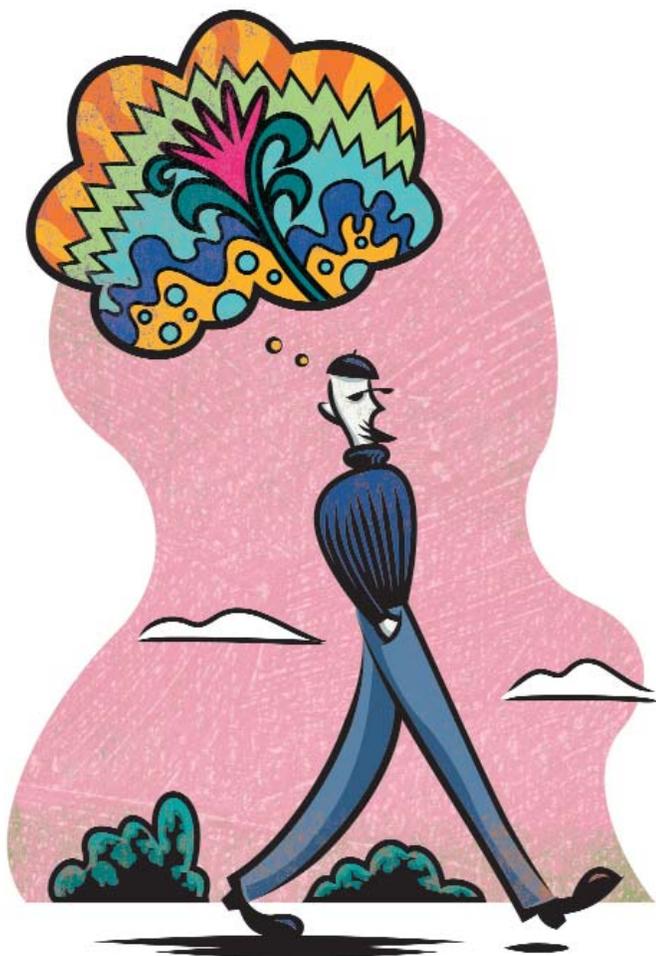
entirely, one where they can escape, get a fresh view of the middle distance, and maybe even grab a latté. These "third places"—the park, a coffeehouse, the local library, or the beach—are chosen by the individual employees.

With a laptop and a cell phone, workers suddenly have a level of freedom that 15 years ago was unimaginable. They can work anywhere, anytime, becoming what one writer worriedly termed "a rootless army."¹⁰ But, as another recent report summarized, "Business is on a steady, irreversible march into a highly networked world in which traditional boundaries of time and space are eroded, and work is done in non-traditional environments and across geographic borders and time zones."¹¹

Many of these workers are markedly different from the prototype, the telecommuter, although various categories of employees who are based at home do comprise a segment of this population. But another portion is modeled on the company sales force. Salespeople are thoroughly familiar with a no-boundaries, mobile work style. They were its pioneers, the backseats of their cars cluttered with presentations and purchase orders and a hotel room making do as a temporary command central as they crisscrossed their territories.

Today, however, it's knowledge workers who represent the most rapidly growing sector of mobile workers. For years, they were the employees least likely to feel productive while locked into an 8-to-5 schedule. They were most likely to be found holding late-night brainstorming sessions at a coffee shop or sneaking out for noon-hour walks. Wise managers have realized for some time that an industrial age mentality—such as asking a creative team to stamp

out a half-dozen concepts to rigid specifications—never really suited these workers, and could actually become counterproductive.¹² Creative workers tend to prize autonomy, and that’s the feature of mobile work that they appreciate the most.



