



Updated: Tue., Feb. 23, 2010, 12:05 PM

2020 visions

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Last Updated: 12:05 PM, February 23, 2010

Posted: 12:53 AM, February 22, 2010

We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives," intones the psychic Criswell in Ed Wood's schlock horror flick "Plan 9 From Outer Space."

No truer words! And they apply to the workplace as much as anywhere, so with that in mind, @work decided to take a peek into the working world of 2020.

We checked in with various experts and got a range of predictions, from "smart desks" and sexual harrassment via hologram to fundamental changes in the ways workers will function and interact. If they're correct, workers a decade from now will face less job security but more opportunities for personal fulfillment. Employees will be doing even less work in offices, which will consequently become smaller and more public. And you'll be more likely to move to where the jobs are while traveling on business less.

We'll be contract workers

Companies are learning lessons from both the current recession and the dot-com bust, and a big one is to not reflexively add full-time employees when the economy is heating up. So in the future, expect many employers to use contract employees instead of full-timers for everything but their core missions, says Dan Finnigan, CEO of Jobvite, a Web-based software company that integrates hiring with social networking.

"A higher percentage of the work will be done on an on-demand basis," he says. "It's like the movie industry in Los Angeles," where studios have full-time employees but make movies using contract workers like actors, set designers and writers.

And it's not just grunt work that will be contracted — high-skill, high-wage positions such as jobs in human resources and marketing will be as well, says Paula Caligiuri, a professor of human resources at Rutgers and author of the forthcoming book "Get a Life, Not a Job."

We'll form networks

To meet this demand, various skilled workers will form networks that companies can easily access, creating online sites where companies can literally reserve their skills the way diners make restaurant reservations, predicts Finnigan. These networks would be both informal coalitions of pros linked through social networking sites like Facebook and formal networks akin to trade associations.

"I think we are moving, in our digital flat world, to a time when digital organizations pop up to get the job done," he says.

Some experts see opportunity rather than insecurity in the work-for-hire formula. For one thing, it will decrease fretting about holding on to a single 9-to-5 job, says Caligiuri. And it will offer workers more flexibility to do different things.

"The upside," says Finnigan, "is you won't be stuck in something you hate."

We'll relocate more

You also won't be stuck in an office, though you may be tethered to a town.

By 2020, it's likely that certain industries will migrate to bigger, denser towns, and workers looking to get ahead will have to follow.

So employees in Cleveland and Detroit interested in working at big industrial companies will shuffle to Chicago, just as actors flock to Los Angeles and financial workers head to New York, says Richard Florida, author of "The Rise of the Creative Class" and the forthcoming "The Great Reset."

In these cities, workers will find networks of the like-minded to help them flourish in their careers, just as White Stripe frontman Jack White used the musicians network of Nashville to expand his career, Florida says.

"People will have to give [where they live] a lot more thought than they have in the past," he says.

We'll be in offices less

Inside those geographical confines will lie a peripatetic work environment where jobs orbit around an office rather than fester inside.

"People are going to be working everywhere," says Andrew Laing, managing director of the workplace design consultancy DEGW North America.

That means at home, on the road, in Starbucks — anyplace time and opportunity allow.

"The idea of the office as the place you go to work will be supplemented," he says, adding that companies will rethink the

purpose of having an office.

As a result, Laing and other experts say offices will get smaller, with less personal space and more public space to interact with co-workers on team ventures. Public places will include both informal, water cooler-type areas and formal meeting rooms.

"It's going to be a lot more about spaces of collaboration," says Laing. "Rows of cubicles that are empty half the time is not what the future is going to be."

We'll have smaller work spaces

In the past, offices were designed around the idea that each employee needs about 180 square feet, half of it personal space and half of it common area. Today that figure has shrunk to 90 square feet or less, and it will likely shrivel further, says Jonathan Webb of KI, which makes office furniture.

So limited space can be used in different ways, expect to see more "flexible furniture" — mountable wall furniture and freestanding desks that can be moved easily to do double duty as a meeting table.

"When space shrinks horizontally, we have to find ways to increase it vertically," Webb says.

Some space will be freed up due to wireless power, which will charge electronic devices without a direct connection — and will make Frankenstein's-lab tangles of power cords as antiquated as rotary phones. Without the clutter, "Everything can be laid out in a clean way," says Sonya Dufner of the architecture firm Perkins+ Will.

