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The Workplace Revolution

Millions of people spend their working lives in offices, and this chapter shows how this has evolved.

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The Changing Face of the Workplace

The concept of an office workplace, where a group of people are located together to perform a range of productivity tasks, can be traced back to the Romans, who had government establishments in their towns to manage and run the towns' affairs. These were known by the name "officium", from where the modern word used today comes.

Office work – and its environment – has evolved significantly over the centuries, largely as a result of political, social, and technological changes and advances. Three of the main areas that have driven these changes are communication, productivity and collaboration, and each of them can be linked to technological developments that have changed the way in which office work is performed. All of these factors have also helped to shape the modern office workspace, which relies heavily on digital technology and, increasingly, tools such as Microsoft Teams.



New technology in the workplace is only as good as the people who use it, so it is important for organizations to invest in comprehensive training for employees whenever any new technology is introduced.

Communication

Communication is one of the most important aspects of office work, and the telephone was one of the most significant breakthroughs in this area. Being able to communicate with someone in another town, city, country or continent transformed the speed at which business could be done: one telephone call potentially replacing the need to send a letter to another part of the world. Once telephony communication was established, it made the concept of global business much more attainable.



Productivity

As with most workplaces, the office environment is largely concerned with producing output. One way in which this was increased considerably was with the invention of the humble typewriter. This led to documents being produced in a fraction of the time than previously, resulting in this skill becoming one of the main features of the office workplace.



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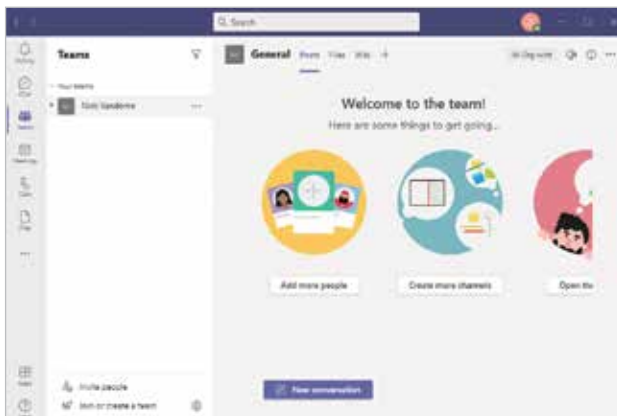
Collaboration

Being able to quickly share documents electronically around different locations is another landmark in making the modern office more efficient and productive. One of the first ways of doing this was achieved by a device that is now frequently viewed with amusement and gentle ridicule: the fax machine. Despite its slightly archaic nature to workers brought up with the internet, email and social media, the fax machine was revolutionary in its time, with its ability to send copies of documents to locations around the world, using existing telephone infrastructure.

The modern office workplace

While the modern office workplace may seem a long way from the days of typewriters and fax machines (although they are still used in some instances) there has been a natural evolution in terms of communication, productivity and collaboration tools. Computing technology has been the main driving force behind this – in some cases, consolidating all of these functions into a single device.

The natural development of the modern workplace is now being seen in collaboration apps that combine all of the main functions in the workplace. Microsoft Teams (Teams) epitomizes this, with its ability to connect groups of office workers – or those in other environments such as education – so that they can communicate, share documents and even collaborate on creating new documents. The functions of Teams can be traced back through the history of the workplace, but it is definitely a very modern tool that can provide invaluable assistance to office workers.



Teams is free to download and use, and there is also an upgraded version that can be purchased as part of the Microsoft 365 suite of apps or from within the free version of Teams. The upgraded version includes unlimited users (the free version allows up to 300), an increased amount of storage for documents (1TB per user for the paid-for version; 1GB per user for the free version). There are also additional administrative functions in the paid-for version.



Just because employees have more free time as a result of working from home, this does not mean that they should feel they have to use it in an outwardly constructive way, such as starting a new hobby. The important thing is that the time available should be appreciated and it can be used in any way that people see fit, even if that is to do nothing in particular.



Savings from working from home have to be offset against additional expenditure, such as increased utility bills.

