

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Today, without leaving his chair, a knowledge worker can send an e-mail to the other side of the world, initiate an IM session with colleagues in multiple time zones, place an IP-based telephone call at the click of a mouse, and attend online meetings even during non-work hours (and possibly while wearing very casual attire). The Internet and the World Wide Web have come into the office (and the living room), and aren't leaving any time soon. Information is available at the tap of a few keys, and online commerce means that one can order something by 5 p.m. and expect it delivered by 10:30 a.m. the following day.

Certainly, this is a great improvement compared to the days of inter- and intra-office memoranda, when keyboards were for secretaries and the typing pool, and when "cc" literally meant carbon copy.

Or is it?

Haven't these tools improved productivity? Today, a plurality of the workforce comprises knowledge (and information) workers. [For the purpose of this book, we will use the term "knowledge worker" which references what some refer to as the "information worker"; readers are referred to their dictionary, where they will find the term "knowledge" defined as "in-

formation”, and “information” as “knowledge.”] But are we, the knowledge workforce, more effective, or is it just a case of *plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose*?

At the start of the twentieth century, unskilled labor accounted for ca. 90% of the workforce; today, that figure is closer to 20% and the largest group in the workforce by far is made up of knowledge workers, representing some 40% of the American workforce. As Peter Drucker, considered by many to be the management guru of the 20th century, noted: “the application of knowledge to work has made developed societies so much richer than any earlier society could ever dream of becoming.” Applying knowledge to various tasks enriches both the worker and the organization.

Admittedly, the future of knowledge work is somewhat cloudy. Will users continue to live in e-mail (admittedly a catchall) or begin to use the “right” tools for the job at hand? How will the trend towards virtual meeting spaces impact the quality of work – and the delicate work/life balance? How will CIOs control technology sprawl – waking up one day and finding nine document management systems, five portal environments, four content management systems, and users who have simply given up?

Many questions are raised.

Will managers realize that “on demand” is not the same as “on call”? Just because one can work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, doesn’t mean that one should – or even that such availability is beneficial.

Will knowledge workers (and their managers) become comfortable with the fact that where work is done is less important than having the best people on the team? The “death of distance” (which is also the title of the brilliant 1997 book by

Economist editor Francis Cairncross postulating that the death of distance between individuals and entities will become the single most important economic force to reshape society in the next 50 years) means that colleagues can collaborate from far off regions; electronic proximity can replace face-to-face meeting time.

Far-sighted companies are already recognizing the benefits of time zone differences, once thought to be a disadvantage due to an inability to bring people together at the same time, and using them to the company's benefit as one group picks up where the other leaves off.

The information technologies (collectively: "IT") that have evolved over the past few decades have brought about the need to create a new way of viewing and managing knowledge and information, as well as the need for a new way of managing the people who work with knowledge and information.

When computers were first implemented in the business world, those interacting with these behemoth machines were told that their tasks must conform to what appeared to be an arbitrary set of rules based on how the *computer itself* functioned. As computers became more prevalent in the workplace, and software more flexible, applications were designed to mimic how workers performed tasks.

Today it is clear that neither of these scenarios is desirable. Business is knowledge driven. Automating an inefficient manual process rewards an organization with a much faster, automated inefficient process. Rather than look at "how we do things around here," companies need to rethink entire operations and processes so as to create environments which foster collaboration and knowledge work. If knowledge workers are not able to collaborate and share knowledge with others,

productivity will suffer. Since this strikes at the heart of the knowledge economy, the results can be stifling.