Another development could be "smart" office furniture that anticipates users' needs — such as a desk that academics at Clemson University are currently designing, which rises when the worker stands up.

We'll use communal work centers

Contract workers not chained to an office will still be able to get an office fix as "co-working" centers — communal work spaces that offer freelancers a desk along with Internet access and other office amenities — become more common, more diverse and more sophisticated, says Michael Haaren, CEO of Staffcentrix, a virtual careers training firm.

Though many of the services work centers will provide will be available at home, their appeal will be the promise of human interaction, so future consultants and freelancers won't succumb to a Unabomber-like isolation.

"You're going to need a place to go to get your species fix," says Haaren, who predicts that Starbucks will jump into the work-center business, offering dedicated spaces outside the service area with amenities for contract workers.

Work centers will offer services like child care — one in Silicon Valley already does — and become more niche as they cater to individual professions, networks and skills. They'll also be a way for contractors to access technology that will remain out of reach of home offices, such as teleconferencing.

We'll do more Teleconferencing

Speaking of teleconferencing, experts say it's going to make big strides. Right now teleconferencing is a decent way for eight to 10 people to meet in a formal setting without having to travel, but it hasn't come close to replicating the "ad hoc communication that is very valuable" in face-to-face meetings, says Laing.

By 2020, though, teleconferencing should be advanced enough not only to allow informal communication and contact, but cheap enough to be ubiquitous in offices. Imagine video walls that allow workers in New York to see the goings-on of the Los Angeles branch. A New York employee may see a Los Angeles counterpart she needs to speak with, and IM the person — an act similar to running into a co-worker in a stairwell, notes Laing.

All this change will be a lot to digest for employees, and there's no magic-bullet skill they can develop that will make the transition an easy one. So be prepared.

"I think the skill that's going to be most in demand is the ability to learn quickly," says Finnigan of Jobvite.

MORE PREDICTIONS:

Getting on track

Think your movements at work are tracked carefully now? By 2020 employers will be using "proximity awareness technology" that can monitor your habits and adjust environmental elements like lighting to suit your needs, says Sonya Dufner of the architecture firm Perkins + Will.

In addition, companies will install monitors on conference room chairs and tags on company cards to see which parts of an office are getting the most use. If management sees certain parts of a floor not getting the action they'd like, they can mothball the area to save money, Dufner says.

Under-coverage

Don't expect employee health coverage to get any more generous in 2020.

"Benefit packages are definitely something that's going to shrink," says Tim Starkey, vice president of sales in the northeast for Colonial Life and Accident Insurance.

Deductibles from \$5,000 to \$7,500 will be common, he notes.

In response, Starkey expects younger workers with their penchant for frequent job changes will seek out voluntary benefits

packages that are portable between jobs.

Perv possibility

Holograms — transmittable 3-D images — may be a compelling way for employees to communicate over long distances by 2020. If so, it's inevitable that they'll enter the arsenal of sexual harassers.

Ever since the first pair of buttocks was photocopied, communication and visual technologies have developed sexual functions that can be used to harass, says Bob Kustka, the president of Fusion Factor, a workplace-productivity consulting firm. Telephones, video, IMs, e-mail — you name it, they've all been arrows in the sexual harassment quiver.

Hence his prediction: "Some employee one day is going to get ahold of this technology and send an image of himself or herself that's inappropriate," says Kustka.

'Post haste

Office recycling is just getting started. By 2020, you may be able to add composting to the list of things workplaces do to be more green, says Kate Winnebeck, an environmental specialist at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

That doesn't mean piles of rotten food will stink up offices — trash-hauling firms will compost the chow off-site and either sell it or return it to the company to fertilize the landscaping.

Workers on a roll

As automobile commutes lengthen to three and four hours, workers will demand their cars function as mobile offices, says Michael Haaren of Staffcentrix. So when you hit the space-car dealership of the future, expect vehicles with high-speed Internet access, video conferencing and other technology that will be voice activated.

If it sounds crazy, it shouldn't: Ford is making mobile WiFi a part of its Sync option on this year's models, Haaren notes.

Whether it's a good idea in a world where people can't change the radio without causing a 10-car pileup remains to be seen.

"I'm not saying this is going to be safe by any means," Haaren says.