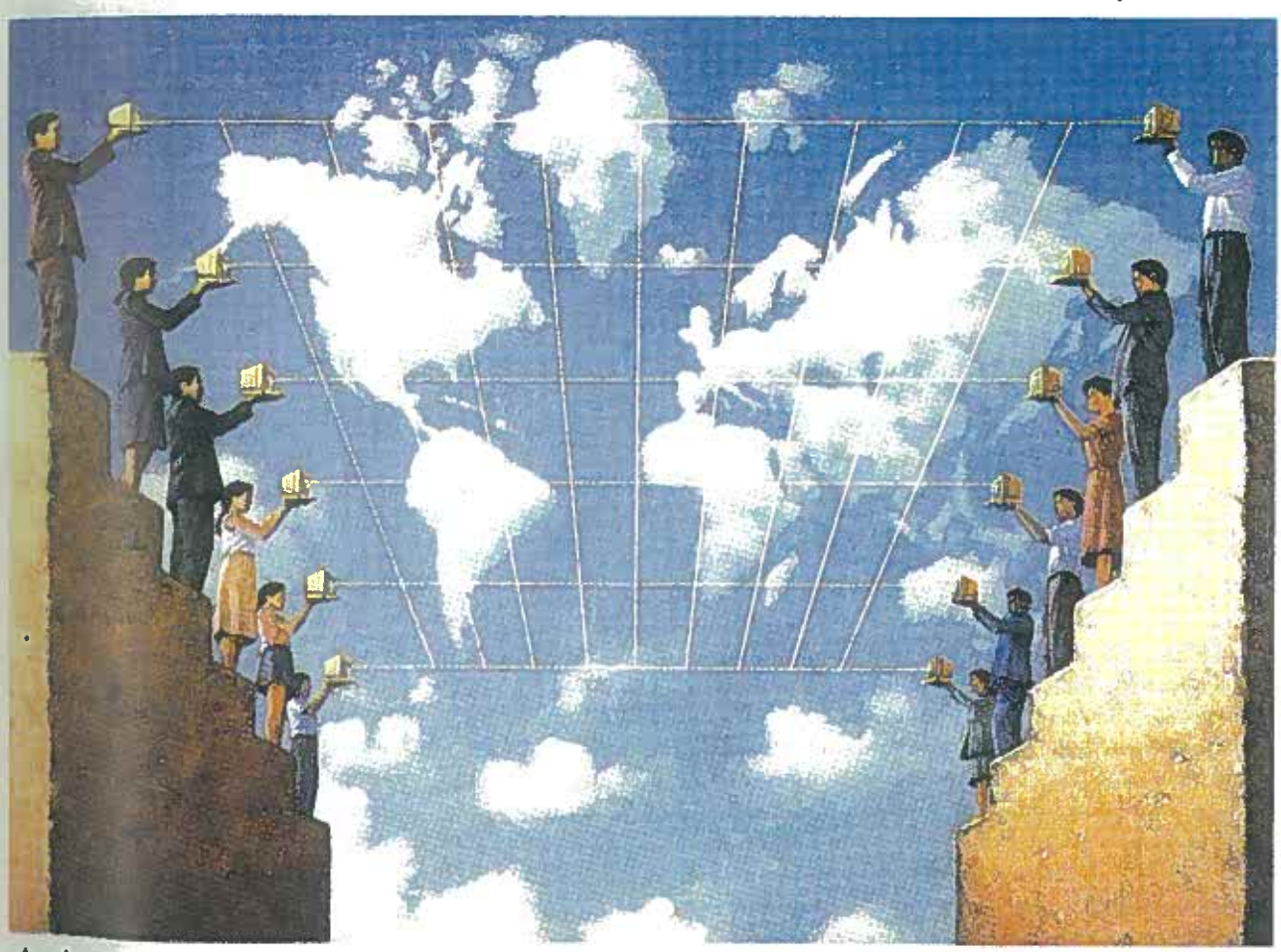
Digital Organisation:

A collection of equals



A digital or virtual organisation knows no discrimination. It treats every individual, right from the CEO to a computer operator, as equals. Powered by technology, digital offices produce maximum output with minimal efforts on the part of the management. This is what makes it such a great concept for the enterprises of the 21st century

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We are in the middle of the third wave of revolution. The agricultural and the industrial revolutions have created enough information base for the present information revolution, that is (within a short span of time) assuming gargantuan proportions. This new access to information and the means to work from wherever you wish means that we need to search into the past to see if it has lessons for the future. During the industrial revolution in the 18th century, no one had offices. There were factories and workshops, and the farm workers laboured in the fields. The rich met and did business in each other's houses.

In the late 19th century, management was by looking, seeing and hearing. Being there was critical because that was where the action was, and where the information was, just as it is on the shop floor of a factory today. You cannot manage a factory without 'working the floor' and seeing the widgets in production. Effectively, the office is just a paper factory modelled on manufacturing.

Information on one piece of paper could only be read by one person at a time and then it had to be able to be passed around easily to others so that they can do their thing. This meant that office work had to be linear. One process had to follow another. People had to work together to share the firm's filing. When the telephone was invented, the switchboard and extensions all made it necessary for people to work in one place. Management was achieved by walking around.

Present scenario

Telephones are no longer slaves of the PBX switchboard, but rather any telephone anywhere becomes a person's workplace. It is all seamless and done at the speed of light. Here becomes anywhere.

Data is now moved and copied and shuffled only in an electronic format. E-mail enables any band of people with Internet access to work together. One local call to the node and one keystroke sends notes and copies to everyone in the group. E-mail is sent directly to an individual. It is not a message to a machine (a fax) nor is it a letter sent to a street address. E-mails go to an individual's computer, so it goes to them directly and immediately, however far apart they are, the next office is no different from California.

Files are transferred as file attachments to people in the team. People work exclusively from their laptops. That is literally an office. It is a typewriter, a fax machine and an e-mail and Internet terminal. This virtual office travels around the world, in the process discarding the traditional notions of time and space.

Virtual organisations and teams

These 'virtual' organisational arrangements consist of networks of workers and organisational units, linked by information and communication technologies (ICT), which will flexibly coordinate their activities, combine their skills and resources in order to achieve common goals, but without very much by way of traditional hierarchical modes of central direction or supervision. Such arrangements will form and re-form as problems arise, providing a flexibility of response to changing circumstances and organisational needs.

As the process of centralisation got under way, electronic forms of monitoring are becoming increasingly important. One example of this is the varied reports available via sophisticated monitoring software used in the telephone 'call centres'. The monitoring kit, positioned on the manager's desk, provides a real-time display of inbound, outbound, available and unavailable phones with times attached to each. Each 'operative' is represented on screen by a block - the colour of the block indicating their present status as inbound, outbound, unavailable, etc. - while on the manager's screen a series of calculations and indicators appear. These change in accordance with the state of the service, for example: 'grade of service' (a calculation based on speed of response, waiting times; calls abandoned, etc.), 'queuing time' (in seconds.), 'calls abandoned', 'total calls abandoned', 'calls reco 'average answering speed'. Each i tor can be examined in more detai equipment will show, for example, long the caller was waiting befor abandoned - 5 secs, 10 secs, and s and can show whether the cal abandoned before or after hearin queuing message. On the walls o office an electronic message board tinuously displays the current sta the phone team - the grade of se how many calls are waiting; the av response time in seconds, and so o

Management information is in provided in the form of a numb computer generated reports; for e ple, an 'agent report' provides deta what individuals are doing throug the day in terms of whether the available or unavailable for calls, many calls they took, average ti calls, etc. These reports are then to create spreadsheets, again as pa a management information which effectively summarises the i mation for those higher in the ma ment hierarchy.

