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Building the future of work together

How today's hyper-connectivity is impacting the world of work

By Denis Pennel

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Today's hyper-connected world is having a profound impact on the workplace. New technologies have changed the way in which both businesses and people operate. They have also blurred the lines between our working and private lives.

Workplaces have become more flexible. Indeed the very definition of a workplace is changing as it is now possible to work from pretty much anywhere – not just at home or at the airport, but also on the beach or on the golf course. The hyper-connected world has opened up a global talent pool and that talent doesn't need to be in the office. Work has become less a place to go, but more a task to be accomplished.

Many organisations and companies now take a far more flexible approach to how and when work is carried out. They allow employees to work from home a couple of days a week in order to fit in with personal circumstances or save them the daily commute. Similarly when people are in the office, they might leave on time, but it doesn't mean that they stop working. Increasingly employees are still responding to emails and phone calls well into the evening. It is no longer necessary to sit face to face with co-workers every day as people can be in constant touch by email and phone. In short, employers are willing for people to manage their own time as long as the job gets done – and studies indicate that organisation offering workplace flexibility have less absenteeism and higher levels of engagement.

Of course this hyper-connected world suits many of us very well. Parents can arrive home at a reasonable hour to spend time with the family safe in the knowledge that they can logon to their computer later once the children are tucked up in bed. It also follows of course that the advantages of technology work both ways. While we might be taking work home with us, most of us are also carrying out personal tasks while we are at work. These days it is commonplace for people to use their computer or smartphone to catch up on personal things such as paying bills, shopping or keeping in touch with family and friends on social media during the working day.

Technology is also changing the very nature of work and work contracts. With people able to set up a home office at modest expense there is a flourishing trend towards independent and freelance work. Similarly interim and fixed term contracts are on the rise as the online world has ushered in the on-demand economy and the expansion of collaborative platforms where those wanting tasks performed can get in touch with workers willing to perform them. Hyper connectivity is also prompting a growing trend of multi-activity where people are engaged in a variety of different tasks and professions and are often holding down three jobs at once. Mornings spent dog-walking, afternoons spent working part-time in an office and evenings spent as a driver for Uber. All of these forms of work would simply not exist without our hyper-connected lives.

Of course while hyper-connectivity brings many possibilities, it also has its drawbacks. People can feel that they never switch off or relax and a demanding client or boss may choose to abuse the situation and constantly badger employees during weekends and holidays. They may feel overwhelmed and like there's nowhere to hide. Certainly the working day is longer now that we are all permanently online and work-life has also become more fast-moving, with the decision-making cycle a great deal more rapid.

The solution must be to strike a happy medium in order to create balance in our lives. In the future we need to ensure that labour laws and privacy laws provide adequate rights and protections for both workers and organisations in our online 24/7 society. In France for example, where overuse of digital devices has been blamed for everything from burnout and sleeplessness to relationship problems, there is a right to disconnect from technology as the country seeks to tackle the compulsive out-of-hours email checking.

Lastly, I believe that the greatest opportunity to emerge from our hyper-connected world is that of advancement and new knowledge. At the touch of a button we now all have access to skills, competencies and education. Organisations are increasingly harnessing this to deliver online training that straddles geographies and is made available to employees all over the world. This is something that is set to grow and we should be ready to embrace it and to recognise that using technology for upskilling and retraining will soon become standard practice for organisations, educational establishments and individuals. It is estimated that there will be 5.6 billion smartphone subscriptions by the end of 2019 – that's over 2/3rds of the planet with access to education and information at their fingertips. This will certainly change the way that we work – and I am convinced that it will be for the better.

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