

Real-Time Revolution: The Future of Unstructured Life

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Technology is transforming the workplace in unprecedented ways. Until recently, it was assumed that workers traveled from home to their place of work, arrived at a set time, worked a set number of hours, and left at a set time to return home. Today, ubiquitous broadband technology frees us from this structured scenario; work is done wherever the worker happens to be, anytime, using an array of devices and applications to accomplish tasks. In theory, this sounds wonderful—but are we ready for it?

Embrace the Inevitable

On one level, it doesn't matter if we are ready or not; it's happening anyway. According to a 2008 survey by Hewitt Associates, the majority of surveyed employers offered some form of workplace flexibility.¹ Generations X and Y² were weaned on computers and expect that the tools and applications enabled by Web 2.0 will be available to them in the workplace. This includes the ability to work remotely at a time and place of their choosing, as well as tools such as social networking and video on demand.

In truth, the benefits of the flexible workspace—including increased innovation, lower employee turnover, higher productivity, decreased travel (with its accompanying cost and environmental impact), and greater employee job satisfaction—are worth the effort and cost of implementation. Freeing employees from the shackles of time and space is not just an employee benefit; companies that have wholeheartedly embraced the real-time revolution in the workplace have experienced both cost savings and significantly increased productivity. For example, when Best Buy introduced the “Results-Only Work Environment” (ROWE) in 2003, allowing many employees to work literally when and where they chose, participants' productivity increased 35 percent. Employee engagement also grew, and voluntary turnover declined.³

Customers are also pushing enterprises into new ways of doing business. Banking customers, for example, want to perform transactions whenever they need to—whether at 2 a.m. or during more conventional banking hours. Retail customers want to shop when they feel like it—and they want to network with friends while they're doing it, trying on clothes “virtually” and asking for their friends' opinions.



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This demand for real-time responsiveness and flexibility has redefined the role of information and communications technology (ICT). Making flexibility and responsiveness simple is a complex task and places ICT at the heart of the business mission. Cloud computing is further transforming the concept of ICT, changing capital investment, reducing headcounts, and raising issues around trust and security—not to mention meeting expectations for speedy provisioning.

Structuring the Unstructured Environment

This sea change in employee and customer expectations has happened with lightning speed, leaving many companies in the position of implementing initiatives such as flextime and teleworking without careful analysis of all the ramifications. Enterprises need to build policies and processes to meet these burgeoning demands on ICT, mapping how proposed changes will proliferate throughout the organization, and putting policies in place to minimize disruption of the enterprise as a whole.

Changes must be analyzed not just for the entire organization, but department-by-department and function-by-function. For example, in most high-tech enterprises, the majority of employees are knowledge workers. As long as the technology exists to support them, it doesn't matter where employees are working, or when; all that matters is results. But it's a different scenario for cafeteria workers in such a company. If Building X has 1,000 workers all arbitrarily choosing where they intend to work on a day-by-day basis, will cafeteria management know how many meals to prepare on any given day? Should the facilities manager heat all of the building, or only part of it? Businesses need to study trends and predict behavior patterns to determine how to manage an increasingly flexible environment. Not every department or function lends itself to an unstructured style of work (the cafeteria worker cannot prepare beef Stroganoff remotely and email it in), and we need to know how the behavior of unstructured workers affects the rest of the organization.

With freedom comes responsibility. To enjoy the newfound freedom of being able to manage when and where they work, employees will have to give something in exchange; they must accept a certain level of "big-brotherism" in the form of presence. Coworkers need to know how to contact their colleagues—even if they don't necessarily know where they are at any given point in time. The IT department needs to know how many people are likely to be logging in from outside company buildings, and so forth. The employer must also have a way to locate employees in the event of unforeseen need or actual emergency.

An extreme example of the consequences of not having a window into employee presence occurred during the 9/11 disaster. A company with thousands of employees in the World Trade Center managed to get everyone out, but two individuals were unaccounted for. A fire brigade went into the maelstrom to locate these people, and one fireman was killed as a result. It turned out that one of the missing employees was not at work that day, but there was no process in place to track employee presence. Most situations are nowhere near as dire, but the fact remains that presence becomes an essential element of a real-time, flexible workplace, and there must be policies and procedures to support it.

The shift to an unstructured work environment will continue, though not for everyone, as we have seen. While this transformation places additional burdens on ICT, which must provision these new expectations and provide the tools to manage an inherently unstructured system, it also elevates ICT to a position of unprecedented importance. The real-time revolution

opens new and more fruitful ways of working and collaborating, expands a company's ability to operate globally, and extends market reach. It delivers new ways to develop and deliver products and services, changing forever the relationship between companies and their customers. In the real-time world, ICT has the opportunity to become the enterprise's strategic change leader—not merely implementing a chosen direction, but setting the course for organizational transformation.

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Endnotes

1. "About Flexible Work Arrangements," Hewitt Associates, LLC, 2008.
2. Gen X is defined as those born in the 1960s and 1970s. Gen Y is defined as those born during the 1980s and 1990s.
3. "Changing a Company's Culture, Not Just Its Schedules, Pays Off," Jessica Marquez, Workforce Management, November 17, 2008.