So what are the main categories of work that can be done most successfully by a mobile workforce? Ming-Li Chai of Herman Miller’s Strategic Vision, Ideation Studio, affirms that one type of worker who will definitely succeed is the employee from the “Super Creative Core.” These people, who represent about 12 percent of the U.S. workforce, are those who generate new ideas, new products, new forms of knowledge, and new initiatives—essentially transforming thoughts into things. They want to be out of the office to find stimuli, make connections, and meet new people, although they also need the retreat of a home base. They don’t crave mobility as much as they do the discovery that comes along with it.¹³

Two other categories of employees who may benefit from mobility or a home-based work environment are not engaged in tasks that are as open ended or cre-

ative. One category includes those whose tasks are assessed primarily by results. The other involves workers who are performing tasks that are well defined and easily measured.

At the Crest of the Trend Wave

Predictions vary on how many workers will shift into one of these mobile work subcategories over the coming decade, but no one is indicating insignificant numbers or large-scale slowdowns in growth. Many studies, including one by IDC, predict that by 2009 approximately 70 percent of workers in the United States will be on the move between various sites to accomplish assigned work.¹⁴ In Asian/Pacific countries (excluding Japan), the mobile workforce could reach 63.1 percent by 2009, a close second to the United States. Japan currently has fewer mobile workers than does the U.S., but it’s positioned for the fastest growth—a 7.4 percent increase between 2004 and 2009.¹⁵ Western Europe currently has the second-largest group of mobile workers, but it alone has a forecast that shows a slowing-down. The prediction is that Europe will only add 1.9 percent more mobile workers by 2009, for a total of approximately 48.3 percent of its workforce.¹⁶

Drivers of the trend’s growth vary from one country to the next. In Asian/Pacific countries, burgeoning technology services in countries such as India will push up the demand for a mobile work style, while in China, a desire to strengthen its technology infrastructure is a chief driver.¹⁷ In Japan, on the other hand, long commutes are one factor creating a demand for mobility in jobs, even though traditional attitudes have held back the trend until now.¹⁸ Western Europe’s slowing growth in adding more mobile workers may be due to such wide-ranging factors as new employment legislation and doubts about the advantages of remote work compared to face-to-face contact.¹⁹

In the United States, it’s the federal government that has been one of the chief drivers in the shift from a tethered workforce to one that’s mobile. Although government agencies usually aren’t early adopters of emerging trends, the concept of multiple locations and more autonomy in work styles seems to have struck a chord in Washington.²⁰

A recent General Services Administration (GSA) report stated, “Corporate America has discovered that the only way to remain competitive and ahead of rapid changes in business and technology is to continually reinvent itself.”²¹ Taking that lesson to heart on behalf the U.S. government, in 2006 approx-

imately 41 percent of federal employees were reclassified as mobile workers. Nearly half of group had just been “untethered” within the past 12 months.²²

Clearly, there’s more going on here than a short-term trend. Corporate America doesn’t purposefully reinvent itself without good reason. And the most compelling business reason to make the shift to a mobile workforce is from a financial standpoint.

Productivity Gains: The Greatest Good

You might expect that the cost savings to be reaped from this trend would come mainly in the form of savings from reduced office space. But in fact, productivity savings far outdistance facilities savings when a mobile worker program is implemented. And that’s good news, because according to the Center for Building Performance and Diagnostics at Carnegie-Mellon University, productivity is where the most significant gains can be made. An average company invests about 8 percent of its annual operating costs in its workspace, but 78 percent in salaries and benefits. So improving the performance of workers has the potential to far exceed gains made in facilities savings, although both are obviously desirable.²³

These productivity gains are due to several factors. First of all, mobile workers suffer fewer interruptions at home offices, guest offices, or third places. Because studies have shown that it can take as long as 25 minutes after an interruption to refocus on a task, significant blocks of time can be saved while working at these remote locations.²⁴

A more surprising gain comes from the fact that mobile workers actually put in more work hours than they would if they were still tethered to a traditional office and schedule. Ming-Li Chai notes that mobile workers tend to work as much as 1.75 hours more a day. She speculates that the additional work time could be the result of one of several factors: a by-product of better concentration; a sense that workers are “giving back” time they would have otherwise spent commuting; or simply one benefit of having happier, more engaged employees.²⁵ In a study by the Omni Consulting Group, it was found that untethered insurance adjusters handled approximately 7.4 more claims a week than their tethered counterparts, while home-based financial services agents executed 11.4 percent more trade options.²⁶

Productivity increases deliver measurable savings.