Working From Home

In terms of working from home, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a process that was already taking a firm hold in the digital workplace. For people who work primarily with computers, there are few arguments to prevent them working from home for at least part of their time at work.

As with any major shift in working practices, there are numerous areas to consider when working from home, for both the employer and the employee. If these issues are addressed constructively, practically and progressively, then working from home can bring enormous benefits for all concerned and transform the way in which we look at our working lives.

Benefits

Although there are some concerns that should be addressed when employees are working from home, there are many benefits:

- **Work/life balance.** The concept of striking the right balance between your working life and your home life is something that is widely talked about in modern society. With the traditional 9-5 model of office work, this can be hard to achieve effectively. However, working from home offers a genuine option for workers to adapt their time at work so that they can maximize the benefits of their free time.
- **Financial.** For workers who have to commute to work, the option of working from home can result in considerable financial savings. If people have to commute large distances then the savings can be dramatic, particularly when calculated over a year. Even if a daily commute is relatively short, savings can soon mount up over time. Added to this are savings that can accrue from miscellaneous expenditure during the working day, and it soon becomes clear that the financial benefits to the employee are one of the most attractive features of working from home.
- **Corporate savings.** Employers can also benefit from their employees working from home. Maintaining office space for workers is a considerable expense for businesses, and if they have hundreds – or thousands – of employees, this can quickly run into large sums. If some of the workforce can work from home, the subsequent savings from downsizing on office space is something that most organizations should consider.

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Getting the right balance

While working from home offers the chance for employees to strike a better work/life balance, this does not mean that working from home constantly is always the best option. Some aspects of office life are important from both a corporate and social perspective and many organizations are now favoring a hybrid model, where employees spend some time in the office and some at home. The ideal situation for employees is if they can choose their own balance between working from home and going into the office.

Managing people

One area that can cause issues in relation to working from home is the management of employees. Some managers like to physically see their staff, as they believe this ensures that they are working and being productive. However, this is not always the case, and a considerable amount of the working day in an office can be wasted by employees not doing much work. In reality, employees can be more productive when working from home and, in some cases, there needs to be a shift in the approach of managers, which can come about once they see that productivity can be improved by employees being located at home.

Home workspace

If employees are going to be working from home for an extended period, it is important that they have an adequate workspace in which to work. Not everyone will be able to have a dedicated office space, but organizations should ensure that their employees have proper space in which to work and the appropriate equipment for the job (see pages 12-15 for details).

Human contact

Human interaction is important in many aspects of our lives, and this is particularly true in a working environment. Attention should be given to ensure that people working from home still have sufficient contact with their colleagues so that they do not feel cut off or isolated. Activities such as virtual coffee breaks and social meetings should be encouraged for home workers, and they should also be given the opportunity to meet up with their friends and colleagues when they work in the office. Human Resources departments should have a working-from-home policy that includes details of maintaining social contact and interaction.



If a hybrid model is used, incorporating working from home and also in the office, an effective hot-desking policy should be implemented to ensure that home workers can book desks in the office when required.



If you are in a household with other people, make sure that you have an open discussion with them about what is expected for when you are working from home. This is particularly important if there are children in the household.



If you are working near a window in your home, there may be occasions where the glare from sunlight can make it hard to view your computer screen. If this happens, make sure you are somewhere where you can draw curtains or a blind and, in some cases, use a glare guard over your screen.

Getting Set Up

In an ideal world, home working should be backed up by a robust policy that includes the provision of appropriate office and IT equipment, and a health and safety inspection to assess the workspace being used. However, this is not always the case, particularly in instances where home working has to be accelerated due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Even in these circumstances though, there are some areas that should be looked at carefully in terms of working from home, such as workspace and equipment.

