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## Meaning at Work

*Commentary by Charlie Grantham and Jim Ware*

Our *Future of Work* corporate members have recently been exploring their role in the design of work experiences. Our group became convinced several months ago that the current methods of workplace design and planning are totally inadequate for the kind of dynamic, mobile economy we live in today (see "[Designing the Work Experience](#)," *Future of Work Agenda*, November, 2007, for an initial set of ideas about this challenge).

This month we're extending our understanding of the current realities of the work experience and the implications they have for the workplace/workforce support profession. We're going to begin at the beginning with a really basic question that hardly anyone thinks about (at least consciously): What does it mean to "work"?

We'll then go on from there to think about the impact of workplaces on work experiences, how individual needs and work styles affect that equation, and finally suggest some tangible/tactical implications of these ideas. Bear with us, because we're going to try to do all that in just a few pages. If we're successful, we'll be stimulating your thinking (and ours) in ways that will eventually produce a whole lot more ideas – but we'll worry about that later.

### The Meaning of Work

Dictionary.com [defines work](#) as "exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something; labor; toil." We've always found it interesting that "work" has been associated historically with distinctively negative concepts like "toil," "exertion," and "drudgery." Of course, that's completely understandable, since for many centuries "work" mostly meant physical labor, and much of that was hard, strenuous, and basically unpleasant. Think of "working on the railroad," or spending your days in a steel mill, a mine, or digging ditches. Even jobs like flipping hamburgers or being a retail clerk have their share of drudgery and toil.

But today many of us (well over 40% of the entire workforce) engage in "brain" work rather than "brute force" work. So-called knowledge work clearly involves a very different kind of "exertion," and even though it carries its own kind of stress, it doesn't often wear out our bodies (and souls) the way that physical labor does.

The good news is that many (though hardly all) knowledge workers actually enjoy, and even thrive on, their work. We're fond of asking people "If you couldn't call it 'work' what words would you use to describe what you do for a living?" The answers typically range all over the place: "fun," "thinking," "creating," "playing," "solving problems," "helping others," "designing things," "collaborating."

We are obviously focusing here on what **Richard Florida** first dubbed “the creative class” in his now well-known (and well-written) book [The Rise of the Creative Class](#) (link is to ordering information for the paperback edition on Amazon.com).

And the two most important things to remember about members of the creative class are that, first, the work they do is the most critical source of wealth in the economy today; and, second, that they are individually and collectively “in control” of their own work. You can’t “manufacture” knowledge the way you make a car, a bar of steel, or even a loaf of bread or a hamburger (though there is clearly basic knowledge and skill required to complete each of those tasks). Creative work is much more internally driven (and controlled) than physical work – and that has huge implications for how organizations and managers have to operate if they want productivity and quality.

For these “creative class” folks work isn’t really something separate from living. And it can certainly be energizing and highly satisfying. That’s not to suggest that work is always positive; there can be plenty of problems and challenges and frustrations in most work experiences, but we’ll deal with those issues a bit later.

Our point here is that in this so-called “Information Age” a substantial portion of the workforce “works” by thinking, solving problems, writing, researching, and communicating. And we do that work in a variety of ways, in a variety of places. We aren’t bound to place in the same way that factory workers and agricultural workers were – and still are (they usually have to go where their equipment is, or where the crops are growing). The formal term we’ve begun using for “any time/any place” work and workers is “location-neutral.” As we’re fond of saying, you no longer have to “go to work” to get work done.

But most of this is obvious. What’s the point?

We believe the most fundamental question about 21<sup>st</sup>-century knowledge work is, “What does this kind of work *mean* to the people who do it?” Put another way, why do people work? What motivates and engages them? What make a work experience meaningful?

First, why do people work? Obviously, they do it to earn a living. But every survey we’ve ever seen suggests that income is actually a only secondary or tertiary factor in determining why people take a particular job. While we all need a basic income, for most knowledge workers there are many jobs they could take that pay enough to live on, and plenty of choices available. And in spite of the current economic softening – we dare not use the “R” word - we think that’s only going to become more true as the workforce shrinks due to the millions of Baby Boomers who will be leaving the full-time workforce over the next decade.

The hard cold reality is that individuals are going to be in a “sellers” labor market for the foreseeable future. That means employers are going to have to meet their employees’ needs and demands or find themselves without a viable workforce.

It’s our sense that there are at least four significant components of the work experience that matter to people and make their work meaningful (listed below in no particular priority order):

1. **An opportunity to make a difference** – to have an impact on the world, on the company's customers, on the company's productivity and performance;
2. **A sense of personal control over their work environment** – the ability to determine where, when, and how they do their work, and having access to the resources (equipment, information, funding) they need to get the work done effectively;
3. **Colleagues and friends who share their values and commitments** - the social environment provides not only a welcome context for work but also a source of identity, recognition, and validation; and
4. **A fair and equitable “deal” with their employer** – they can trust their managers and believe that the company is treating them fairly, measuring their performance appropriately, and rewarding them equitably.

We may sound idealistic, but this is not just our opinion; these factors have been found repeatedly and consistently in numerous surveys and other studies of employee satisfaction, engagement, and productivity.

### **Individual Shades of Meaning**

It's trite only because it's true: one size misfits all.

Certainly not all individuals would rank those four work environment factors in the same order, or even experience the “same” work environment identically (experience, after all, is ultimately highly personal and subjective). And more importantly, we all have individual work styles, individual skills, and differing ways of balancing our work, family, and personal interests. We believe those individual differences are far more influential in determining the quality of individual work experiences than is generally recognized.

Some of us are introverts who work alone or on individual creative tasks more effectively (or at least choose to do so more often than not), while others are clearly extroverts who crave interaction and communication with others. Some of us are analytic (so-called “left brain” types), while some are more emotional and creative (right-brained). Some are rational in their problem-solving approaches, others are more intuitive. We each do “our best work” in our own way.