AT&T’s telework pilot program, which carefully tracked results, demonstrated annual real estate cost savings of \$30 million, but also raked in a staggering \$150 million in extra work hours from the employees assigned to the program. The pilot program also showed a 50 percent drop in turnover among regular salaried employees in the pilot program.²⁷ In addition to the extra hours worked, the lower turnover translated into fewer training dollars spent and less time lost via the “learning curves” of replacement employees.

Bottom-Line Benefits from Facilities Savings

The second, and perhaps more obvious, category of cost savings is found in real estate and facilities management. In a single year, Sun Microsystems estimated it saved \$63.8 million in real estate costs because of its adoption of an untethered work style.²⁸ The savings followed the institution of the company’s iWork program, where employees could choose to work from home or in company “drop-in” centers.

Note that these facility savings can be garnered in several ways. Moves to smaller buildings, the termination of some facility leases, reductions in utility costs, and the elimination of satellite offices can all result

in cost savings. A mobile workforce also makes it possible to offer smaller workstations or guest workstations to workers who do not put in a five-day week at the company facility. Additional savings may come in the form of reduced facility management costs as on-site demands decrease.

Additional Benefits of a Mobile Workforce

Another area of significant savings is one that benefits the environment. IBM estimates that something in the neighborhood of 58,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions were not released into the air during a single year of its work-at-home program, thanks to the elimination of daily commutes for 25,000 employees.²⁹

A final benefit comes from a company’s ability to become more inclusive as it hires and retains workers. Untethering employees in various company programs expands the number of people a company can include in its workforce. Suddenly, people in other states or countries can become part of a bigger potential hiring pool. Disabled people who could not manage a daily commute but who can deliver their expertise from a home office are more easily added

Productivity savings far outdistance facilities savings when a mobile worker program is implemented.



employees who may or may not be mobile, but whose primary office space will still be housed at a corporate location.

But corporate offices will need to change in order to suit this inevitable shift in work methods and work style. With part of its staff offsite, a company's dedicated space for individual workstations can be reduced. But the workplace will remain the place where mobile employees arrive and depart all day long as they move to and from home offices or third places. So a demand for space configured for new purposes—public areas, team spaces, and "campsites" or unassigned guest offices—will increase.

to staff. And workers who value a creative, collaborative work culture are going to be more likely to accept jobs at companies that demonstrate the kind of flexibility that a mobile work culture provides.

The Reinvented Office Landscape

From the numbers alone, it looks like the traditional workplace is once again facing a major shift, one that could be as profound as its transition from a bullpen of desks in the early 20th century to its present mix of open-plan and private offices, conference rooms and shared spaces. Knowing what we do about the various tasks and work patterns of a mobile workforce, can we predict how an increasing number of untethered workers will change the office landscape?

Home Sweet Home Base

In a direct reversal of the earliest telecommuter predictions, it now seems clear that current corporate facilities will not just disappear. A central location plays a primary role, even in the lives of workers who spend most of their time away from it as they work from home offices or travel from one site to another. Company headquarters become the clearinghouse for ideas and information, the place where employees come for meetings and collaborative work, the touchstone for corporate culture, the central location for technology support, and the company's public face to the business world. In addition, corporate facilities will remain home base for a number of

New Workplace Needs and Patterns

Here's one example of how mobile workers may use corporate facilities. A mobile worker who arrives at a company facility may have a list of things he or she needs to do. Checking e-mail might be one, and so a guest office—perhaps with a charging station to awaken exhausted laptop batteries—might be a first stop. From there, the employee may head to a conference area or an assigned team space for a meeting. Afterward, time spent in a public area such as café or cafeteria will allow the employee to network and catch up with others in the company.