Virtual teamwork, it is sugge places a particular emphasis on co nication and the development of 'a ness' skills. With increased geograp dispersal of the specialised centres, ever, a 'buck passing' culture emerge, with poor communica impacting on team-working across organisational divide. Co-locatio task in itself creates and encourages ticular, often very fierce, group loy and the development of a 'them an attitude (where 'them' is effectively other organisational unit). Clearly of the major problems facing any v al team is that of 'communicat ensuring that work proceeds smoo from one phase of activity to the that it is passed on in a timely coherent fashion, that plans and pr dures with their associated paperw and records are understood and adh to, and so on. However, implemen such improved communications is h ly straightforward and raises a nu of other issues connected to 'standa ation' and software development.

Features of digital organisation

The physical environment

The traditional office evolved because people needed to work where information was stored. Information can now be delivered anywhere in electronic form so this has a profound effect on the role of a modern commercial office and its location.

Technology

New technologies are transforming the traditional ways of working. In particular, the worlds of computing and telephony are coming together to open up a whole new range of possibilities. There are many examples, but three of the key areas are:

Computer Telephony Integration (CTI) will bring a new revolution to the desktop. CTI has traditionally been used in all call centre applications. Recent developments are now delivering the power of the call centre to the desktop. The power of the telephone and PC can now be integrated to bring an array of capabilities to the user:

- automatic 'pop up' of diaries depending on who is called
- re-routing of calls from the screen
- easy set up of conference calls
- transforming the quality of telephone response and hence customer service.

Short Message Service (SMS) is a cheap and effective service for mobile phone users, needing straightforward information through their mobile phone. Short Message Service is a facility for sending and receiving messages of up to 160 characters on mobile phones. It is an effective way of communicating vital information quickly, economically and unobtrusively.

E-mail integration

Integrating SMS into the existing e-mail infrastructure allows the whole organisation to take advantage of SMS. Products such as Express Way make this possible.

Office systems integration

SMS technology can greatly enhance existing or new office systems. For example, phone messages can be sent via SMS rather than written in a message book. The possibilities are extensive.

Voicemail alert

SMS technology added to existing voicemail systems builds an effective method of receiving voicemail alerts.

Other applications

There are endless possibilities which can be implemented using an understanding of the underlying technologies. For example: security system alerts limit exceeded on a financial system stock price out of range.

Mobile data

This enables a laptop to retrieve information anywhere through the mobile phone network. Mobile Data Communications revolutionise where and how work is done. In the past, corporate information has often been inaccessible from many of the places where it is needed. The ability to link your laptop to your mobile phone means that you can remain connected to your own virtual office from anywhere.

Virtual teams and customers

National Westminster Bank 'Delivery Strategy' is a classic example. The delivery strategy has involved restructuring its internal organisation, its technological infrastructure and its relationship to customers. The plan was implemented in various ways, some through general and comprehensive restructuring and some through more experimental and radical modes of business. The overall aim was to transform the organisational culture from a predominantly 'administrative' one to a 'selling and service' culture. While the rationale of these changes is 'organisational' in that it requires the development of a new organisational culture, it is also dependent on the extensive use of IT to 'reconfigure the organisation' through its application in data analysis and processing, communication and decision support. Specialised centres have been introduced, each serving a number of branches from which a range of functions has been absorbed. Such a centralisation process requires much greater coordination, and IT support, network systems of accounting, relational databases and 'expert' systems are seen as essential.

Remote management

The management of employees or contracted staff working away from the main office for all or part of the working week is not a black art, or difficult to learn. Remote management simply puts a greater emphasis on 'good' management and exposes 'poor' management.

It is not just a question of getting the work done. Employers also need to ensure that they have systems in place to help employees with their career, social needs and cultural issues. Great care needs to be taken in choosing managers with the right experience as well as recruitment. Everyone involved in remote management needs to have Project and Meeting Management Skills.

Getting work done

Measure output not input. Set and agree objectives and priorities, then monitor regularly. This will become a more formal process as less reliance can be put on informal contact filling the void.

