



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

Nor Iron Bars A Cage

By Stuart White
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Pop in to Café Dijo or Equatorial any working day and it's like walking into an open-plan office - numerous business people all busy accessing their e-mails, surfing the net and doing I guess what we all normally do in the office – just not at the office but in the ultimate internet cafes.

I have always kicked hard against putting people in boxes, figuratively. Now I'd like to argue against it literally. It's no great secret that the design of an office or work environment can have a dramatic impact on how employees do their jobs. Check out some of the fashionable, bright, open-plan, tastefully-designed and decorated offices in our new office blocks and then compare them with some older government buildings with their Dickensian, drab, dingy, dark, single office layout – the 'all doors closed and no windows, workforce as inmates' look. And I bet that the difference is not only in the aesthetics but the morale, productivity and motivation of employees too.

For years corporate workplaces have been defined by cubicles and private offices delineating status – the higher the rank, the bigger the office, each one guarded territorially as a private fiefdom, an arrangement that does little to encourage interaction and communication. If collaboration is the essence of effective businesses then this arrangement can hardly be conducive to team-work and synergy. It is therefore not surprising that latterly, companies have been paying more attention to the ergonomic impact of office layout and how it both affects and effects the way work is conducted. In an attempt to improve working relations, create more openness, reduce time spent guessing what is transpiring behind closed doors, and create a sense of 'we are in this together' – the open-plan office was invented. But that has been around for a while now and is, if anything, passé. Move aside – time for a new look.

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When most people think of an "office" they associate this with a single physical space where they work. But with technology, we no longer need to be tethered to one place. In fact, for many knowledge workers, they are almost never in the office anyway so do we even need an office?

Using libraries, cafes or other public or private spaces available to us could really be an individual or team choice. If we do have an office, chances are it is much smaller than those provided in days gone by, as we only need it to access specialised equipment or regularly collaborate and connect with our colleagues from time to time. Given the wide variety of choices we have to work in truly people-centric, productive places, why would we ever choose to sit in a little cubicle again? At Microsoft, work stations are designed with high levels of flexibility. There are collapsible conference rooms scattered throughout the office, so workers can always find a private place to huddle on specific problems. Meanwhile, a central staircase made of Brazilian hardwood with electrical outlets built into the steps doubles as an informal and inter-active meeting place.

You've heard of the movers and shakers right? Let me introduce you to the Mooovers: 'mobile out-of-office workers' - a new generation of young entrepreneurs who are using technology to break free from desks and traditional work environments. You can see them conducting deals, holding meetings or finding inspiration at local coffee shops, hotel lobbies, airport lounges or on park benches. These tech-savvy workers live their business lives in nomadic fashion, wherever they can find a pleasant place to park and a wireless connection – and they don't believe in the traditional nine to five. Many are entrepreneurs running their own internet-based companies, but they could be management types working for big firms and often away from the office, media consultants out and about meeting clients, or freelance writers. Far too many of us endure a daily commute, only to sit at our desks and work on jobs that we could do from anywhere with a chair and an internet connection.

The biggest perceived drawback of the mobile working life (and the reason the office will never disappear) is the lack of regular interaction with colleagues – no discussions and debates, no sharing of ideas, no strategic planning, no cohesion! That, after all, is why offices were invented before e-mail and intranets. But with video-conferencing and virtual meetings, this argument falls away. The second is that if we allow employees to work out of the office it would require managers to measure performance based on output instead of attendance. The latter is easy, a simple matter of sight and sound, even easier when aided by clock cards or attendance registers. Measuring results, however, requires us to know what is important to the business, what counts, what adds value to the bottom line and what are our strategic objectives – not just 'being' but 'doing'! Sounds hard, hey? Life is so much simpler if everyone is in their cubicle for the day – that way we know where they are and what they are up to. On the other hand if we chain them to their desks, that may not amount to much. It's hard to be free-thinking and creative when you're physically restrained.

The virtual workspace allows for far more flexibility in the concept of terms of employment. The old 9-5 rule falls away because a virtual desk is accessible at any time of the day or night and companies will need less actual office space, even while employing more staff. 'Open-plan' is being replaced with 'open-air' and all that's needed to join the revolution is an equally open mind.

Managing Director
HRMC
Phone: 395 1640
<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

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