That last stop is not a frivolous one. In any company with workers spread out among various locations, face-to-face time will become more important and valuable than ever. There are tasks essential to any work process—such as brainstorming, building working relationships, and meeting with managers—that are difficult to accomplish across remote locations. As a GSA report noted, "When people are at the central office, they may be talking with each other, sharing information, and catching up on news, instead of working at a computer or being in a scheduled meeting. Such scenarios should be considered real work, not time out."³⁰ Some of the space that used to be allocated to private workstations could well be transformed into casual meeting areas to encourage just such conversations.

Common Ground for Team Projects

In addition to these public spaces, a need for more private team spaces will also become pressing. “A mobile workforce increases the need for teaming, for collaborative spaces,” Shelly Brown of Herman Miller’s Strategic Vision, Ideation Studio, comments. “A teaming space can be smaller than a traditional conference room, for use by perhaps two to five people. This could be assigned for the duration of a project, or unassigned for spontaneous meetings.”³¹ With team members doing independent project work at different locations, such an area or room offers common ground for collaborative efforts, a depository for files and reference materials, and space for presentations. It is an important venue that the corporate facility can provide.

So what is the perfect office environment for a mobile workforce? Change is the watchword here, as supportive office spaces will vary from company to company. As

a company shifts from tethered to untethered work, the landscape of the corporate facility may need to change on an ongoing basis. Alterations will probably have to be fine-tuned, requiring a forgiving and flexible office design. As a GSA report on worker mobility related to company headquarters commented about Robert Propst, designer of the original Action Office® system, “Propst identified many of the factors influencing the office that are still of concern today: accommodation of change, need for better communications, the diversity of office tasks, and new management trends.”³²

As always during a major shift in work style, a facility design will require these characteristics in order to serve the needs of a workforce in transition.

Tightrope Technology

Even as mobile workers turn up at company facilities to meet, greet, and touch base, they will still face significant communications challenges during the majority of their work hours when they are away from a central location. A cell phone and a laptop with wireless connectivity may serve equally well on a corporate campus or at a coffee bar, and appear to provide adequate and effortless technology support. But IT professionals know that the appearance of effortlessness is far from the reality of the situation.

“Supporting mobile workers can be more challenging and expensive from a technology perspective, but there’s a benefit from their degree of mobility,” states Patrick Boruta, an IT professional at Herman

Miller.³³ Along with the beneficial aspects of mobility, a laundry list of challenges comes with untethered territory: the difficulty of delivering IT support to remote locations; issues with security; integration of technology; and providing adequate technology training. Each carries with it potential difficulties as IT departments keep on-the-move employees tethered, at least, to the corporate communications network.

Protection and Policies for Roaming Equipment

Keeping mobile workers connected starts with a worker’s ability to be reached by others. A person on the move is more or less a moving target for messages. Even mobile workers who stay put much of the time in a remote location can seem less accessible than those working at a corporate site. Is it all

right to call an at-home phone number? Is that person really working? And what, exactly, is that person working on? Is it interruptible? Simply because of the

nature of their work, these employees may be less likely to check voice mail or e-mail messages as often as their corporate-site counterparts. Instant messaging may be one of the better ways of reaching these workers, along with cell-phone message services, but it’s still going to take patience and adjustment to find the best messaging methods for individual employees.

Another area of concern: Corporate IT departments are already finding the maintenance of remote computers a challenge. Take the worker who is based in a home office. A dedicated computer belonging to the employee and not the company may not be secure enough—or maybe it’s shared with a twelve-year-old who’s using it for school research and computer games. Is this lone computer an easier target for hackers? Is it being routinely updated and checked for viruses? IT personnel will be tasked with how to protect corporate data on any at-home equipment. There’s even the possibility that a hopelessly crashed computer may have to be replaced overnight, regardless of its location.

A laptop can prove even more of a challenge. Laptops wander, notes Boruta. A firewall on a laptop can prevent intrusion into the computer itself. But if an employee leaves a laptop in a cab, someone will find it and may be able to get the information off of it, although some hard drives have encryption that may protect data in the case of loss or theft. Handheld devices, such as Blackberries, add another level of risk, notes Boruta, because they can so easily be misplaced.³⁴

“A mobile workforce increases the need for collaborative spaces.”