- Ensure staff have the necessary skills.
  - Time management
  - PC skills
- Ensure staff have the tools.
  - A flexible company office environment, which caters well for a shifting pattern of occupants.
  - The technology to properly support mobility such as a laptop and adequate quality data communications.
- Ensure that the voice communications systems work well so that colleagues, customers, etc. can communicate easily without loss of perceived quality of service.
  - Telephone calls automatically re-routed to the current place of work.
- Ensure that the business processes are designed to encompass and make good use of remote working.
  - The role of a 'team coordinator' usually becomes extremely important as the hub of team working and communications.
  - Simple examples such as having to come to the office to sign letters obviously makes little sense.

Career

Review systems must ensure that 'out of sight' does not mean 'out of mind'.

Visibility of the individual is a shared responsibility between the individual, the manager and the team. In the broadest sense, marketing skills become important for everyone.

Social needs

Work is also a social activity. Individuals have very different socialising needs. Ensure these are met by social events, team meetings, newsletters etc.

Culture

Be aware that the culture of the organisation ('the way we do things round here') will be modified by this way of working. It will be different, not necessarily better or worse.

A greater degree of individualism and entrepreneurialism will be bred. This will develop naturally, but can be seen as threatening to some managers. It is as well to be prepared in advance.

Experience of the manager

- The manager is more effective at managing remote workers if he has at least limited experience of working this way. In general, it is possible to deliberately inject some remote working into most management responsibilities.

New starters and changed jobbers

- Remote working needs a greater emphasis on the induction process. 'Sitting by Nellie' will happen only as a result of planning, not by accident.

Project and meeting management skills

If you are travelling to a meeting and have several meetings in a day, then each meeting needs to be well organised and purposeful. Projects will frequently involve project members at different locations and again this will require a greater degree of formality in the management process.

Virtual and real

While virtual organisations are picking up pace, there is a section of organisational scientific community who argue that virtual organisations can never bring the real feel to an organisation. Zuboff, for example, writes of such organisations as involving 'more intricate, collaborative' relationships in which 'mutual responsibilities to colleagues' rather than to the larger organisation itself become more prominent. In a similar vein, Casey C, in his book Work, Self and Society After Industrialism, argues that the new forms of teamwork 'in which people share knowledge, skills and resources and work cooperatively in the manufacture of their products' will displace 'identification wi an occupation and its historical reposit ry of skills, knowledges and allegianc in favour of 'relationship to a product, team family members and to the comp ny'. Such team-working, 'less fettered the constraints of traditional hierarch and spheres of responsibility, engender heightened sense of empowerment, co mitment and collective responsibility'.

Of course, there can be an endle debate on the pros and cons of a virt al organisation. In a world of increasi complexity and differentiation, it impossible for any one company have all the skills that are needed to the job.

The Virtual Organisation takes the ideas and makes the final leap. T organisation becomes a collection equals. That's where the reality of virt al organisation lies.

Implementing a virtual office

Implementing a virtual office normally means that a new hum resource policy will be required. The following is a list of su gested policy headings which provide a useful framework wit in which to start planning.

Philosophy	Why 'the virtual office', teleworking, flexibl working, etc has been introduced as a way working.
Definition	How this will be implemented and the tool that will be used.
Scope	People and job roles that will be affected.
Amendment ard contract of employment	Most standcontracts of employment to will need to be amended to reflect a change in place of work.
Facilities, services & equipment	Office accommodation and services plus communications equipment and services that will be provided.
Expenses	Changes that will occur in allowable expens and the method and timing of payment.
Allowances	Any additional payments or allowances and conditions attaching.
Taxation	Taxation impacts on the individual.
Insurance	Insurance cover provided by the company, plus individual responsibilities.
Security	Guidelines on the individual's responsibilitie
Health & Safety	There is joint responsibility between the employer and the individual. Normally a H&S self-assessment form will be provided for the employee to use.
Storage	What should be stored and where. As far as possible, electronic storage should be adopte

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