Workspace

When people are working from home, their actual location will be largely dependent on their own circumstances and where they live. However, if this is going to be a long-term situation for you, then some care and attention should go into where you are going to work. Some areas to consider are:

- Try to ensure you have enough space. If you cannot use a work desk, try to use a flat surface and ensure that your workspace has enough room for your work equipment and also any documents, books or folders that you may have to access.
- Natural light is important. Try to work somewhere where there is enough natural light so that you do not feel like you are working in a cave. This does not have to be direct sunlight, but try to avoid working in any area where there are no windows or sources of natural light.
- Be prepared to clear away your equipment at the end of the working day or working week, if necessary. If you use a space that is regularly in use by other members of a household, you may have to make the space available when you have finished working. If you have to do this, make sure that your equipment is kept somewhere safe and secure. This is just one of the many trade-offs that working from home can entail.
- Ensure that your workspace is somewhere where you can conduct audio and video conversations. If there are other people in the household, particularly children, then it may be necessary to schedule these types of calls at times when you are least likely to be disturbed.

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If possible, it is best to use a work desk when you are working from home. This will not only help you organize your equipment, but will also create a more professional workspace.



Try to keep your desk as free from clutter as possible. This will create a more efficient workspace and help maintain a more focused mindset for work.

A workspace using a large table, near a window, is a good option if you cannot have a dedicated desk in your home.



A reliable and fast broadband connection is usually required when working from home. In some instances this may be provided by the organization, but frequently it will be up to individuals to provide their own broadband.

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Equipment

In terms of equipment for working from home, your organization should provide a minimum of any IT equipment that you need, such as a desktop computer, monitor, keyboard, mouse, laptop and printer. There is also a range of other equipment that could be provided, to help with your workplace setup. This includes:

- **Foot rests.** These can be used below a table or desk so that the user can have their legs raised slightly, which can help with circulation and make sitting more comfortable.
- **Back rests.** These can be attached to a chair to give back support. They are usually adjustable so that you can position them where they can give you the most support and comfort.
- **Wrist rests.** These can be used with a keyboard or a mouse, to give your wrist support when you are typing or maneuvering your mouse. Wrist rests are frequently filled with a firm gel, to increase support and flexibility.



- **Computer stands.** These can be used to position a computer or a laptop at the correct height on a table or a desk. Ideally, your eyeline should be in line with the top of the monitor.
- **Headsets for audio or video calls.** These can be used to make hands-free calls so that the user can simultaneously perform another task, such as typing a text message, as required.



If you change your work pattern so that some – or all – of your time is spent working from home, you may be able to claim tax deductions for certain items, such as utility bills. Check with an accountant or financial advisor for the tax rules for your particular working situation.



Headsets are more effective for audio and video calls than the speakers and microphone on a computer because they enable the two elements to be isolated and used separately, unlike the ones on a computer, where only one element can be used at a time.

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The most important item of equipment for working from home is undoubtedly your chair, since you will probably be spending many hours a day in it. Ideally, a dedicated office chair should be used: if your organization does not provide one then it is worth getting your own one, rather than sitting on a kitchen chair that may become uncomfortable. A fully adjustable office chair is probably one of the best investments you will make when working from home (and it may be tax-deductible; see first Hot tip on the previous page).



Back problems are common among people who work regularly with computers, and one option that can provide relief from this is to use a standing desk. This is a type of desk where the user stands at a workstation rather than sitting on a chair, thereby helping their posture and, hopefully, putting less strain on their back. This is not a solution for everyone, but it has the added advantage of being more mobile around the home.



Some standing desks are foldable, to make them easier to store away in the home.

Teams Comes of Age

One of the areas of digital communication that have flourished due to the increase in the number of people working from home is that of collaboration tools, and Microsoft Teams (Teams) is very much at the forefront of this revolution.

It is easy to think of Teams as a video communication tool, along the likes of Zoom or Skype, but in reality it offers an impressive range of features that can link people throughout an organization so that they can communicate and collaborate in a range of ways.

Teams at work or in education

Teams is very much a tool for a professional environment, and it can be equally effective in the business world or in all levels of formal education. During the Covid-19 pandemic, large numbers of schools and universities have embraced Teams to ensure that their students can continue their studies, wherever they are located.