Wireless networks themselves used to be perceived as highly risky from a security standpoint. Anyone who was scanning signals could pick up and enter a wireless network in much the same way a portable radio could pick up any radio station in a specific area. Today, the security of these networks is not as much of a concern. But corporate policies will become a definite necessity for employees who want their own wireless network at home. Most encryptions will foil a hobby hacker. But a determined professional might still find a home-office corporate network a weak link that's ripe for exploitation.

This is where policy must come into play. Even at headquarters, policies are what protect a company from losing its most valuable asset—information.

Some departments, such as a legal department or research and development, may not be candidates for wireless technology or mobile communications simply because even the slightest risk to that department's information is not tolerable.³⁵

IT professionals find integrating technology in a single building or campus to be challenging enough—but new levels of complication enter in when integration has to reach out to embrace a wide-ranging network of home offices, third places, and even employee vehicles. With so many different communications tools available, true integration may not even be a possible goal in many cases because companies cannot afford to buy all-new equipment for every employee. And mobile workers are more likely to be using at least some equipment that they own themselves. For these reasons, Boruta feels that it's in a company's best interest to identify the technology that is most strategically important to its business, establish and maintain standards for that equipment, and define the policies that will make it clear to everyone what other technologies will be tolerated, even if those aren't supported directly by an IT department.

All the Tools in the Toolbox

Despite these integration and security challenges, technology is really the engine in this ongoing switch to a new mobile work style. Along with wireless connectivity and intranets for information exchange, web conferencing can make it easier to connect with colleagues, as does voice-over IP. Instant messaging is not only convenient for side discussions during meetings, but also offers a way for nervous managers to check in with employees—to get fast answers to questions. Team collaboration software makes large

projects easier to track and record. Blog sites and podcasting allow for social interaction.

These and other emerging tools—virtual flipcharts, interactive furnishings, rich media for conferences, even clothing items such as vests that contain GPS software and check-in, check-out capabilities—will all work together to eliminate any problems that remote employees face from being physically separated from coworkers.³⁶ But being adept at the use of these tools is another matter altogether.

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“People end up only using a fraction of the tools that are provided to them because they don't understand how to use them,” notes Erica Driver.³⁷ There may be proficiency gaps between employees

themselves simply because of differing comfort levels and abilities in using equipment and software. For example, some people can listen and key at the same time, and others simply can't. Some find that learning new software feels like a matter of intuition, while others require formal training and phased-in introductions to new software.

As companies adjust to mobile work styles and add more employees who work from remote locations, training will have to take a leading role in ensuring that the playing field is level for all of its workers.

Mobile Workers and the Changing Corporate Culture

With all of this movement, freedom, added technology tools, altered office landscapes, and what one author termed “networked individualism,”³⁸ companies are going to experience some major shifts in corporate culture. Although it's difficult to predict the width and breadth of the changes that will occur, some aspects of this new work-style revolution are immediately apparent and can be prepared for.

With fewer individual offices and workstations and more public and team spaces, the company's main facilities will become like the train stations we see in old movies: lots of arrivals and departures, greetings among people who haven't seen each other for a week or a month, and a buzz of activity, news exchange, and creative ideas being vetted with coworkers. Workers still on site will have to learn to adjust to the increased distraction level—which in turn can be minimized by floor plan designs.

The work itself will probably become more project focused, and one model that's used to describe it is

the film industry.³⁹ When a movie is being made, teams consist of employees, contract workers, and freelancers, all loosely networked and coming and going as free agents, but working together in creative collaboration for the duration of the project at hand. Corporate teams may start to look very similar to these film project teams, with some players present from start to finish, and others called in on an as-needed basis.

