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And a Grand Time Was Had By All

By Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware

From where we sit, the 2005 *World Congress on the Future of Work* was a terrific success. We can't resist starting off this brief summary of our experiences and learnings with a picture of **Philadelphia Mayor John Street** welcoming the Delegates to Philadelphia.



Mayor Street focused his remarks on "Wireless Philadelphia", emphasizing its importance to local residents, schools, and businesses. He also stressed the challenges involved in forming a wireless municipal infrastructure. The city faces severe resistance established service providers and other special interests who see a municipal system as serious competition to their own businesses.

We were very fortunate that **Dianah Neff**, Chief Information Officer for Philadelphia and the day-to-day champion of Wireless Philadelphia, was a Delegate. She participated actively in several of our World Café sessions and in the Town Meeting on "New Ways of Working" that was hosted by **Toni Kistner** of *Network World*.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Our goal in this report is to provide you with a high-level summary of the issues we covered, the insights the Delegates generated over two days of intense conversation, and some of the "products" that are coming out of the World Congress. We're not going to walk through the entire agenda minute-by-minute; we'd rather focus on the content of the conversations and the new ideas that we all left the World Congress buzzing about.

(If you are interested in more details about the agenda, the Delegates, and the "raw" sense of what transpired in Philadelphia, please visit the World Congress website (<http://www.futureofworkcongress.net>) or take a look at our *Future of Work* weblog (<http://thefutureofwork.net/blog>), where **Elizabeth Albrycht's** [on-the-spot reports and photos](#) are available).

Setting the Context

Following Mayor Street's welcoming remarks and a similar greeting from our "official" host, **Kevin Kampschroer** (representing the General Services Administration), we opened the World Congress by officially declaring it a PowerPoint-free zone.

Our intention, as those of you know us know, was (and always will be) to create a context in which the Delegates could listen, learn, and teach each other; each Delegate came to the World Congress with valuable knowledge, experience, and questions. The

World Congress was a forum where we could all explore together and develop a collective intelligence that goes way beyond what any of us could ever build as an individual.

Charlie put it this way: "We are going to provide you with access to tools, people, and ideas, and each Delegate will receive a toolkit that will help you create a productive future in your workplaces and your communities."

Charlie then highlighted several aspects of the world of work that feel different to us from just a year ago:

- ◆ The speed of technology diffusion has increased significantly. We see more new kinds of collaborative technology and collaborative platforms appearing every day.
- ◆ The predicted shortage of skilled knowledge workers is becoming very real, especially in the last six months or so.
- ◆ The bloom is off the rose of globalization. It isn't working as well as many people thought it would. That's a big subject that we'll come back to many times over the next two days.
- ◆ There are many more real-world experiments in shared work environments, distributed work programs, and serious use of collaborative technologies. Some are working, some are not.

What Did We Learn?

So, cutting to the chase and skipping all the process replay, what were the "Really Big" learnings that came out of this year's World Congress? We'll actually have this all sorted out in a lot more detail in another month or so, but here's what stands out for us right now (others will naturally have different perspectives, and we relish continuing the dialogue):

1. *Distributed work may be surprisingly attractive to older workers – and to their employers.*

Several of the early conversations about the future of work began by focusing on the huge number of public and private sector employees who are already able to retire (in his opening conversation with us Kevin Kampschroer pointed out that fully 50% of federal employees are eligible to retire right now).

Not only the federal government but many other organizations need to keep those folks on the payroll for the foreseeable future, for the simple reason that there aren't anywhere near enough talented younger workers (meaning anyone below about age 55) available to step into those empty slots.

We also remembered that the majority of those baby boomers have saved only about \$50,000 towards retirement, and that they probably won't actually be retiring any time soon simply because they can't afford to.

However, some kind of "gradual retirement" might become very popular, including provisions for older workers to work part-time, and from home, thereby avoiding lengthy and unpleasant commutes and perhaps enabling them to live in

smaller, more attractive communities, some distance away from major metropolitan areas.

What really struck some Delegates is that the older workforce may need substantial training in how to use online tools for work. But work online and remotely means that people don't necessarily know your age, and generally can't judge you on your appearance (we don't all have web cams yet). That might be a significant reason for more older people to move towards online work.

2. *One of the biggest changes in the future of work will be the degree and kind of control that individual workers have over where, when, and what they do to produce value.*

A dominant aspect of work in the future (at least for knowledge workers) will be the extent to which the workers themselves will be determining what they do, when they do it, where they do it, and – most importantly – how they do it.

This means, essentially, that individuals have major choices to make – and most of us are not yet skilled at making those kinds of choices because we don't have much experience at it. In the "old world" of work we went to a corporate office because that's where our file were, that's where the company resources (including support staff) were, and that's where we would meet with colleagues, bosses, suppliers, and even customers.