The power of Teams

Some options that Teams offers are:

- **Creating teams of people with common work interests or duties.** The team can then communicate and collaborate with each other, in an environment that is limited to the people in the team. These are the teams that give the app its name.
- **Enabling audio or video meetings.** Meetings can be held with members of a team or can be started (or scheduled) with a member of the organization, presuming they have permissions for this. It is a quick and efficient way to conduct online meetings with colleagues or students.
- **Providing a text chat facility.** Teams also contains a powerful text function, which can be used to send text messages around the organization, and even to post text comments during an audio or video meeting.
- **Sharing files with people within the Teams environment.** This is an excellent feature for sharing work presentations or a range of coursework in an educational environment. Documents can be shared by displaying items on your own screen during a video meeting, or files can be uploaded to their own dedicated area within Teams, where other members of the organization can access them to view them, and also edit them as required.



For many organizations, Teams has become the default option for collaboration through teams, video calls, text chat and file sharing.

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Versions of Teams

Teams is a cross-platform app that can be used on devices with a range of operating systems. It can be used on desktop computers and laptops using Windows, or macOS on Apple devices. There are also mobile versions of Teams that can be used on iPhones using iOS; iPads using iPadOS; and Android smartphones and tablets. This gives users the ultimate flexibility in terms of how and where they use Teams.

Integration with Microsoft products

As Teams is a Microsoft product, it is only natural that it is closely aligned with other Microsoft productivity apps. Teams can be downloaded, for free, as a stand-alone app and it is also included in the Microsoft 365 suite of apps. This is a subscription service that can be used on a monthly or an annual basis. A lot of organizations will already be using Microsoft 365, and so its apps will be available within Teams. If not, it can be subscribed to from the Microsoft website. Microsoft 365 apps can be accessed from within Teams, in which case they appear within the Teams interface. The components of Microsoft 365 include:

- **Word.** This is the widely used word processing app that helped revolutionize the way that documents are produced in the workplace.
- **Excel.** This is an app for creating spreadsheets so that data can be viewed and managed using complex mathematical formulae, if required.
- **PowerPoint.** This can be used to create presentations for the business environment, although it should not be over-used.
- **OneNote.** This is a powerful note-taking app that can be used to create lists and reminders and also display a range of different content.
- **Outlook.** This is a powerful email client that links up with the other Microsoft 365 apps.
- **OneDrive.** This is Microsoft's online storage facility and it can be used within Teams so that content can be accessed wherever users are located, either in an office or on the move.



For more details about using Microsoft 365 apps within Teams, see pages 170-173.



When using Teams, documents can be stored on your own computer or in OneDrive. Documents stored in OneDrive will be available to you from any of your devices on which you are using Teams. Teams will also enable the OneDrive documents to be available to others Teams members.



If your organization's Teams policy states that something is not allowed, then this function should be disabled for use. However, even if you can use it, resist the temptation to do so if you know that it is referred to in the policy.

Security Issues

Cyber security is a vital issue when working in any computing environment, particularly one in which people will be collaborating and sharing information. This applies to Teams just as much as using other apps or any online activity. While the technical side of cyber security should be taken care of by your organization's IT department or supplier, there are also certain steps that individuals can take to ensure their interactions on Teams are as secure as possible:

- **Reading your organization's policy regarding the use of Teams.** This should lay out what you can, and cannot, do with Teams. Some of the areas that may be covered include creating and editing teams and channels, sharing documents, and communicating with people outside your organization. If your organization does not have a specific policy for Teams, a general IT policy may cover the pertinent points.
- **Being aware when discussing sensitive information.** When communicating with a collaboration app such as Teams there is always a chance of a conversation being recorded, either by the app or by someone using a smartphone. Because of this, it is essential that only appropriate information is discussed in an audio or a video call. Never say anything that you would not want to appear somewhere else at a later date.
- **Being careful when sharing documents with people outside your organization.** Teams has a facility for including external users, but you should consult your organization's appropriate policy to see what is allowed in terms of sharing documents or information in this way. If in doubt, don't do it.
- **Referring unsolicited requests for information.** If you are contacted by someone outside your organization with a request for documents or information, contact your IT security officer if there are any aspects about the request with which you feel uncomfortable. It is always best to check first and keep a record of the request and your referral.
- **Removing sensitive background items during video calls.** When conducting video calls, make sure that there is nothing offensive in the background of your video feed and there are no sensitive financial items in view, such as bank statements or credit cards.