Change Managers

Everyone will require new skill sets, especially where technology is concerned, but managers in particular will have to become adept at managing from a distance. They will have to learn how to successfully assess employees' individual strengths and especially their ability to handle autonomy and collaboration. This will become primary information in assigning projects and tasks. If work teams included contract workers as well as full-time employees, managers must be able to project their appreciation of everyone's contributions, so that first- and second-class citizen tiers don't start developing within teams.

Upper management will have a tricky challenge, too—ensuring that the middle managers are not allowing outdated attitudes to become roadblocks in this new work environment. Work will inevitably spread out across both the weekdays and weekends. People will take breaks when they are needed, not because the hands of the clock point to certain numbers. Managers will have to learn to respect that, trust their employees, and delegate and monitor work across varied distances and time zones. If a manager fears that mobile workers “aren't really working,” and attempts to overcontrol a team or a project, it could topple a team relationship or even the outcome of a project itself.

On the other hand, companies will also have to face the fact that some jobs and assignments are simply not suited for mobile work. There will always be work and assignments that must be completed on site, and these will probably be done during more traditional work hours. Dealing with the possibility of worker resentment because some

employees are perceived as having “freedom” while the tethered employees don't is going to be a human resources balancing act of the most delicate kind.

The amount of “face time” will diminish, and different communications methods will replace face-to-face meetings. Managers must learn to use new methods—such as instant messaging of questions, reading the tone of employee voices over the phone or within e-mails, and focusing on results as opposed to a set number of working hours—in order to maintain and build employee relationships.

Managers must use new methods for communicating to build and maintain employee relationships.

Companies managing the shift to mobile work in different parts of the world will have to be sensitive to a variety of factors that may inhibit or impede successful change. In Japan, where group work and high levels of personal contact are valued, there could be ongoing resistance to the mobile work style. Some Japanese companies have even traditionally rewarded extra time spent at the main office in the form of additional compensation, an entitlement which may have to be changed.⁴⁰ In Western Europe, on the other hand, mobile workers already compose nearly one-half of the workforce, and this trend reinforces Europeans' appreciation of a work/life balance. But additional growth could be slowed by factors such as insufficient IT infrastructure or even legislation that interferes with a company's addition of more mobile workers to its staff.⁴¹

Some other old-guard cultural responses, both in the U.S. and around the world, that may unintentionally derail the effectiveness of mobile work might be: loss of confidence because of electronic security breaches; negative reactions of employees who don't want to be “on call” 24/7; and the failure to launch policies that protect both employees' success and the security of company information.

One Approach to Consider

It looks like the shift to more mobility is inevitable. How can companies ensure success as they steer this new course? The IDC identifies the following six steps to a successful transition.



- 1 Make sure your physical facilities are ready. Remember that even with half your workforce working out of a variety of sites, including home offices and third places, your own offices still need to be fine-tuned to support collaboration, casual meetings, drop-in-for-a-day workspaces as well as companywide or department meetings. In some ways, your office facilities become more crucial, not less so, to the mobile part of your workforce. Don't wait too long before you begin to make the changes to accommodate these new work styles.
- 2 Acknowledge that your mobile workers, as well as those still working in company offices, need to find a work-life balance and respect that as one path to improved productivity.
- 3 Don't allow your managers to cling to outdated attitudes or methods of evaluating employee performance. Everyone, including workers who rarely "come into the office," deserves a career path and the chance to succeed.
- 4 Be willing to embrace the increasing necessity of mobile work and acknowledge that mobile employees are strategic to the success of your organization. Future success is going to require these workers, so make them feel valued from the start.
- 5 Invest in training that helps all of your employees connect with each other and employ the best technological tools you can afford to make those connections, whether they are working from company facilities, home offices, or third places.
- 6 Develop human resources programs that reward both tethered and untethered workers in ways that are fair and evenhanded.⁴²

Change always contains both difficulty and opportunity, and a change as large and far-reaching as the new mobile work style could at first appear daunting. But companies that prepare in advance, adjust policies and procedures in a timely manner, and understand how important it is to provide supportive workplaces for these new work needs will reap a full cargo of benefits from this coming wave of workplace change.

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