As most of our readers know, there many psychological “inventories” that measure these kinds of individual differences. Probably the most well-known (and most widely used) is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® or MBTI (currently owned and distributed by [CPP, Inc.](#)). But there are many other popular diagnostic instruments; we've often used the TAIS ([Test of Attentional and Interpersonal Style](#)) that was developed by **Dr. Robert Nideffer** and several colleagues, and is at the core of *Future of Work* Senior Fellow **Robin Pratt's** professional practice (TAIS is available from several sources, including Dr. Nideffer's firm, [Enhanced Performance Systems](#)).

Thus, the “same” work experience can have as many different meanings as there are individuals who “share” that experience. While there are certainly dominating cultural

norms and values that often obscure or overwhelm individual responses to an experience, there is a growing recognition that individual work styles **do** have a meaningful impact on personal productivity and satisfaction. And they make a much bigger difference in knowledge work than they do on an assembly line or in other more routine, structured production jobs.

It's also important to recognize – and plan for – the simple fact that everyone's workplace needs change over time – whether a day, a week, a month, or a year as both their “micro” tasks (e.g., from hour to hour) and their longer-term project work assignments change. As we suggested some time ago, knowledge workers don't need **a** workspace, they need many workplaces (see “[Musings on Knowledge Work and Place](#),” *Future of Work Agenda*, July, 2006).

We've seen lots of utilization studies that document how a particular workspace or an entire office facility is used over the course of a day or a week, but we have yet to see a meaningful analysis of a “A Day in the Life Of . . .” that tracks in detail the way an individual moves around over time and switches from one kind of work to another.

By the way, we find it instructive that the workplace designers and services professionals at Hewlett-Packard are beginning to tell HP employees that the entire office floor (or even the whole building) is their “workplace.”

### **Implications for Work Experience Designers**

Yet – and this is where we've been heading all along – most workplaces are still designed and built as if we were all the same, doing the same things, and experiencing work in identical ways..

But we all know that work isn't like that these days (if it ever was). Increasingly people come to the workplace (or don't) on their own schedules, engage in a wide variety of work activities (some individual, some involving meetings, and some in collaboration with others thousands of miles away) in a wide variety of places (both inside and outside corporate facilities).

Thus, if we are correct in our sense of what people look for in, and at, “work”, how should we design workplaces that meet these various and multiple needs? Workplace planning has become particularly difficult in a world where you don't know with any certainty how many people, or which ones, will be in a particular facility on a given day, or what kinds of spaces (individual workplaces, collaboration space, meeting rooms, learning spaces, informal lounge areas, or whatever) they will need to be effective. What's a designer to do?

We conclude by suggesting several design principles that we think will help lead to more effective work experiences.

First of all, **make the workplace flexible**. And by “flexible” we mean more than just a chair that is height-adjustable. Even cars are more flexible than most offices. You can adjust your car's lighting level, temperature, and sound, and customize it with plants (yes, in cars), seat covers, and even the scent of your choice. The more individuals can reconfigure their workplaces moment by moment, the more they'll feel in control and

the less they'll be demanding endless moves, adds, and changes from the workplace professionals.

Second, **pay close attention to the social experience of the workplace.** The social context may be more important for some than for others, but nonetheless we all get social satisfaction from the work environment. Every workplace we've been in lately would benefit from more "social" spaces – and more social events as well. We all bemoan the demise of the "watercooler effect" in central facilities and the detrimental impact of that loss on innovation, but office designers (and the senior executives they work for) somehow find it difficult to justify spending capital for an informal, Starbucks-like "café" on each floor.

Third, **recognize and design for individual differences.** We believe strongly that designing workplaces to support meaningful work experiences will ultimately lead to work environments that match the desires and comfort levels of each individual member of the workforce. More importantly, we're convinced that those customized workplaces will produce higher levels of individual and organizational productivity.

You might call it mass customization. We all live in residences that are tailored to our individual likes/dislikes, preferences, color choices, and whatever else matters to us as individuals. Why can't we do that for workers who demand more and more meaning from the workplace? There really is no reason we can think of, short of an industrially-based desire for uniformity and predictability, that we can't do it. And, hey, even the people who developed Levittown eventually came to realize that one size does misfit all.

Fourth, **think residential.** By that we mean, think of an office the same way we think of our homes. We move from the living room to the dining room, to the kitchen, to the den, and to the bedroom and bathroom to meet our changing space needs. With rare exceptions (such as living in a one-room studio apartment, or entertaining in the kitchen instead of the living room), we don't confuse the differing purposes of those rooms – and we make use of all of them at various times. Why can't we think of a work facility in the same way?

Finally, **design from data, learn from experience, and adapt as you go.** Above all else, pay attention to the way people actually *use* the spaces they have available to them. Talk to them, survey them, watch them as they move around, and let their workplaces evolve, change, and adapt to their ever-changing needs.

If you look back at what makes work experiences meaningful, these desires for "**my** space" bear a striking similarity to what people also look for in less secular places. So in closing we want to offer you a look at what one of our colleagues, Michael Trent (of [www.thirdplaceconsulting.com](http://www.thirdplaceconsulting.com)), is designing for community churches and other gathering places to meet the social (and less other-worldly) needs of members and visitors.

For some powerful inspiration, please take a look at one of these new environments at <http://www.aspengroupblog.com/photo-gallery/moraine-valley-church/>. Now that's a potential workplace of the future that imparts genuine meaning.

Why can't we be that creative about where we spend most of our time the rest of the week?

Send us your comments to [comments@thefutureofwork.net](mailto:comments@thefutureofwork.net). We look forward to learning from you!

### **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.

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