



Kevin Kelly

LIVING IN THE OFFICE

BY TIMOTHY HAIGHT

Since our in-house telecommunication system (The WELL) sprang to life several years ago, we've had more parties on the premises than ever before. Once a month, WELL-beings gather shoulder to shoulder in our cramped offices. It's sure put the lie to the futuristic notion of pale figures meeting only as disembodied electronic minds at the ends of wires. My take is that computer networkers' on-line conversations are mere overtures working up to the main event of flesh-to-flesh meetings. There are other myths to undo. Tim Haight, a former WELLite, now west coast editor for the industry trade rag CommunicationsWeek, sees the conventional wisdom of working at home via computer as the first casualty of information-age reality.

—Kevin Kelly

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During the marathon assembly of the Electronic Whole Earth Catalog, assistant editor Richard Nilsen takes a nap under his Mac.

TELECOMMUTING, the idea of working at home via telecommunications instead of traveling to work, is one of those social predictions that ought to come true but somehow never does. This kind of idea fascinates me because it indicates some glitch in our thinking that keeps us going in little circles around a concept that almost fits.

Bart Stuck of Probe Research Inc., for example, has predicted that growth of ISDN [an upcoming universal wire that carries several electronic media] will be fueled by people choosing to work at home. Clearly, an end-to-end digital service with some decent bandwidth will make it easier to take the computer home.

The question is whether the society will take advantage of the technology.

I think the office and home are coming together, but not in the way that we might think they are.

Getting Malled

Reminds me of the way I used to think about shopping malls. During the 1960s, one of the prime targets of social criticism was shopping centers. Critics saw them as the end of community, the triumph of the automobile, concrete aggregations of stores with — if the shopper were lucky — a couple of cement benches to sit on.

We longed for a return to the village green, an impulse that resulted in a spate of downtown revitalizations, few of which worked.

Instead, the shopping center got much more comfor-

table, right down to the little twinkling lights in the trees, postmodernist architecture, the movies, the arcades and the sidewalk cafes.

Now that the malls have started featuring craftspeople, collectors, high-school bands, and displays by the local classic car clubs we might as well admit that malls are today's community centers. This is particularly true for teenagers. Some day there will be a nostalgic *American Graffiti*-type film treatment about cruising the mall. (Where were you in '82?).

The Common Good

The '60s social critics saw rampant commercialization and cried for community. Twenty years later, the malls *are* communities — though not exactly what the critics had in mind. We express our commonality not with "Power To The People" but with "Toys 'R' Us."

In retrospect, it seems obvious. Commerce was a more powerful force than social criticism; the critics' ideas were co-opted into the stronger agenda. It's a particular irony we experience over and over, and we never wise up.

Why? because we don't see how traditional we really are. We who came of age in the '60s are now the old folks who are set in their ways and believe these newfangled things are scandalous. This generation doesn't say "blasphemous," it says "overcommercialized." And by doing so it misses the trend.

So here's the scoop: instead of working at home, it's going to be living at the office. The future is not the "home office." It's the "office home."

To be blunt, offices are in many ways nicer places to live. The view out of my office window, for example, is a lot prettier than the view from my bedroom window.

Inside the office, it's a clean, well-lit place. Somebody comes by each night and tidies up. A trained accountant takes care of my business expenses. We have Macintoshes with sophisticated games. We have a full kitchen and bath facilities.

In our New York offices, we have exercise rooms, aerobics classes, a cafeteria and day care. Some companies go much further than we do. Offices are going through the same evolution as malls. Work 'R' Us.

At home I spend a lot of time cleaning up, doing the bills, or fixing things.

I can't quite afford servants, accountants and electricians, but at work, all that is provided for. (If only I could get my parents included on my health insurance!)

Home is where you have to do it all for yourself. For creature comforts and economic stability, the office has the home beat cold. But, of course, that's not what's important about home. It's the emotional contact. Or is it?

That offices have become communities has been clear in mass culture since "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," where the real family was the job family.

Now, for every "Cosby," there's an "L.A. Law"; for every "Family Ties," a "Night Court."

"Thirtysomething" has got the '80s zeitgeist exactly right. The series gives work and home equal billing.

I certainly relate to my officemates better than I do to my neighbors. My office friends are interested in most of the same things, have about the same education and laugh at most of the same jokes.

My next-door neighbor drives a bus, and the lady across the street is retired. Nice folks, but we don't really hit it off.

Once we admit the appeal of the "office home," we don't have to reject family life.

A minor conclusion is what we've understood all along: people like to go into the office for social reasons. The major conclusion is that as offices become nicer places to spend time, being "officeless" will probably take on the same hurt and stigma as homelessness. And this has telecommunications consequences.

Remember that in most families these days, particularly the families of trend-setters, there are two offices and one home. When the couple moves, one person joins the ranks of the officeless. Sometimes, that means losing career or community standing that have taken long years to develop. It can mean leaving the town where the extended family lives. And the process of moving is itself such an obvious hell that it's amazing it took this long for Richard Pryor to make a comedy about it.

Staying put means keeping friendships going — if your friends don't move when you stay.

There are many subtle economic benefits to staying in the same place as well, not the least of which is a profit in real estate.

And school is to our kids what the office is to us. Moving bothers them, too.

We sympathize by telling them we also hated to move when we were kids, and they wonder why we didn't learn from our parents' mistakes.

So my telecommunications prediction is that we'll use the new technologies more and more to cut down on relocation and turnover.

Real telecommuting will mean being able to climb the corporate ladder without loading up the furniture. Or it will mean living where you want without having to sacrifice your career.

It will be choosing what office to work out of, rather than not coming into the office. It could mean moving when and where you choose, rather than when a job comes up and to wherever its last jobholder lived. It may mean allowing the husband or wife who goes along with a spouse's move to take his or her old job to the new town.

Jobs and careers differ. Some can be done anywhere with the help of new technology while some, such as serving in public office, can be done only in one place.

Sorting out which are which, and using our new telecommunications technologies to make them fit with the needs of families and companies, will be the real trend. Not working in your residence. ■

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