

Is the modern executive lifestyle socially unsustainable?

If sustainability is to have relevance in the new knowledge economy, it must address the needs of people in the social environment of work as well.

As business today strives to do more with less, many people working in both public and private sector organisations find the quality of their life deteriorating. They spend longer and longer hours either at work, engaged in quasi-work or commuting. Finding that work-life balance can prove elusive.

Those who remain in executive roles are also becoming increasingly time poor with likely long-term consequences for the quality of their decision making.

Information technology has both a cause and effect in all this. The real-time, on line, 24X7 global economy are terms quite broadly used to describe the radical changes taking place in the systems for the production and consumption of goods and services. These changes are forcing the restructuring of domestic economies and the value creating organisations that comprise them.

The changes resulting from the ascendancy of the techno-economic paradigm present two clearly outcomes. Firstly, there is the seemingly inevitable reduction in the power and influence of "local" managers. Secondly, there is an increased feeling of insecurity for local managers and workers alike.(1)

The eminent business writer and academic, Charles Handy has postulated that the executive lifestyle may be coming socially unsustainable. "We are in danger of populating companies with the modern equivalent of monks, people who forgo all else for the sake of their calling" he says. (2) Our modern working environment has been called "libido leeching", which might be just as well if one decides to choose the monastic life! Thirty three percent of women and 13% of men surveyed say the stress and effort of their employment leaves them uninterested in sex (3)

Against this background, how can modern business best protect its investment in human capital from the demands of its own work?

The re-emergence of community

One option currently gaining credence is for organisations to see themselves more as communities, capable of meeting both individual and shared needs. However as many businesses have been downsized, the concept of community has shifted towards a "community of practice", capable of fulfilling more formal needs. When business finds itself without the critical mass of employees engaged in specialist tasks or functions, it is increasingly turning to information technology to share information and knowledge across organisation boundaries and amongst peers. These communities have a rational-economic purpose; to harness and apply knowledge to help meet corporate objectives, without the need for each individual organisation to necessarily develop and maintain its own complete base of knowledge.

Underneath this strategy for corporate survival is a fine example of the use of cooperation in order to remain competitive.

This approach is quite different to a strategy which consciously aims to develop a culture that embraces social community as a key corporate value and one essential for long-term business sustainability.(4)

Principles of "community" are now being stated in design criteria for new commercial working environments. But how well do the built outcomes reflect authentic, sustainable qualities of social community?

Interaction or collaboration?

A part of the answer lies in an understanding the role and importance of collaboration in the formation of social community. In the context of an organised social system for work,

collaboration reflects more purposive relationships that involve a desire to solve a problem, create *shared purpose*, discover or generally to produce meaningful outputs. The true medium of collaboration is other people, and collaborative effort becomes a medium for individual self-expression and hence *personal development*.

Quite separately, research conducted by Mc Kinsey and Co and the Boston Consulting Group (5) found that *the top two work environment factors affecting motivation* are opportunities for *personal development* and having a sense of *shared purpose*. Given the positive links between motivation and performance, there would appear to be sound economic reasons for designing working environments for collaboration, not simply interaction.

Tools for collaboration

What sort of essential "tools" are needed to support collaboration?

Firstly, good tools for collaboration must seamlessly become an extension of the user. With little extra time or skill they enable creativity to flourish. Secondly, they should enable the user to better come to grips with their work. Thirdly, they must be easily used by anybody else, as often or as seldom as required.

Are these the kind of user benefits delivered by a Palm Pilot for example?

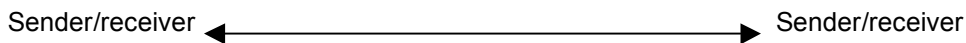
A quick check in the modern working environment shows most prevalent office equipment is actually designed to support individuals, not collaboration; eg workstations, laptops and telephones. These "tools" simply aid interaction and the accumulation, processing, duplication, packaging, transmission and distribution of *information*.

Real community is characterised by collaboration whereas much of the current workplace design emphasis is on improving interaction in the physical space, supported by technology. Collaboration and interaction are qualitatively different.

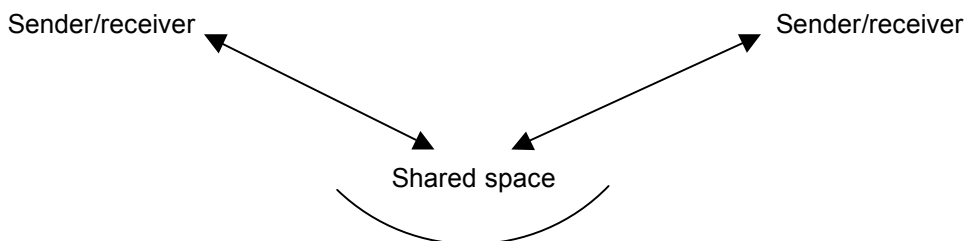
Apart from the essential ingredient of people, collaboration requires a "space"; where conversations can be shared, where there are opportunities to create shared memory.

The following diagrams show the fundamental differences between interaction and collaboration. In both cases there is a communication of information between sender and receiver. Interaction uses traditional office tools while collaboration takes place in a "shared space".

Interaction



Collaboration



The role of the "shared space" is to add extra dimensions to the conversation by embracing the representation of symbols (eg sketches, mud maps), manipulation and

memory. This is not simply a shared physical space that allows people to "drop by" and casually connect, like around a cappuccino machine or in a designated social space. It is more a shared "*media space*" with at least the following characteristics;(6)

- It has low barriers to entry and exit
- It is accessible in a number of different physical locations
- It has equity of access

From this perspective space for collaboration is also very different to a formal meeting space. Meeting spaces tend to support a group of individuals who share the same *physical space* and a common problem at a specific point in time. The social ecology of meetings is also very different to the social ecology supporting effective collaboration.

What then are some of the more important themes we need to pay attention to when creating collaborative working environments?

The following short list provides a starting point;

- Collaborative environments support *social processes*, not the production of outputs
- Tools should enable conversations to *seamlessly extend* across physical spaces, from location to location and through time
- Media spaces can be shared using *hard technologies* (eg windowed whiteboards, integrated screen based systems, what you see is what I see (WYSIWIS) etc)
- There should be a *diverse mix* of formal and informal physical spaces
- The best collaborative environments stimulate *relaxed intensity*

References:

1. Arthurs, H., Labouring into an uncertain future; in Australian Financial Review, 14 June 2002, extract from presentation to 10th Annual Labour Conference, University of Sydney, 2002
2. Handy, C., Reprinted from Harvard Business Review in Australian Financial Review, 20-23 December, 2002
3. Croucher, J., Department of Statistics, Macquarie University, November, 2003
4. Wheatley, M. and Kellner-Rogers, M. A Simpler Way, 1998
5. Cave, M. Go Ahead, Motivate Me! BOSS magazine, June 2002
6. Shrager, M. No More Teams - Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration, 1995

Brian Purdey
Managing Director
KODO
The Ark Workspace
Level2 50 York Street
PO Box Q1585 QVB
Sydney NSW 1230 Australia
T: 612 82431116
F: 612 82431122
M: 0410 483 922

Creativity Vision Leadership