Now, of course, we can do that work anywhere, anytime, and we meet all those fellow workers wherever it's most convenient. And all too often we blur the boundaries between our professional and our personal lives. We have a tendency to take our laptops, cell phones, PDA's, and other "tools of the trade" with us just about everywhere we go (including the beach, the golf course, the living room, and the car) because we can – not always because we "have to."

Many knowledge workers also mix and match their "work day" and their personal time, to the extent that they run personal errands mid-day and make up for it by working late at night. That's a real benefit of the information economy, but a major complication as well.

We believe that learning how to choose, and how to set limits on when and where they "work," will be one of the biggest tasks facing knowledge workers over next few years as they finally begin to take charge of their work, and their lives.

And organizational managers are going to have to learn to operate and exercise influence in a world where the individual workers are "in charge." And that won't be easy.

3. *Economic development agencies, and local community initiatives, will be a major factor in creating the future of work.*

This World Congress was the first one where we actually had economic development professionals mixed in with corporate real estate executives; that design was completely intentional. It seems clear to us that organizations – both large and small – have a growing demand for talent (workers), while the supply resides in local communities. So, how can we best match supply and demand?

Traditionally, organizations would offer to pay for a new hire's relocation to the area where the corporate office was located. And then, in their infinite wisdom, would transfer people around the country frequently, and at tremendous cost. All of this sub-optimal behavior was driven by the belief that people needed to "live close to where they worked." Well, given current technology, globalization, and several other factors, "work" is no longer a synonym for "place," and people are now able to work from almost anyplace they happen to be.

At the World Congress we heard case studies, testimonials from several people, and some *very* forward thinking that leads us to conclude that in the future communities will become known for the kind and quality of work that occurs within them. Organizations in search of increasingly scarce talent will reach out to help local communities build and maintain the infrastructures needed to support "remote" workers who will be making independent choices about where they want to live and come home to from work (there's that confounding of work and place again; how could we say it differently).

This perspective implies that in order to be sustainable, communities will choose to promote economic development plans and programs that support emergent workers, help attract for "creative talent," and reduce their dependence on growth through increasing retail sales tax revenues. The future of work will be created by communities and their residents as much as it will be by companies trying to stay competitive in the global marketplace for talent.

4. *Corporate office facilities will undergo radical redesign as architects and facilities managers redefine their roles as enablers of work, not as creators and managers of physical places.*

This is a major shift in thinking. And a quantum leap in perspective. Now, admittedly we were only dealing with several dozen self-selected thinkers and senior executives. But this is a theme we have also seen in larger professional organizations such as CoreNet Global. In fact, the very terms "facilities manager" and "human resource support" may not even appear in our new dictionary of the grammar of work.

First of all, the physical work structures themselves must be designed and built from a different perspective. We don't design our homes to minimize the cost per square foot and then just let people figure out what to do in them. No, we design and build our residential environments to enable specific activities in our lives. Kitchens are for cooking, dining rooms are for eating, bedrooms are for sleeping, and recreational rooms are for playing. In the future we believe that corporate offices (as well as Business Community Centers and home offices) will be designed to support a number of equally specific and highly varied work-related activities.

This concept immediately implies a shift in the social roles and competencies needed by the professionals who are charged with enabling and provisioning work processes. The World Congress left us with many important, but unanswered questions. What should we call these specialists? What's their job description (maybe another antiquated term)? We suspect that by next year we will have made significant progress on this issue.

5. *There is strength in numbers. Change agents are far more effective when they operate as part of a larger community than as “lone wolves.”*

Finally, it became clear throughout the two days that the Delegates relished the opportunity to share stories, explore challenges together, and learn from each others' experiences.

More than once we saw Delegates exchanging business cards so they could keep their conversations going beyond the World Congress, and out of a desire to reconnect in the future around specific challenges and projects. They seemed almost to rejoice in the recognition that they were not alone in struggling to create the future.

There is a real sense of empowerment that comes from knowing that others are facing, or have faced, the same challenges you are confronting. And it's a whole lot more than “misery loves company.” It's also about sharing experiences, about learning what's worked (or not) and why. It's about having someone to test ideas on before “going live.” And it's about drawing on the collective wisdom of the larger community for advice, support, guidance, and even just friendship.

We've already heard some wonderful stories about Delegates who met at the World Congress getting together back home to keep talking, and even being overnight guests in each others' homes.

We believe more strongly than ever that membership in the broader community of future of work change agents enhances individual capabilities. The future of work is a one-and-one-and-one makes five world. And that makes us feel just great.

So that's a first pass at what we learned, and what we're thinking about. We wish our entire cast of Delegates could have contributed to this summary of the World Congress. Sometime in the not-too-distant future we strongly suspect that too will happen. We know the collaborative tools to do it are out there – and maybe next year we can figure out how to produce an 80-author report. How's that for something to look forward to?

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*.

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