



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
March 2010

Notes: The Future of . . .

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*This note is a compilation of short notes on several management topics we track on a regular basis: **Technology, Place and Space, People and Organizations, and Work Design** (the latter two are on vacation for a month). We also frequently include a brief review of an important book or article.*

The Future of Technology

Sixth Sense Technology

Last month we recommended that you get familiar with Augmented Reality (see those notes [at this link](#)). This month we point you down a parallel and equally important path, with this link to a fascinating video of a [presentation at the 2009 TED Conference](#) by Patty Maes of the MIT Media Lab. She described and demonstrated what she and her graduate assistant Pranav Mistry call “sixth sense” technology.

By that they mean a way to access the “cloud” of data out there in cyberspace right when you need it in everyday life, such as when you are trying to compare two products in the grocery store or want to know Amazon’s ratings (and reader reviews) of a book at the exact moment you are looking at it in a retail bookstore.

You have to watch the video to understand the concept; they have developed a very simple, intuitive person-computer interface that is incredibly inexpensive. It goes way beyond keyboards and touch screens to “marry” your normal gestures with product bar codes in a way that projects product information right onto the surface of the product itself—really!

Check out the video [at this link](#). And [let us know what you think](#).

Technologies to Watch

Which technologies are going to have the biggest impact on government operations? [Input](#), a market research firm focused on the public sector, has weighed in with its predictions, as reported in *Computerworld*:

[Five Technologies to See Huge Growth in U.S. Government.](#)

Input identified cloud computing, open source software, virtualization, service-oriented architecture, and geospatial technologies as the five technologies most likely to see dramatic growth in the federal government.

Is Blogging a Dying Phenomenon?

[VentureBeat](#) cites an IBM report that [over 80 percent of corporate bloggers never post more than five entries](#). Blogging sounds like a great idea in the abstract, but as we can speak from experience, it takes time, energy, creativity, focus, and good writing skills to be successful—to say nothing of discipline and good old-fashioned stick-to-it-iveness. And those capabilities are unfortunately in short supply across our species.

However, IBM has a solution: a software package called [Blog Muse](#) that suggests topics for bloggers to write about. To us that sounds a little too much like those packages that automatically write performance reviews for managers; but, hey, if you need the help, it may be the best way to get beyond that five-post “bloggers block.”

The Future of Place and Space

The recent “snowcalypse” on the east coast reminds us once again of the importance of planning for business continuity in the face of natural (or man-made) disasters. We have a very simple question: why isn’t everyone telecommuting? As far as we know the roads may be closed, but unless your power is out, the Internet is still alive and well.

John Edwards of the [Telework Network](#) (not *that* John Edwards!) has posted a wonderful series of “good, bad, and ugly” stories at <http://www.teleworknetwork.com/16.html> about how the federal government is coping (not!) with this latest disaster. He reports that the Washington Post has estimated it costs the government about \$100 million in lost productivity every day it is shut down. That would sure buy a whole lot of flexible work!

WorkSnug: A New Resource for Mobile Workers

We’ve been collaborating for some time with Richard Leyland, the London-based founder of [Worksnug](#). That’s a new web site and—more importantly in our humble opinion—an iPhone 3GS app (and social networking tool) that overlays information about local wifi hotspots (and the coffee and noise levels) on real-time video images of the street where you are standing with your iPhone.

Worksnug has been “live” in London, Berlin, and Madrid for several months, in Barcelona for about a month, and now it’s just come to San Francisco and New York City in the United States, with future plans for aggressive expansion to other major cities all around the world.

We’re excited about WorkSnug, as are many mobile workers and aficionados of “co-working” facilities. It is also a wonderful example of the power of augmented reality, which we mentioned in some detail in February ([at this link](#)).

Just point your iPhone down the street in front of you and WorkSnug will show you exactly where the nearby wifi-enabled operations are located, as well as the quality of the

food and service, the noise level, and even the availability of power for your laptop and other mobile devices (based on user-generated ratings). There's a terrific short video available on YouTube ([at this link](#)) that will show you exactly what the WorkSnug app can do for you.

Check out Worksnug even if you don't live in any of those cities. And get the app (it's free) so that when you *are* there you'll know just where to settle in for a good cuppa joe and that online work you need to get done.

The Business Case for Flexible Work

The American Bar Association has weighed in on the business value of flexible working arrangements. Shayana Boyd Davis has an article in the Winter 2010 issue of *Minority Trial Lawyer* that lays out a clear and simple set of guidelines for individuals in the legal profession who want to work from home (or a Third Place, of course) part-time. The article has been reprinted in the Litigation News section of the ABA web site:

The Bookshelf: Stuff We're Reading (and you should too)

[The Lights in the Tunnel: Automation, Accelerating Technology, and the Economy of the Future](#), by Martin Ford

Martin Ford is an entrepreneur, the founder of a Silicon Valley software firm, and a very thoughtful person. If you care at all about the future of the economy, the future of work, and the future of society, you will find this a very provocative read.

Ford asks an important but unusual question: will automation lead to economic ruin?

His basic argument? Technology is so good at increasing productivity that it could eventually eliminate just about every job in the entire economy. At first that sounds almost idyllic: we'll have everything we need with almost no effort at all.

But wait a minute; if we don't have to work, we don't have jobs—and that means we don't have any personal income. How do we feed and clothe ourselves?

Yet that's a very likely future in Ford's view. But he's really just asking "What if?" He's not claiming that a jobless high-tech future is inevitable, but he does raise some really important questions about what that kind of world might be like. Just as importantly he offers some very concrete suggestions about what we as a society could do to stave off disaster.

Ford believes we could change the future by developing new kinds of "jobs," paying people to take education courses, volunteer to help others, or become artists, among other socially useful tasks.

Ah, you ask, how would we pay for such folly?

And this is where Ford gets really creative; he suggests imposing new taxes on companies to capture for society at large a small portion of the savings that come from automation.

When you think about it, most of the revenues society uses to pay for basic needs like defense, education, fire and police protection—and yes, even health care—come from personal income taxes. And as we experience one “jobless recovery” after another, the percentage of the population that is employed full-time—and paying all those taxes—continues to decline.

So Ford recommends a new kind of tax policy, one that transfers some of the productivity gains from automation into the federal treasury, for redistribution that creates purchasing power for those who are displaced by automation. Now before you get too worked up about that “socialist” idea, remember that without personal income there wouldn’t be customers for *anyone’s* products.

Another Ford—Henry—understood that reality so well that in the early years of the automobile industry he voluntarily increased the hourly wages of Ford Motor Company employees so they could afford to buy the cars they were producing—thereby increasing the market demand for those very cars. Think about that for a long time before you dismiss Martin Ford’s “radical” ideas for a very different kind of economic justice.

For a longer, more detailed review of this incredibly important book, [click on this link](#). Or read the Comments on [the book’s page at Amazon.com](#). And check out Martin Ford’s own blog, [econfuture](#). You won’t regret it.

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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