FLUORESCENT JUMPSUITS, FOOD OUT OF A TUBE, MANURE-FUELLED CARS?
A vision of the future workplace

So what will the workplace look like in 2020? I don't necessarily buy into the sci-fi office with people wearing fluorescent jumpsuits eating food out of a tube and plugging their brains into a USB port. Or equally a mutated version of today's workplace where we go to sustainable buildings on an energy efficient public transit system or in a manure fuelled car, eat locally grown organic produce in the staff restaurant and fool ourselves that we're making a real difference .

What is evident in all this is that team working is vital to success, it is long proven that the interaction of people delivers results, as long as they are suitably skilled, empowered and motivated. Also you can't rule out the sociability of it all, we like to see our mates, colleagues, we like the camaraderie, the banter, even the office politics.

However, buildings are getting more expensive to run, energy costs are rising significantly, availability of staff to do the jobs is becoming more and more difficult, legislation is getting tougher and there's volatility in commodity prices. This is set against fierce competition, price & profit sensitivity, liquidity and the state of the economy.

The impact of technology plays a significant role and some companies have embraced it, reducing their workspace significantly and encouraging remote working. For instance, with a smartphone, mobile broadband and wifi you can hook into the Internet and access everything you need to do business. You don't even need to attend every meeting in person, a routine catch-up can easily be undertaken by teleconference.

On the other hand working remotely has its downsides, if you are not interacting with the team you can end up with a bunch of mavericks not effectively communicating or interacting with others and potentially doing more harm than good.

In the future aspects of work will clearly be different, we already know some of the challenges:

- people could have up to 6 different careers in their working life
- around half of the UK's working population will be self-employed by 2011
- retirement age increasing to 70
- a desire for better quality of life
- women having children later in life
- the planet's resourcing are diminishing.

We see technology getting even better i.e. higher speed broadband, better social networking, 3D video conferencing .... Great, but homeworking has its limitations – where do you draw the boundary between work and family life? Many people feel that to go to work, they physically need to go somewhere else to create distance without commuting but close to local amenities.

So I can see a greater requirement to invest in multi-use spaces within the community. These buildings should be free at the point of use. Within the package you would find hot desks, free wifi, low cost printing and other business support activities. Users would be expected to bring their own laptops and other equipment to plug in. The concept is slowly emerging but it needs to be a bigger initiative which integrates the traditional library, the managed office market, community buildings and so on.

The benefit will be that less people will need to travel, companies will occupy smaller spaces although Facilities & Catering services would significantly reduce and High Street delis and the like would take a hit. Instead people will be going to the local hub to do their work and interact with others. A bit like the tradesman in the Middle Ages who would get together at the market, pub, church and so on – instead of blacksmiths, bakers and shoemenders it could be journalists, consultants, film makers, wedding planners – anyone.

I would envisage the model being coordinated through, say, Business Link in conjunction with Local Authorities, Chambers of Commerce, business social networking sites (Ecademy, Linked-in and so on) but with business sponsorship. Existing facilities could be adapted or new buildings built. The vision is smaller, efficient hubs managed by an FM company (with catering and hospitality services provided) funded in part by the State (in whatever form), sponsorship and partly by the user. They could quickly appear across the country from the Outer Hebrides to Jersey and everywhere else in between.

This initiative has the following advantages:

i)   Reduces environmental impact with lower travel requirements; sustainable buildings; local working
ii)   A firm commitment to business by the Government, and particularly to start-ups and sole traders
iii)   Instant networking and collaborative opportunities
iv)   Co-location of support functions e.g. employment agencies, financial advisors, accountants, solicitors, citizens advice, teleworkers
v)   A true public/private partnership at grassroots level
vi)   Opportunities for the construction industry to build or convert buildings
vii)   Return on investment to taxpayers
viii) Better use of underutilised real estate

I am aware that local initiatives are underway, but the approach varies across the UK. There needs to be a cohesive Government strategy which looks at the benefits of incubating new businesses allowing them to grow and positively contribute to the economy. This initiative also does not alienate FM & Catering service providers, it asks them to consider new approaches and adapt to change.

If you want to feedback on this article please email me at solutions@nellerdavies.com as I'm really keen to hear your perspective.